

China's Media Strategy in the Pacific

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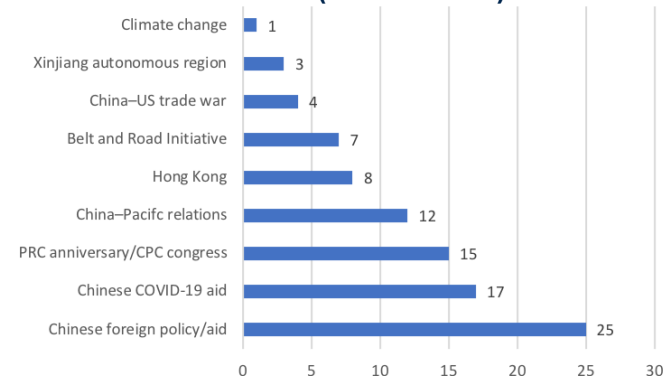
This paper analyses how China has both used its own media outlets and engaged with Pacific media organisations to 'tell the China story' in the region in recent years. It also briefly compares China's media strategy with Australia's. The research aims to enrich debates on China's presence in the Pacific Islands region.

Engaging with its partner countries' media sectors is high on China's agenda. At its 2018 national conference on publicity and ideological work, Chinese President Xi Jinping [stressed](#) that China would step up external efforts to 'tell Chinese stories well' and 'make the voice of China heard'.

The Chinese government's media activities' in the Pacific fall into five categories. First, China has expanded its official media to Pacific Island countries (PICs). The China Central Television's English international channel (CCTV-9) has established operations in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM, 2002), Samoa (2005), Vanuatu (2005), Fiji (2006) and Tonga (2006). China Radio International is also broadcasting to audiences in Vanuatu (2007), Samoa (2010) and Tonga (2012). In September 2010, China's biggest news agency Xinhua opened its first Pacific branch in Fiji's capital, Suva. In addition, Chinese embassies in the Pacific have opened Facebook and Twitter accounts for publicity purposes.

Second, Chinese diplomatic missions actively use local media for publicity. Between August 2016 and September 2020, Chinese ambassadors to Fiji, FSM, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu published a total of 92 articles in the mainstream newspapers of these countries, such as *Fiji Sun*, *Kaselelhi Press*, *Post-Courier*, *Samoa Observer*, *Matangi Tonga* and *Daily Post*. All were clearly labelled as authored by the Chinese ambassador or provided by the Chinese embassy.² As Figure 1 shows, more than a quarter of these articles were about Chinese foreign policy or aid. Their second most common focus was Chinese aid to PICs to combat coronavirus (COVID-19), strong evidence that Beijing has prioritised media outreach in the Pacific to build a positive image of its handling of the pandemic.

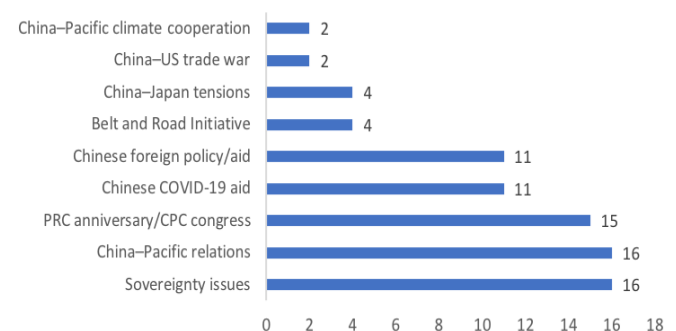
Figure 1. Newspaper articles published by Chinese ambassadors in six PICs (8/2016–9/2020)



Source: compiled by the first author based on public data.

In addition to publishing articles, Chinese ambassadors have actively sought interviews with Pacific journalists and organised press conferences to convey China's official messaging on selected topics. Figure 2 summarises the focuses of these three types of activities in China's three largest partner PICs — PNG, Fiji and Vanuatu — between 2008 and September 2020. Compared with Figure 1, the notable difference lies in China's focus on sovereignty issues with places such as Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and the South China Sea. This is not surprising as China seeks the votes of PICs in international and regional arenas.

Figure 2. Articles, interviews and press conferences by the Chinese ambassadors to PNG, Fiji and Vanuatu (2008–9/2020)



Source: compiled by the first author based on public data.

China's three other types of media activities include sponsoring Pacific journalists' visits to China for training or exchanges, constructing media facilities and fostering ties with local Chinese media in PICs. For example, Pacific journalists attended capacity training programs in China in August 2015, October 2016 and June 2018. In March 2019, China [funded](#) the construction of the press gallery in Fiji's parliament. Chinese embassies have also made efforts to establish close relations with *Fiji Daily*, the country's largest newspaper in Mandarin Chinese, and *Vila Times*, the first Chinese-English bilingual newspaper in Vanuatu. In March 2018, Chinese ambassador to Fiji Qian Bo [encouraged](#) *Fiji Daily* to play its role in 'telling the China story well' in Fiji and contribute to China-Fiji relations.

Compared with China, Australia's media has had a lengthy presence in the Pacific, primarily through the government-funded yet independent Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).³ However, there have been notable changes in the past decade. Funding for the Australian television service broadcasting to the Pacific region was substantially reduced in 2014, which led to cuts in the amount of broadcast content tailored for Pacific audiences (Dobell et al. 2018:34–35) and, in 2017, Radio Australia shortwave broadcasts to the Pacific [ended](#).⁴ While these cuts were keenly felt in [many parts](#) of the region, Radio Australia nonetheless continues to provide coverage of regional issues through 13 FM radio stations across the Pacific (Duffield 2020:185). Daily news content about the Pacific is also available online from the ABC. Additionally, the ABC has an arm that undertakes activities intended to strengthen the media in the Pacific region.

Australia's funding cuts to the ABC may affect [its influence](#) in the Pacific region. As Shoebridge explained:

The influence and credibility that comes from an independent but state-funded broadcaster like the ABC has an impact far outweighing propaganda-driven content and broadcasts from state-owned media entities that are now broadcasting to the peoples in our near region (in Dobell et al. 2018:4).

In line with Australia's Pacific Step-Up policy to boost influence in the region, a new scheme funded by the Australian government will provide commercial television content, including drama, lifestyle, sport and children's programs, to 10 free-to-air television stations in seven Pacific nations. Although it has been welcomed by some Pacific television executives, the scheme has been criticised by others for provision of [culturally irrelevant](#) content. Shailendra Singh, head of the journalism program at the University of South Pacific, [asserted](#) that funding to assist with the production of local content would have been more beneficial. It has also been argued that the initiative [is duplicating](#) the efforts of the ABC.

As the geostrategic competition between China and PICs' traditional partners intensifies, it is likely that countries will consider how to compete for the power of influencing the discourse. Foreign powers may choose to support local Pacific media or engage with them in other ways. Alternatively, they may prefer to disseminate their messages through their own media outlets.

Similar to Australia, New Zealand's media has also had a prominent role in the Pacific region for a considerable period (Dickey et al. 2019:ii). Further research would be required to determine whether the positions of Australia and New Zealand as key media partners 'are less secure than they once were' (ibid.) in the context of China's rise in the Pacific. One possible method is research on Pacific peoples' perceptions of foreign media content.⁵ This could show which external partner has won the hearts and minds of Pacific Islanders.

Notes on authors

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Endnotes

1. Some Chinese enterprises are also active in the media in the Pacific, which deserves separate analysis.
2. Based on the second author's conversations with news editors at three major Pacific newspapers in November 2020, it is unclear whether the publication of any of these articles was paid for, as practices differ between media outlets.
3. Some Australian media businesses are also active in the Pacific, which deserves separate analysis.
4. China's state-owned broadcaster took over those shortwave radio frequencies in 2019 (Dickey et al. 2019:iii).
5. See, for example, [Pacific Perspectives on the World](#).

References

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