What's in the News? Urban Issues in *Solomon Star* Online Reporting, 2014–2016
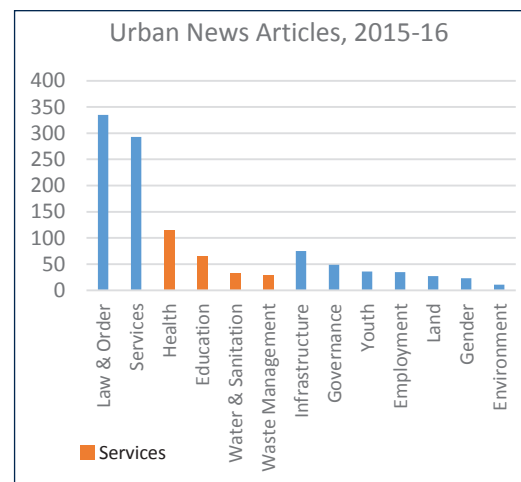
Jessica Carpenter

One of the greatest challenges and opportunities facing the South Pacific is rapid urbanisation, and Solomon Islands faces some of the most pressing urban growth stresses in the region. Its urban population is increasing at around 4.4 percent, almost twice the rate of national population growth — a tempo that will double urban dwellers in less than 17 years (Keen & Barbara 2015). As part of a broader study of urbanisation in Honiara, this In-Brief examines online urban news articles from July 2014 to June 2016 reported in the main newspaper, Solomon Star. The study investigates the capacity of press media to accurately and independently communicate urban issues.

The study has some limitations. Although most national news stories are published online, there are some gaps. The *Island Sun* newspaper was not included because of the large overlap in stories. Social media was not evaluated — most active participants in the major medium for social media commentary in Solomon Islands, Forum Solomon Islands International, do not reside in the country, let alone the city (Finau et al. 2014).

Of the 4910 news articles examined, 884, or around 18%, were urban news stories specifically about, or related to, Honiara. Of these, the vast majority dealt with law and order (38%) or services (33%), trailed by infrastructure (8%). The service that received the most commentary was health (13% of total urban reporting), followed by education (7%), waste management (3%), and water and sanitation (3%).

Law and order reporting focused largely on court cases, followed by criminal activity, police operations and police capability. Key issues concerning services related to the National Referral Hospital, access to toilets, unsightly rubbish heaps, and short bus routes. Roads and traffic concerns were the most reported infrastructure issue, with housing also prominent.

The majority of the *Solomon Star* readership resides in Honiara (Iroga 2008). Noting this, one might posit that law and order was the overriding concern of city residents.

Urban News Articles, 2015-16

Source: *Solomon Star* online

While it is an issue of concern for many, most urban stories reported were not based on investigative journalism, but were drawn from press releases and other news feeds, mainly from government agencies and the police. Almost 25% of articles were word-for-word press releases; much of the remainder relied heavily on direct feeds.

In particular, the large composition of law and order reporting largely reflected an ease of access to information. According to a senior media officer, an active police media unit facilitated weekly press conferences and daily press releases, and the unit was highly responsive to media enquiries.[1] Only around 15% of law and order articles displayed even a small degree of independent journalism.

Urban news articles were also largely reactionary. The majority of articles focused on a specific event or circumstance, such as a forum, workshop or commemoration. Reports on urban youth and gender issues were the most reactionary, with at least 90% of articles based on press releases or reports of what was said at meetings.

One implication of this type of reporting is that while information on urban issues is made available to the public, it occurs in a largely uncritical manner, reflecting primarily

the interests and priorities of government and other key stakeholders. Professional journalism needs to look beyond official news releases and the opinions of the elite to question self-interested representations of issues (Devi and Chand 2008). But this takes time and resources — both in short supply for newspapers run on shoestring budgets.

In an attempt to gain better insights into matters of concern to Honiara citizens, 720 items in the Letters to the Editor section over the same period were assessed. Just over 10% of letters were on urban issues and were written by Honiara residents. Although a smaller proportion and a limited group, they may provide a clearer indication of urban issues of most importance to Honiara's population. Services, again, were significant (30%), while law and order (18%) and infrastructure (19%) received similar attention. This is consistent with the 2013 RAMSI People's Survey, which found that Honiara residents largely believed services, specifically education and health, should be prioritised.

There was more commentary in letters on trends than on specific issues (just over 50%) — possibly indicating a greater public concern about trajectories of urbanisation and socioeconomic implications. Urban employment, which received greater commentary than in news articles, focussed more on informal sectors and business opportunities, as opposed to the articles' focus on job creation. Letter-writers mostly concerned themselves with markets and self-help for small business initiatives. This may be representative of the divide between government's prioritisation of the formal sector and the importance of the informal sector to the livelihoods of a vast majority of Honiara residents.

The heavy reliance of the *Solomon Star* newspaper on news feeds for urban reporting allows the media to be used as a mouthpiece of key players, and results in short-term, reactionary media responses to urban issues. Issues of most importance to city residents, such as the informal sector, are not receiving sufficient attention in press media.

The low levels of independent and rigorous reporting reflect challenges that face many media outlets across the Pacific, including media ownership and convergence, limited financial resources, and inadequate education and qualifications (see Robie 2014). But even with limited resources, journalists can benefit from issue-based briefings and support to boost their understanding of urban issues and key sources. For example, the additional support for a complex issue of national importance, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) drawdown, assisted with more accurate and critical reporting.
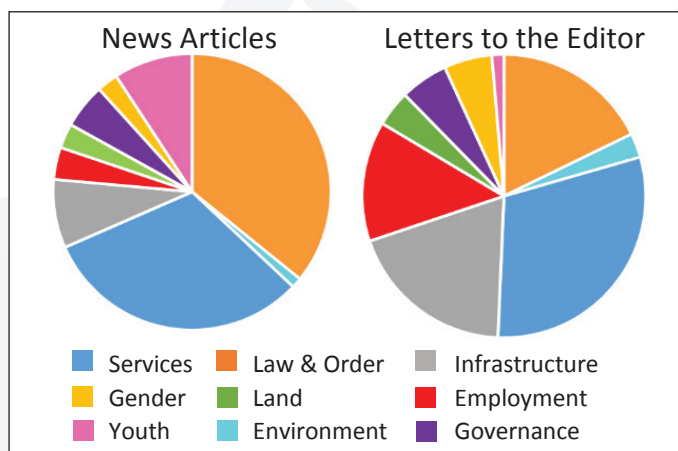
For newspapers to play a role as knowledge brokers, opinion shapers and catalysts for social dialogue, they need to report on issues of high social relevance, and represent the outlooks of both the elite and the marginalised in the city. Arguably, the Letters to the Editor section is filling an important role in opening up a space for people to express their views on urban policies and practices, even if those expressing views are part of a literate elite. Ideally, as the media develops further, it will improve its capacity to seek out a wide range of views. This could allow the media to play a stronger role in national development by reflecting social needs and shaping informed decision-making.

References

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Endnote

1. Senior media authority, Honiara, personal communication, 6/7/2016.

News Articles   Letters to the Editor

Services — Law & Order — Infrastructure
Gender — Land — Employment
Youth — Environment — Governance

Source: *Solomon Star* online

ssgm@anu.edu.au
StateSocietyandGovernanceinMelanesiaProgram
@anussgm
ssgm.bellschool.anu.edu.au