



Church Media in Papua New Guinea

September 2021





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Background

The Church Media briefing provides a summary of the role and importance of church media in Papua New Guinea (PNG), with a view towards outlining its role, importance, management, and operational policies. Dedicated focus is also directed to how church media address information gaps around COVID-19.

The objective of this briefing note is to provide a fundamental overview of the cultural relevance of church media, including its points of differentiation and potential opportunities for fostering a more robust and community-driven information landscape.

The findings reflected in this briefing were formulated through a systematic literature review of publications on church media in PNG and a scoping study conducted by MDI to identify media training needs and opportunities for media capacity building amongst community church media.

This briefing was produced in September 2021 as part of the Media Development Initiative PNG. Media Development Initiative PNG is implemented by ABC International Development and funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Methodology and Limitations

Methodology

The Church Media briefing note was compiled based on:

- (a) a systematic survey of online publications on church media in PNG. Lexis-Nexis was used to identify relevant verified and/or peer-reviewed information sources.
- (b) preliminary interview requests were sent to 10 Christian media organisations comprising of nine radio stations and one newspaper. Representatives from 4 radio stations agreed to participate in the study. The provinces of National Capital District, Morobe and Western Highlands were represented in the study across 3 different denominations. Findings were gleaned from semi-structured interviews with a media staff member from each of the four stations.

Limitations

The following limitations apply to the research:

- (1) Church media operate as an independent entity outside of mainstream media platforms and as an extension of their Ministry and evangelical work. As such, traditional performance indicators such as audience reach are not readily accessible.
- (2) There is very limited published literature on church media in PNG. A variety of verified online sources were used to establish context.
- (3) Due to the small sample size, findings should not be generalised as being reflective of the entire church media sector.

Role and Importance of Church Media in PNG

What is Church media?

The church sector in PNG is extremely diverse. In the early 2000s, there were estimated to be 150 different Church sects and religious organisations in operation. These Churches can be roughly divided by the large established mainline Churches which are members of the PNGCC and the evangelical/Pentecostal churches (ECDPM, 2015¹).

Church media, in the context of PNG, consists of an extension of church functions relating to ministry work and evangelism through regular media programming and community outreach work. The core function of church media is to disseminate Christian and spiritual teachings, with a focus on providing consistent community access to reliable information on a range of social issues.

The central significance of churches and church media

The PNG Citizen Perceptions of Governance and Media Engagement Study published by MDI in 2019 noted that the church stands out as the single most trustworthy source of information for most citizens. From a survey of 1539 respondents, 85% regarded churches as 'very' and 'quite' trustworthy. The study also asserted that church groups are crucial in coordinating public service roles and to deliver information to vulnerable communities. Through audience focus group discussions, the 2019 study concluded that church media and church congregations play an integral role in filling in information gaps from mainstream media sources or when mainstream media platforms are not accessible.

1. Ringing the church bell - [The role of churches in governance and public performance in Papua New Guinea](#) (European Centre for Development Policy Management)

Focus on communities and their congregation

The interviews with church media representatives revealed that much of the public appeal of church media content stems from its focus on bridging national interest news and coverage with religious principles and beliefs, making programming more relatable to both urban and rural communities. While secular media are known for covering national-level issues, using high level decision makers as news sources or content informants, church media have a strong grassroots content focus, broadcasting sub-national or community-oriented issues in their content.

Additionally, it was discovered that church media outlets are not bound by reach limitations/concerns as their audience is concentrated within their congregation and the communities they directly serve and engage with, through various forms of outreach and public-facing initiatives. Church media funding is also secured through their affiliation with the church and congregation rather than solely through media advertising.

It is worth noting that church media reach numbers were not available at the time the scoping study was conducted.

Church media's relationship with secular media

Based on interview responses, it was determined that there is no formalised relationship between secular media in PNG and church media.

All four stations that were interviewed reported having existing professional relationships with NBC. NBC provincial staff regularly provide informal and formal assistance to church broadcasters by relaying the NBC main radio news (full bulletin), conducting training sessions and providing general support for station set-up. The scope of training and support provided were not disclosed at the interview sessions.

Long running weekly paper Wantok, is the only nationally distributed Tok Pisin newspaper and remains a key media outlet that is co-owned by four major PNG churches (Khosla, Freeman and Eggins 2019). It covers a range of social and religious issues and provides updates on faith events.

Other instances of collaboration included the recent church radio broadcast of COVID-19 awareness with EMTV's Lae-based reporters.



Screenshot of EMTV's [Scott Waide Tweeting about the COVID-19 broadcast](#).

Church Media - Management, Programs, Policies

Management

Church media operates quasi-autonomously, particularly to peak bodies such as the PNG Council of Churches (PNGCC). The PNGCC is an ecumenical movement comprised of seven mainline churches: the Anglican Church of PNG, the Gutnius Lutheran Church (affiliated with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod), the Baptist Union, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of PNG, the United Church in PNG and the Solomon Islands and the Salvation Army.²

The PNG Media Council comprise membership of mainstream media outlets. Wantok Niuspepa is the only church media known to be the associated with the Council.

Within the church media sector, there is no official body facilitating collaboration between each of the church media to enable them to address shared issues and challenges. However, from a survey of available literature on church media, there are efforts at church leadership level to work together on national issues and welfare such as a shared commitment to reporting on COVID-19 and combatting misinformation on vaccines (Pacific Beat 2021). Previously, church media have participated in on-the-ground collaborative initiatives to disseminate information on national relief efforts around national disasters such as earthquakes (Anglican Board of Mission, 2018).

There is no systematic performance appraisal system in place for assessing the quality and/or effectiveness of church media content as church media outlets are regarded as a stream of ministry and evangelism work rather than as an independent media organisation. As such, the usual performance metrics around audience reach are less relevant. However, interviews revealed that church media outlets typically receive high levels of audience engagement, with station managers keen to further understand audience feedback as a way of informing programming decisions. One church media interviewee, having worked previously at a secular broadcaster said the audience engagement with church media content was higher. This was with regards to content such as Bible quizzes and on-air counselling content delivered by trained clergymen and women.

Church media are funded through a variety of streams with the primary sources being donations from the congregation and local NGOs, church funding and sporadic funding from both national and international faith-based philanthropic organisations.

Programs

Interviews with media representatives of respective church media highlighted that the scope and focus of church radio programming is determined in consultation with the church leaders such as the Archbishop, who also oversees the day-to-day management of church media outlets. Radio station managers are involved with the routine programming, operations and content production.

Interviewees at management level have stated that there is a deliberate effort for packaged and live content to cover development issues and emergencies such as natural disasters or the COVID-19 pandemic. Church radio further balance these offerings with their denominational beliefs and teachings and will always use gospel music as an extension to the Ministry work.

Talkback radio is the main programming format utilised by most church media. Beyond its primary remit in discussing Christian values and related devotional content, there is also a topical focus on socio-cultural/community issues such as poverty, women's health, mental health, and education (Church Nazarene Asia-Pacific, 2019). Whilst church media did not explicitly provide political coverage, there is occasional programming on politically neutral concepts such as leadership values and social responsibility.

2. RNZ (2021) [PNG Council of Churches backs Covid-19 vaccination](#).

Participants in the scoping study noted that church media are integral to connecting with rural based village communities and providing information on key local issues. Due to COVID-19 health policy restrictions, limited amount of grassroots engagement has been achieved. This has led to a dearth of content around important social issues concerning health, safety, and community development within village communities.

Policies

Only one of the four sampled church media outlets interviewed had a gender inclusive editorial plan or policy in place. The data showed an overarching interest by church media in seeking ways to adopt more gender inclusive content particularly in addressing the social and economic challenges faced by women. Participants mentioned that a consistent approach towards reporting on gender and women at risk will need to be formulated to ensure balanced coverage in the future. None of church media outlets interviewed had a disability inclusion policy.

There was a consensus amongst church media staff on the importance of establishing a social media strategy to ensure messaging is standardised especially around COVID-19 information. Further to this, participants also voiced a need for better content integration from radio programming into social media platforms. At the time this research was conducted, only one station had a dedicated social media officer who was tasked with overseeing social media posts according to an internally produced editorial guidance note.

Role of Church Media during COVID-19

The sampled church media outlets in the scoping study reported having access to trusted and verified health information from government health authorities. A key part of their coverage involved the use of ready-made public service announcements around health protocols and measures from media partners, including MDI. Church radio stations also received pre-packaged health safety recordings from the Department of Health which was aligned with the national public health response to COVID-19.

Three church radio stations expressed a commitment towards combatting misinformation around the pandemic through their platforms and educating the public on the benefits of being vaccinated. There was also a general commitment amongst participants towards contextualising verified health messaging with teachings from the bible to improve information relatability. It should be noted that regular programming was, for multiple church radio stations, temporarily put on hold to accommodate more news programs around COVID-19.

At a leadership level, many church leaders participated in a COVID-19 vaccination campaign in PNG to fight online conspiracy theories and encourage vaccinations in the community. Most of these efforts were conducted at grassroots level with tents being set-up in public spaces allowing church leaders to talk openly to members of the public on vaccination (ABC Pacific Beat, 2021).

Caritas Australia (2021), an international aid and development organisation of the Catholic Church in Australia, recently published an account of their work with Churches in PNG to combat COVID-19. Through their engagement with community churches, they found that church media partners effectively influence citizen attitudes on national social issues such as misinformation and health hygiene than other platforms.

In certain remote PNG communities, churches serve as the only source of COVID-19 information that is both trusted and accessible. International churches of different denominations from Australia, North America and the United Kingdom have, at various points in time during this pandemic, offered communications equipment to remote PNG based church ministries to improve church communication infrastructure. These donations comprised of radio transmission sets and other portable transmission devices to ensure PNG church media can meet the COVID-19 information needs of the local communities they serve (Anglican Board of Mission, 2021).

Recommendations

Collaboration and Partnerships

Networking opportunities across church media sector

Whilst there have been ad hoc collaborations between churches at the leadership level, church media outlets would benefit from having a firmer mutual understanding of each other's scope in terms of content production and community outreach activities. This could also entail more robust networks of content sharing between churches.

Wider media engagement and collaboration

Additionally, media organisations outside of the church network could collaborate with church media around producing content relating to specific communities or provinces. These collaborations could build the media capacity of church media to produce content that is specifically tailored to the communities they serve potentially on civic issues faced by these communities. It can also assist media organisations outside of the church network to better understand the needs of communities.

Editorial

Consistent sector-based approach to social inclusion in content

The scoping study revealed that whilst there was a general awareness of the need for greater gender and disability inclusion in content, there were no existing uniformed editorial approach towards ensuring vulnerable communities were included in reporting and information dissemination. There is scope for formalised mentoring in this area with key church media representatives across the sector to arrive at a consistent commitment and/or policy around reporting best practices.

Capacity building

Development of communications plan

There is potential for church media outlets to develop consistent yet tailored responses to specific national issues and policy, that are relevant to the local communities they serve. This would strengthen the voice of church media at a national level and open opportunities for greater discussion between policymakers and the local communities represented by these church media outlets. There is scope for specialist intervention in supporting the development of a communications plan for the church sector.

Understanding of audience feedback

Given the high levels of audience feedback that church media have received, it would be useful for church media to develop standardised ways of collecting and understanding feedback and incorporating those learnings into content production if they have not already. This would strengthen audience engagement.

Social media

There was a consensus amongst church media staff on the importance of establishing a social media strategy to ensure messaging is standardised especially around COVID-19 information. Further to this, participants also voiced a need for better content integration from radio programming into social media platforms. At the time this research was conducted, only one station had a dedicated social media officer who was tasked with overseeing social media posts according to an internally produced editorial guidance note. The risk of fake news and misinformation on social media is a potential challenge that is likely to go beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The church media staff will need skills and capacity to counter misinformation, disinformation, and fake news and ensure information integrity online for their communities.



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ABOUT MDI

The Media for Development Initiative (MDI) is a program (2017-2021) is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as part of the Papua New Guinea-Australia Partnership. MDI works with a range of media in PNG with a focus on voice and accountability capacity building and content production, to help strengthen PNG media. It is part of the Decentralisation and Citizen Participation Partnership (DCPP). In line with the wider program MDI works at the provincial and national level to guide media to reflect citizen voices effectively and facilitate responsiveness of decision makers. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MDI program has pivoted its focus to health messaging and assisting media to inform and discuss the impacts of, and responses to, COVID-19.