

Tess Newton-Cain
Interview with Amanda Donigi
Stella Magazine
July 2014

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Tess: My name is Tess Newton Cain I'm a research associate with the Development Policy Centre and this afternoon here in Port Vila, it's great to meet Amanda Donigi who is the publisher and editor of Stella Magazine which those of you in Papua New Guinea will know and others of you who are getting to know very quickly, as it spreads its influence throughout the regions. So thank you Amanda for making some time available to chat today.

Amanda: Of course, thank you for this opportunity.

Tess: Okay, just to start with I thought maybe you could tell us a bit about your background, what you're currently doing and what brought you to Vanuatu this week.

Amanda: Sure, my background is mixed East Sepik and Melbourne. My father is from East Sepik and my mother is from Melbourne. I grew up in Port Moresby and I left when I was about 12 years old, went with my family as we joined the Foreign Service, my dad was in the Foreign Service. I spent some formative years in Germany learning German and growing up generally. After that – how much of this do you want to know?

Tess: That's fine.

Amanda: Cut, fast forward to university I guess. After university, I did a postgraduate in publishing and then I was going to publish and edit books, but then it turned into magazines once I moved back to Papua New Guinea.

Tess: Okay and what's brought you to Vanuatu this week?

Amanda: This week I'm here for a conference organised by an NGO based in Australia called GLEAM, which is Girls' Leadership Education Advancement Mission. They do workshops every now and then, mainly in Melanesia, and this week it's in Mele Village just outside of Port Vila with a group of girls. It's all about education, health, that kind of thing, so they asked me to come along and talk about social media, so that's what I have been doing. I just finished that component but I'll go again tomorrow just to see what the other talkers are about.

Tess: Great, maybe we can come back to that in terms of what you talked about as we move through the issues that I'd like to discuss. So first of all, I'd like you to tell us a bit more about *Stella*. What's the concept behind it, what demographic is it aimed at, and what can you tell us about *Stella's* voice in Papua New Guinea?

Amanda: Sure, so the age group for the magazine is probably about 18-25 years old, probably mid to late 20's is our central core age group. So women who might have travelled a little bit or are interested in travelling, are kind of very connected to the world thinking about what's happening outside the country and outside the region as well as throughout the region. So I don't want to say educated, but definitely switched on girls.

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Tess: Yeah, informed.

Amanda: Yes, definitely informed. They follow the news; they might be connected to the internet everyday in one sense or another, not just on Facebook. I guess that's our main reader, but we do try to share stories about everybody from village level up to Parliament. So we have spoken to some of the female politicians in Papua Guinea and also the Prime Minister's wife and candidates from 2012 election.

So it's been a bit politics and what we're calling ourselves is a thinking woman's magazine. So women who are just engaged and interested. And this doesn't have to necessarily be working women. It could be mothers as well who are looking for the best for their children as well, health experts, sportswomen.

But I - we actually have 25% of our readers are male, our buyers and our Facebook users and that all kind of thing, are male. So that's interesting, men want to know more about women too. So this is also an opportunity for us to promote women in a more empowering way to male readers and show them that we can be equals and we can be respected. We are not trying to say we are better; we are trying to say we are on par. We should be treated equally.

Tess: Is it a magazine about women's issues? Or is it a magazine about issues that seek to reflect women's thinking and women's voices, because I think there's a difference.

Amanda: Yeah, definitely. I think - I wanted it to be - what I wanted it to be and what it has become are two very different things. I'm not unhappy with what it's done; it's really exciting to see the direction that it has taken, just because of who's contributing to the magazine now, after almost two years.

I guess what I wanted to do is just entertain the readers as well and it kind of morphed into something more meaningful which is really exciting. So I wanted it to have guts to it, not just a shell of the woman. I wanted it to show the whole sort of sweep of our consciousness I guess. I mean women are very complex, but even one woman might be completely different to another woman. We can't just generalise about these sorts of things. So we're trying to break down the stereotypes to make life easier for women who might not see themselves in the mould that's been created for us. So yeah, I don't know if that answers the question.

Tess: No, I think it does and I think that, you know, obviously everything about it in terms of the visuals and the layout is that it's very much a high end product that I'm sure is attractive to a wide range of readers and obviously ...

Amanda: Well yeah. The other thing is we can't really control what people are going to think about something as well. Like I may intend something by a particular photo or intend a reader to think about something that they might see in a completely different light, which is fine. That's fine too. I'm not trying to control anything. I'm just trying to put the information out there and let people interpret it the way they want to.

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Tess: So my third question, so as you move around the region - obviously you're here in Vanuatu and we were in Canberra and I know you were doing lots of networking while we were there - obviously you're meeting lots of different people. What do you think - what to your mind are the issues that are most important for young people in Melanesian countries right now?

Amanda: I think from what I have seen, people are really concerned about health, very concerned about the cost of health and the access to health. So in Papua New Guinea especially the hospitals are very expensive, the private hospital. The public hospitals are overflowing. There is very little care given to women. It's improving, but it's not perfect yet. It's not a place I would like to give birth to be honest.

So yeah, definitely health. But then even in the conference we did this week, women are really concerned about mental health and that there is no - the sort of fall back for that is that you have to rely on the community. And a lot of times there was a stigma about being depressed or being stressed and not being able to talk about it. But I don't know if the Western world has it any better either, where you talk to a psychologist. That is quite expensive too.

So health definitely is a big concern. And I think also generally because I'm dealing with a lot of women, is women's participation in lots of parts of society. So whether that be education, health or everything. But everything is connected. Everything sort of influences the way that women can participate. Whether or not they have good health facilities or good childcare facilities or things like that to be able to work - be at work.

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: To attend their jobs, to be reliable employees, so that they can keep their jobs.

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: So there are lots of issues. But mainly I think the big issue that I'm always seeing is how women are not really considered too much. The issues that are important to women are not addressed properly, probably because we don't have women in policy doing the policy-making in government pushing for more - better rights for women.

Tess: Okay, good. Thank you. Based on - I would like to pick on one aspect of that. Based on your experience with establishing your publishing business, what do you think would be the best advice that you can give to young female entrepreneurs, whether in Papua New Guinea or elsewhere in our region?

Amanda: I think definitely go with your passion. Do something that you absolutely can't live without. If you're trying to do something just for money, then when it gets hard, you're not going to know what to do. So you have to be totally passionate about it. If

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you're starting off as an entrepreneur, you got have some money behind you, because the first two years are pretty sleek, what's the word?

Tess: Yes, slim pickings.

Amanda: Yeah, you're not going to have a lot of money in the first two year of your business. I'm hoping that ends soon for me. But definitely have a passion and don't let your business change you as a person. That's the sort of advice I get along the way as well. Don't let things change you. Things get hard but don't let it make you bitter. Just keep smiling, keep doing what you're passionate about doing.

It's a really good idea to find a mentor that you can trust that supports what you are doing. And it doesn't necessarily have to be someone in the same field as you, but somebody that you can bounce ideas off. Somebody that has enough respect for you to be honest with you as well about what you're doing.

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: I think a lot of people that are coming out as entrepreneurs do have a lot of family support from one or the other parent in terms of mentoring. But looking outside the family too is good to get some experience from somebody you haven't grown up with.

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: It can be quite eye opening and really beneficial. Also don't be afraid to ask questions. If you're going to the bank, just ask. Talk to the manager. Establish a relationship with your bank manager because that kind of easy access when you have problems is really good, especially in the Pacific.

Tess: Yeah, well those relationships are very important in business. I just want to pick up on one thing, and you said that one of the things you were here addressing in the GLEAM conference was about social media. How have you made use of social media as part of your business model?

Amanda: It's almost, well probably, I definitely have more people on social media than buying the magazine. So it's been a great tool for me to advertise without spending a lot of money. But young people are on Facebook across the Pacific. Everyone is on Facebook. Even today in the workshop, 90% of the women there have Facebook accounts. It's pretty much the older generation that didn't really know about it, or weren't interested in it.

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: Our demography for the magazine is already on Facebook. That spread a lot. I think a lot of people have heard of us but have not actually read the magazine. A lot of people follow us but still haven't touched the pages of the magazine.

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Tess: Well I think I would fall into that category.

Amanda: Yeah?

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: Did I bring a copy?

Tess: I saw it yesterday. But because it's not here in Vanuatu yet, that would be me.

Amanda: We are still only printing 4,000 copies. But our Facebook following is 31,000 across the region, with organic growth of 1,000 followers each month. So it kind of makes me think that we have to probably do an e-version of the magazine just to be able to reach of all those people that want to access the information inside on subscription base.

As well on Facebook, we are on Twitter and Instagram. It's not as popular yet. So we probably only 1,500 followers on each of those, so it's still quite small. But we do much more on Facebook just because of the popularity.

Tess: Well that's where your audience is. Do you find that it's opened or provided you with opportunities whether it's to speak at things like this or to make contact with new contributors or things like that?

Amanda: Yes, probably. I mean just saying that people probably have heard about us but still haven't seen the magazine. I'm not sure if that's true for the conferences that I get invited too, but definitely when I go to – I went to Fiji for fashion week. So they love us going because we take some nice photos for them and it's a good promotion of the event. So that avenue, that use of social media has benefited us I guess in getting people out there seeing what we are doing and also to partner with other people doing exciting things.

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: Because they like what we are doing too. Also partnering with GLEAM and Melanesian Women Today, which is the conference this week and hopefully to build on that. And it's really important - that's another thing that entrepreneurs should do too is build a team. Don't just try and do it on your own, let other people do some of the work.

Tess: Yeah.

Amanda: Help to promote it too because.

Tess: I think those strategic partnerships are really important. Sort of share the resources and share the credit.

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Amanda: Yeah definitely.

Tess: I think that applies in business. I think it applies in development. I think it applies in all sort of -

Amanda: But I think as entrepreneurs you think I'm just a small business. I don't follow the same rules. But I think it's pretty general rules that you should even if you're small you should try and aspire to having schedules and having programs and being professional.

Tess: Absolutely. I guess it's a bit like how we train our children. Learn the good habits when you're young and it's easy. Don't wait for it to be too big because then there isn't time to learn.

Amanda: That's right.

Tess: Okay, I would like to finish with a slightly more political question I guess or a slightly bigger question. Which is bearing in mind that you are Papua New Guinean and you live in Papua New Guinea, how would you rate the quality of the relationship between Papua New Guinea and Australia at present time? And what are the factors that lead you to evaluate it in that way?

Amanda: I guess this depends on whether you mean between governments or between people?

Tess: I'd be keen to know your sense for both. And it may be that it's different in one sphere to the other.

Amanda: Okay so we talk about the countries as governments, as entities, as businesses. I think that Australia still really patronises Papua New Guinea. And that does translate into relationships as well, like between individuals. I still feel patronised by some Australians that come across for the first time.

And it's not their fault. It's what they have been taught. It's how they have been prepared to come to Papua New Guinea. So I think that needs to change. And I'm hoping by doing this magazine, people see what we are doing, and Papua New Guinea is we're not just all black fellows running around in grass skirts. So I do think we do deserve a lot more respect than what we're given from Australia at the moment in terms of Australian aid and in terms of foreign trade and things like that.

In terms of - going into like more of a business world of things, Australians are running most of the businesses in Papua New Guinea, like individuals, Australian males. And there is a lot of Australian women too in high position in businesses that are preventing Papua New Guineans from moving up the ladder.

But I know there is problems between - I know the government needs to change that, the government needs to lift minimum wage and things like that and provide

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for more jobs to be reserved for Papua New Guineans and not just the menial tasks. Not just the accounting or the secretarial positions, or the PA positions. There are a lot of PAs that are quite capable of doing much more than, or they are doing much more than they are getting paid for.

So in terms of business, there's a lot of room for improvement. But that's government. The government needs to legislate that. Minimum wage needs to increase. It's just, it's impossible. It's so hard to live in Papua New Guinea on a Papua New Guinean wage. So a lot of people [say], *'I'm moving to Australia'*, and coming back as Australian citizens so that they can get Australian wage, or working for the big mining companies selling their souls, what I like to call that, no offence to any of my friends in the mining sites and things like that.

But I do, yeah, I think it's very patriotic in many terms. This is generalising. There is a lot of fantastic Australians that are my mentors as well that have been there since I was, before I was born and that actually do care about the development and growth of the country, I think it's definitely the new Australians that are coming into the country who, for whatever reason, have very racist ideals about the difference between blacks and whites. And it really shows in business and in the way they meet with us.

I don't know. I think also the way Papua New Guineans treat white people in Australia, in Papua New Guinea perpetuates it. So they do sort of pander to them and treat them a bit with too much respect, I think, especially some people who don't deserve it necessarily. So there is a lot of room for improvement, but I wouldn't say that it's everybody.

Tess: Just to finish and go back to that sort of government-to-government level, what effect if any, do you think Papua New Guinea's participation in Australia's Pacific solution has had on the relationship between the two countries?

Amanda: I'm not sure about that.

Tess: What effect does Papua New Guinea hosting the regional processing centre on Manus Island, how is that affected the relationship?

Amanda: Actually...

Tess: If you think it has affected it at all.

Amanda: No I don't think so because a lot of Australian business have benefited from that processing centre. There's not a lot of Papua New Guinean businesses that are running at the level necessary, to be employed or to be contracted to fill positions there in security or whatever, catering whatever.

There's probably a handful. There's a lot of corruption going on there too that I'm sure the Australian government is aware of.

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On the ground I know that people are quite – some people are probably looking at it as a win for Papua New Guinea because now we are getting this development in our health sector, especially with the Engau hospital. A lot of them say, *well if it means that it's a bit of better health care for our people, then who are we to sort of say keep these aliens out that kind of thing. If we can benefit from this relationship*, a lot of people are thinking like that. So they are not looking at it as human right issues, but more of their own human rights, like we deserve better health care and if we can get it from Australia for giving them a processing centre that is in a place that we are never going to go ourselves, that's in a place so far away from where most of our lives are situated.

But I myself am not convinced. I'm a bit torn because I do think that we do need a lot more health care, but it doesn't need to come in this format. We have so many resources coming out of the country. And where is that money going? There's definitely - we don't need to be selling people's lives for better health care. We can do it just with our resources. Such a resource-rich country. So if things were done a little bit better going back 20 years or so, then we probably wouldn't be in this situation.

For what it is now, I still don't think that it's right to detain people just for trying to escape hardship and to be part of that with Australia is I think quite quite inhumane and short-sighted for our Prime Minister to have done that.

Tess: Okay, thank you very much. That's great, thank you for your thinking and your time and enjoy the rest of your stay here in Vanuatu.

Amanda: Thank you, I will.

[end of transcript]