

# The Pacific Islands News Association at 50: part I

by Kalafi Moala

18 October 2024



The 2024 Pacific Islands News Association Summit in Niue

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*A perspective on the history and future of the Pacific Islands News Association from incoming President Kalafi Moala.*

The common feeling among participants at the recent 7th Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) Summit was that Niue was the right place to host the conference for journalists, media practitioners and partners. The event is held every two years in different Pacific locations. Niue outdid itself in warmly hosting the 2024 event with remarkable hospitality.

The Summit included plenary sessions, side events, training workshops and tours of the island, warmly referred to as “the rock”. The PINA Board, through its Secretariat, and with on-the-ground participation by the Government of Niue, ensured the smooth running of the event.

Two Niue leaders stood out in their enthusiastic participation, namely the Speaker of Parliament, former broadcaster Hema Douglas, and Prime Minister Dalton Tagelagi. Michael Jackson of the *Niue Star* publication, who invited PINA to Niue at the 2022 Honiara Summit, was unable to attend due to illness in Auckland.

Eighty PINA members from 11 Pacific nations participated in the Summit, which marked 50 years since the founding of PINA in 1974. Niue was also celebrating its 50th anniversary as a self-governing nation in free association with New Zealand.

As a first-time visitor to Niue, I was pleasantly surprised by how developed the country is, in comparison with other small Pacific island states. The island is about the size of Tongatapu, the main island of Tonga — 260 square kilometres — but with a population of 1,681, compared to Tongatapu’s 74,454. Debt-free, offering free healthcare and education, and boasting the lowest crime rate in the region — was how one official described this beautiful island nation.

The serenity that characterises Niue provided a conducive atmosphere for the region’s media leaders and journalists to ponder and discuss the state of media in

the region and what direction it is taking. What are the challenges and what needs to be done to strengthen media practice?

Despite a full program of meetings and training workshops I found, as in previous PINA summits, that the greatest benefits came from the renewing of friendships and fellowship with other journalists, learning from their stories of success and failure, listening to issues they were still seeking answers to, and also making new friends among media workers from different nations.

PINA held its first formal founding meeting in September 1974, following the formation of an informal media network two years earlier at the first Pacific Islands editors' conference in Suva, Fiji. The official establishment of PINA took place the same year, with its first office located at the University of the South Pacific in Suva.

PINA Organising Committee members included Chairman Léota Pito Alailima (Samoa), Falenaoti Malietoa (Samoa) and Organising Director Len Usher (Editor of *The Fiji Times*, later Sir Len Usher). Other founding members included Floyd Takeuchi (Hawaii), Ian Johnstone (South Pacific Commission Education Broadcast Officer), Dr. Jim Richstad (East-West Center, Hawaii) and Matt Wilson (Fiji).

In 1985, PINA formally elected its first executives at a meeting which also resolved to begin annual conferences. The founding executives were the President, Fata Pito Fa'alogo, Editor of *Samoa Times*, and the Executive Director, Tavake Fusimalohi, General Manager of Radio Tonga.

Reflecting on the past 50 years, PINA has been a key force — for better or worse — in shaping and driving media practice and development in the region. The merging of the Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association (PIBA) and PINA in 2004 united the media industry, establishing PINA as the peak media association and the region's "fourth estate", actively shaping the development of media in Pacific island nations. The watchdog role of media in speaking truth to power became a central focus of the past 50 years, especially during the early years as many Pacific nations emerged from colonial rule. Newly independent nations like Papua New Guinea (1975), Solomon Islands (1978) and Vanuatu (1980) began to assert their newly found freedom, sharing their stories and perspectives on their own terms.

The emergence of regional journalism programs at institutions like Divine Word University in PNG, the University of PNG and USP Fiji, saw the provision of journalism training at a tertiary level. Beyond international institutions like the University of Hawaii, University of Queensland, and Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand, the region gained robust opportunities for journalism education. Many early and current media leaders in the Pacific were trained at these

institutions. The PINA Secretariat, based in Suva, has been instrumental in organising a lot of training workshops across the region. Supporting the professional development of its members through training remains one of PINA's core activities. The media landscape in the region has evolved significantly. Over the past three decades, the rise of independently owned media outlets has allowed for greater freedom in news coverage. They are no longer constrained by the influence of traditional media owners, such as the government or church.

The growth of independent media however often came into direct conflict with unreformed governance systems that were (or still are) driven by unchecked and unaccountable power which needs to control the flow of information for its survival. From the 1980s and into the 2000s there were journalists who were physically assaulted, arrested and jailed because they told the truth! The powers that be in the Pacific were unaccustomed to being critically covered by news media or asked hard questions. Independent media with press freedom values exposed the irregularities of decision making and corrupt behaviour in leadership.

Leadership throughout the region in any sphere was perceived as an opportunity to control rather than to sacrificially and responsibly serve. Unfortunately, this view and practice of leadership is still very much alive today and contributes significantly to stagnant development everywhere, including in media operations. There are still incidents of persecution of the press in some places, but there have been huge improvements in the violent treatment of journalists and media workers.

The changing landscape in which economic and social development are key issues means that the need for money has become prominent in media operations, more so than the need for passion and skilful communication.

The need for funding has become a huge focus. Media organisations have unfortunately focused more on seeking funding than on fulfilling their watchdog role in speaking truth to power. This was very apparent in Niue. There were more workshops and conversations on how to obtain funding than on anything else, other than maybe a secondary emphasis on artificial intelligence technology.

So where do we go from here?

*This blog is the first part of [a two-part series](#) reflecting on the Pacific Islands News Association at 50. Read [Part 2](#).*

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**Author/s:****Kalafi Moala**

Kalafi Moala established Tonga's first independent newspaper and currently manages the online platform, Talanoa 'o Tonga. He was elected President of the Pacific Islands News Association in September 2024.

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