

## FROM SOCIAL NETWORKING TO ACTIVISM: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE FREE WEST PAPUA CAMPAIGN

Jason Titifanue  
Jope Tarai  
Romitesh Kant  
Glen Finau

*University of the South Pacific*

West Papua has one of the most repressive media environments in the world with a long history of media censorship and banning of foreign journalists, and only recently has this policy been somewhat relaxed. The tight media restrictions have led to the increasing use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, by West Papuan activists who broadcast the atrocities and human rights violations committed in West Papua. Driven by developments in information and communications technologies, Pacific Islanders are increasingly “switching on” and leveraging social media as a political tool. Digital tools such as hashtags are being used to organize, share, and disseminate stories and Free West Papuan messages. This has garnered support from all over the world and created “digital villages” of Free West Papuan activists. The Free West Papuan campaign has received an unprecedented level of global attention with prominent politicians, such as Papua New Guinea’s prime minister, Peter O’Neil, coming out in support of West Papua with reference to graphic images posted on social media. This article illustrates how social media are ushering in a new wave of Pacific activism and also fostering the rebirth of bottom-up regionalism in the Pacific using the case of the Free West Papua movement.

SINCE ITS INCEPTION, social media tools have exponentially grown in terms of popularity and outreach. Improvements in technology have facilitated an increase in Internet penetration levels around the world and, as a result, a dramatic increase in the number of social media users. World Bank (2015a)

statistics for the Pacific indicate that despite the current low Internet penetration rates and social media accessibility, these rates are now continuously increasing exponentially. As a result, Internet and social media accessibility is rapidly growing around the Pacific.

West Papua refers to the western half of Papua, which is currently politically integrated with Indonesia. Since Indonesia took over West Papua, there have been numerous reported atrocities and human rights abuses committed against ethnic Papuans (Brundige et al. 2004). Also, the mainstream media have been severely censored, with foreign media being barred from entering West Papua. Only recently, on May 10, 2015, did the Indonesian president announce an ease on the restrictions placed on journalists (ABC News 2015). A result of the historical media stifling has been the advent of the Internet and social media as the means by which West Papuans are able to share the reality of what is transpiring. This has resulted in outrage from activists and concerned individuals around the globe who have organized petitions and protests as they campaign for a free West Papua (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon 2013; Tebay 2005). Over the course of these activities, social media tools have played a prominent role as the key means by which activists spread messages, garner the interest of individuals, and organize movements and protests against the human rights violations committed in West Papua (Barber and Moiwend 2011; Chesterfield 2011).

This article thus scrutinizes the situation in West Papua and the contemporary phenomenon of social media and how they have been utilized by Oceanian activists as a key means of disseminating and articulating messages of West Papuan freedom. The article examines the various tools and features offered by social media platforms and how they have been adapted for activism in the context of the Free West Papua campaign. Additionally, the potential that social media have to foster the rebirth of a bottom-up approach to Pacific regionalism is briefly examined.

### **Information and Communications Technologies and Social Media in the Pacific**

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) and social media platforms are relatively new phenomena to the Pacific region. However, statistics from the the World Bank (2015b) show that ICT elements, such as mobile phone and Internet accessibility (see Figs. 1 and 2), have been increasing at exponential levels.

As the above statistics show, increasing numbers of Pacific Islanders are becoming consumers of ICT technologies. In many Pacific islands, the use of mobile phone technology has become ubiquitous in urban centers. At the same time, increasing penetration rates have resulted in their use

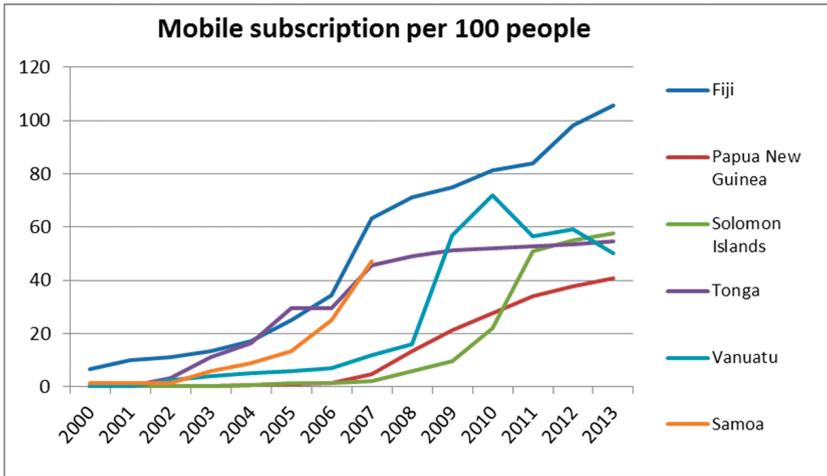


FIGURE 1. Source: World Bank (2015b).

exponentially increasing in rural areas. Mobile phone penetration in the Pacific has grown to the extent that it has far outstripped fixed-line usage, as can be seen in Figure 3.

The increasing levels of penetration and the ubiquity of ICT tools have given rise to increased accessibility to Internet tools. This, coupled with rising Internet speed in the region (Fig. 4), has resulted in social media

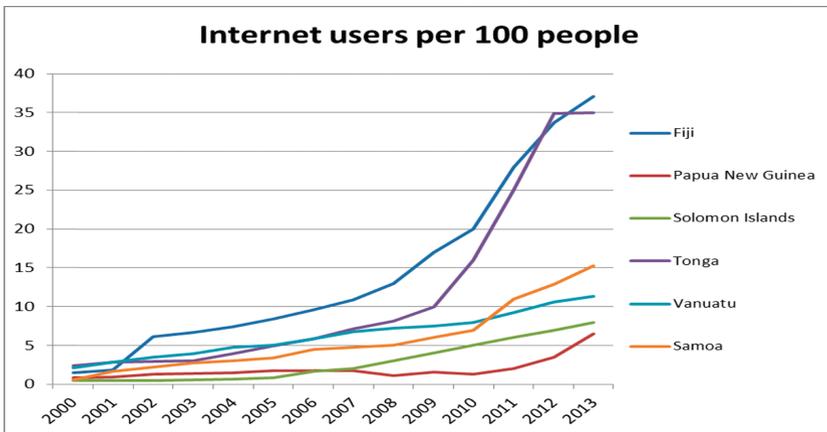
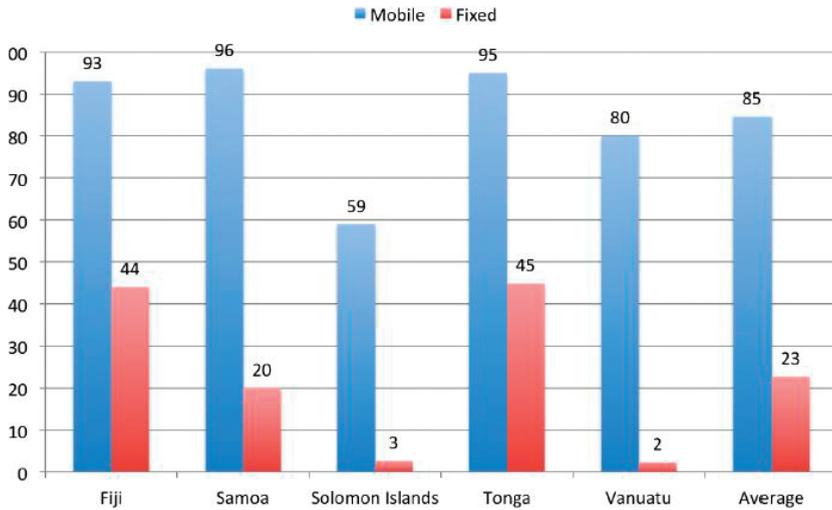


FIGURE 2. Source: World Bank (2015a).

Figure 2.4: Households with a telephone in the South Pacific (latest survey data 2009-2013)



Source: Adapted from national statistical offices.

FIGURE 3. Source: Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility (2015).

platforms such as Facebook concurrently growing in outreach and popularity (see Table 1).

Increasing accessibility to ICTs and social media, as shown above, has led to these tools being adapted for a variety of purposes. In the case of the Free West Papua movement, ICTs and social media platforms have been quickly adapted for various means. With the aforementioned media blackouts in West Papua, social media platforms have become the main sources of information and discourse on what is taking place in West Papua.

### **Social Media: A New Arena for Political Discourse?**

Social media is defined as a group of online media that can allow individuals to create, exchange, and interact with Web-based content not only among individuals but also among larger groups and forums (Boyd and Ellison 2007). The implications of being connected with online platforms are that online content can be created, accessed, and interacted with not simply among individuals but among larger groups as well. This online aspect has meant that the extent of connectivity, participation, conversation, and community that can be created on social media is limited solely by the reach of the Internet (Mayfield 2008).

The launch of undersea fibre optic cables has had a sharp impact on international Internet bandwidth in the region. In 2007, total capacity in the region excluding Fiji was less than 100 Mbit/s. By 2014, it exceeded 1 Gbit/s. Particularly impressive is the sharp rise in capacity and access in Tonga and Vanuatu following deployment of their submarine cables. This has come about through a sharp fall in wholesale prices as operators move from previous reliance on satellite to undersea fibre optic cable.

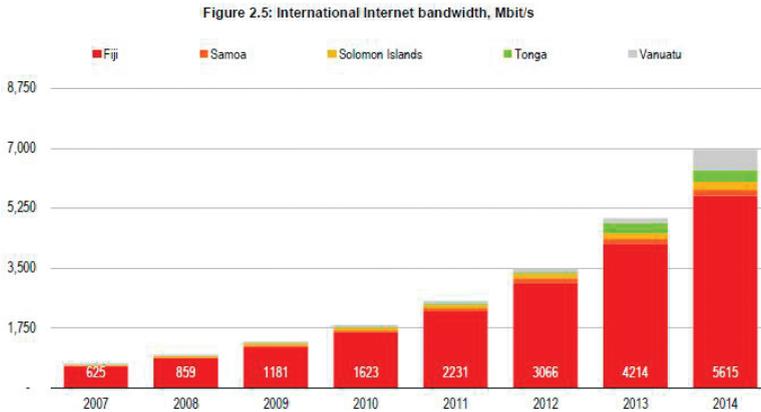


FIGURE 4. Source: Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility (2015).

Because of their relatively recent introduction, social media studies are an emerging but rapidly growing area of interest. As the role of social media grows to encompass the realm of political activism and dissent, researchers are beginning to branch into this new area of study. The prominent role of social media in facilitating and coordinating dissent movements during the “Arab Spring” has prompted the development of extensive studies into social media and its potential in activism. This distinction has even prompted

TABLE 1. Snapshot of Pacific Facebook Statistics.

Country	Facebook Users	Penetration Rate
Fiji	Approx. 300,000 +	33.71%
Papua New Guinea	Approx. 300,000 +	4.75%
Solomon Islands	Approx. 30,000 +	5.13%
Vanuatu	Approx. 15,400 +	6.02%
Tonga	Approx. 30,000 +	28.30%
Samoa	Approx. 40,000 +	20.62%

Source: Social Daily Analytics (2015).

prominent organizations, such as Amnesty International (2014), to write manuals aimed at facilitating online movements.

Social media as a tool of political discourse and activism can be linked to the notions of a public sphere as articulated earlier by Habermas (1989). The public sphere as characterized by Habermas is a realm in which all citizens have access, assist in the formulation of public opinion, and are permitted conference and debate in unrestricted fashion about matters of general interest. Basically, the idea of a public sphere refers to a medium or realm in which political participation is enacted through dialogue between citizens (Şen 2012).

As technology advances, the realms in which political discourse takes place diversify and increase. From the traditional arenas of the public sphere, such as salons and coffeehouses, as articulated by Habermas (1991), political discourse has also grown into the ICT arena. The Internet in particular has provided a new arena for political discourse and encompasses new forms and formats of participation (Kellner 1997). Through the Internet and social media, citizens are able to access information and carry out political discourse (Johannessen 2013). The structure of the Internet allows for a wide range of voices to be expressed and allows for feedback and exchange. Thus, through social media, political participation and related activism would come to encompass online discourse via social media (Valtysson 2012).

The Internet offers several unique features that make it a suitable arena for public political discourse (Edgerly et al. 2009). First, the structure of the Internet allows a wide range of voices to be expressed. The “low barrier of entry” allows people to produce content in a variety of ways: from updating a personal blog or constructing a profile on a social networking website to uploading videos, photographs, and personal reports of current events to social websites (e.g., YouTube and Flickr) and professional news organizations. Second, the structure of the Internet allows for feedback and exchange. Social media, especially Facebook, have “comment” features, allowing users the opportunity to share their opinion and respond to comments made by others.

Academics provide mixed results about the potential for the Internet to act as a forum for political dialogue (Koop and Jansen 2009). Criticism exists on the efficacy of social media as a tool for activism, as there is a school of thought advocating that social media and ICTs, rather than fostering activism, serve only to encourage “clicktivism” and “slacktivism.” Critics articulate that promoting ICTs and social media as solutions for activism and bringing about social change are unfounded, as the Internet tends to simply act as a distraction for people from more important issues (Morozov 2013). It is argued that social media simply promote low-level activism that lulls people into believing that “liking” or sharing activism content means that they

are doing something meaningful. Rather, they claim that real social change can be brought about only through high-risk meaningful offline activism (Gladwell 2010). Gladwell (2010) further argues that while social media do create networks, these networks are loose and leaderless and consequently incapable of effecting meaningful dissent and change. In fact, social media activism has attracted so much attention and inquiry that UNICEF Sweden (2013) launched a “Likes Don’t Save Lives” campaign in an effort to combat what it saw as token support.

However, advocates of social media activism and dissent point out that the use of ICTs and social media is simply an incremental evolution of previous social activism tools, such as postcards and letters, and that online activism is a component of overall strategy aimed at informing and influencing people and decision makers (Karpf 2010). Additionally, a number of studies show that social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube serve to strengthen activism outreach efforts, create exposure and awareness outside of normal channels, and through this outreach strengthen the organizational growth of activist movements (Joseph 2012; Obar et al. 2012). In addition, research has found that apart from acting as a medium to disseminate information and raise awareness on issues, social media platforms can act as a means to coordinate and organize groups. Shirky (2011), a proponent of this argument, claims that while in the past well-funded groups were the most likely to be effective due to their ease of coordinating members, social media now compensate for this by reducing the costs of coordination. The Arab Spring has been cited as a key example of the prominence that social media have gained as an activism tool (Taki 2013). Through social media, dissenters were able to voice their protests, raise awareness on their plight, and, most important, coordinate and organize themselves (Eaton 2013; Jones 2011; Moussa 2013).

In the Pacific, there have been some studies that seek to examine social media and their impact on Pacific politics. Writers such as Walsh (2010) have provided analysis on the rise of alternative forms of information dissemination and discussions of political developments due to curtailment of media freedom in Fiji after the 2006 coup. Additionally, other writers have found that in the Pacific, social media enable the discussion and dissemination of information relating to issues censored from traditional media (Finau et al. 2014; Tarai et al. 2015). Through social media, citizens are able to criticize government policies and to some extent hold government officials accountable (Cave 2012; Logan 2012). In relation to activism, however, there is a dearth of literature that examines the role that social media play in activism and dissent movements in the Pacific. With the rapid ICT development and innovations taking place around the

world, there is enormous potential for exponential increases in the use of social media in the Pacific. Social media thus have a significant potential to play a role in developing political discourse and activism within the Pacific region.

### **West Papuan Context**

#### *Historical Background*

West Papua refers to the western half of the island of New Guinea. The island is divided into two entities: Papua New Guinea, which is a sovereign state that gained its independence in 1975, and West Papua, which has been politically integrated into Indonesia as a province.

Indonesia gained administrative control of West Papua when in 1963, through a United Nations Temporary Executive Authority, a proposal was made that Indonesia would assume administrative responsibilities of West Papua until a plebiscite of West Papuan independence could take place (Trajano 2010). This culminated in the 1969 Act of Free Choice, whereby West Papuans were to vote on whether they wished for independence or to remain politically integrated with Indonesia. At this event, all 1,054 Indonesian-selected West Papuan elders voted in favor for integration with Indonesia. This event was met with significant criticism and remains contentious to this day due to the lack of transparency in the process as well as the coercion and threatening of voters carried out by the Indonesian government (Brundige et al. 2004). The contention surrounding the plebiscite has resulted in the event being now referred to as the “Act of No Choice” by West Papuan activists.

On attaining political control over West Papua, Indonesia has undertaken a systematic campaign of resource extraction and political suppression. Despite the vast natural resources, such as copper, gold, oil, timber, and fisheries, found in West Papua, the area remains one of the least economically developed provinces of Indonesia (Amnesty International 2013). For instance, West Papua houses the Grasberg mine, which is the world’s largest gold and copper mine (British Broadcasting Corporation 2015). West Papuan miners have been paid a pittance wage of \$1.50 an hour despite being employed by “the largest single taxpayer to the Indonesian government, and for which profits are such that workers’ strikes cost an estimated \$30m in revenue per day” (Wenda 2011). When West Papuan miners carried out strikes, protesting against the low wages they were receiving, the strikes were brutally suppressed by Indonesian security forces, who shot and killed a protestor and wounded more than a dozen others (Associated Press in Timika

2011). These deplorable events have accelerated to the extent that the state of events in West Papua is at times referred to as a genocide (Brundige et al. 2004; Elmslie and Webb-Gannon 2013).

Contemporary sources estimate that as many as 500,000 West Papuans have been killed due to activities perpetrated by the Indonesian government (Robinson 2012). Such violations are exacerbated by Indonesia's controversial Transmigrations scheme, which is making ethnic Papuans a minority within their own homeland. Under this scheme, ethnic Javanese and Sumatrans have constantly been resettled into West Papua. A result of this, latest demographic data reveal that Papuans make up less than 50 percent of the West Papuan population (Dagur 2014).

While West Papuan activists have for some time been campaigning and raising concerns over resource plundering, human rights issues, and killings in West Papua, media suppression has prevented the true extent of human rights violations from being brought to light. In essence, since Indonesia occupied the region, there has been a media blackout in West Papua and a consequent lack of freedom of expression and information on the human rights issues present (Amnesty International 2014; Kata 2015b; Reporters Without Borders 2015). Until May 2015, foreign journalists were barred from entering the province, and journalists who do enter to document events run the risk of arrest by Indonesian security forces (Mitchell 2015). This is evidenced when as recently as August 2014, two French reporters were arrested for filming a documentary in West Papua and sentenced to a period of two and a half years, though they were released early for having had served time in custody (Al Jazeera 2014; Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2014; Bachelard 2014).

In such a situation, mainstream mass media have been severely hindered in their role of reporting on the state of affairs in West Papua, and, as a result, West Papuan activists face difficulties in making their issues known and publicized to the outside world. In view of this media vacuum, activists in West Papua have turned to alternate media, such as blogs and social networking sites, in an effort to make their concerns known to the world. Social media, as stated by an interviewee, "offers an unprecedented level of connectivity that enables information to be circulated at a local as well as regional and global level." Facebook in particular has taken on a prominent role in raising awareness on issues in West Papua, articulating these issues to a wider global audience, and coordinating dissent groups not only in West Papua but around the Pacific region as well.

### *Methodology*

A qualitative approach was employed in this study. This was carried out in several ways. First, semistructured interviews were conducted with West Papuan activists in order to ascertain the extent to which they utilized social media platforms for activism. Additionally, the interviews assisted in gauging how activists felt on the efficaciousness of social media tools for activism. The research also carried out qualitative content analysis of Facebook pages and forums related to West Papua. This was done using the NCapture tool in the NVivo qualitative analysis software package. This tool enabled the capture of data that had been uploaded to Facebook pages and forums in the form of a data set. This data set was then qualitatively analyzed to assess how social media were being utilized in the context of the Free West Papua campaign.

## **Social Media and the Free West Papua Campaign<sup>1</sup>**

### *Background*

Informing people and disseminating information have traditionally been the roles of the free and independent mainstream mass media, such as newspapers, television, and radio. Activists and dissent movements would have the use of public forums and due government consultation processes as a means to protest and articulate opinions on issues. In West Papua, the stringently imposed media blackout carried out by Indonesia has meant that West Papuans have access to none of the aforementioned options. Dissent, whether by protest or by speech, is severely suppressed by the Indonesian government. This has resulted in West Papuan activists seeking other means to articulate their dissent and pleas.

The Internet and the various communications platforms it offers have become a key instrument for disseminating information related to the West Papuan struggle. E-mails, blog sites, and social media platforms have been adopted by activists as tactical tools for their overall strategy of advocating on the issues faced in West Papua. In essence, social media have evolved to be a public sphere in which West Papuans and concerned parties can confer and debate in unrestricted fashion about matters of general interest to West Papua. Social media tools, Facebook in particular, have been employed by the campaign for the following reasons:

1. Providing information for West Papuan activists to people outside and raising awareness on events in West Papua
2. Communicating with other members of the campaign

3. Coordinating, promoting, and organizing events related to the campaign

The following sections of this article discuss these uses in more depth.

### **Social Media as an Information Outlet on Events within West Papua**

As noted by journalists who have been able to infiltrate West Papua, Internet and social media platforms have become the sole way by which West Papuans are able to disseminate news and messages on what is occurring in West Papua (Rotheroe and Collister 2013). A multitude of social media forums now exist that focus solely on broadcasting events taking place within West Papua. Such forums either are administrated by West Papuans or rely on information sent by West Papuans. Kata (2015a) notes that “with the West Papua issue, social media and citizen journalism were creating a global groundswell.” The information posted on such forums include but are not limited to images of human rights abuses perpetrated by Indonesian security forces (West Papua National Coalition for Liberation 2015<sup>2</sup>), images of protests and rallies taking place inside and outside West Papua (Free West Papua 2015), images of suppression of expression by Indonesian security forces, and press releases by West Papuan leaders inside and outside West Papua.

The role that social media have played in disseminating information relating to atrocities perpetrated against West Papuans has proven effective at also raising awareness on the realities of what is transpiring in West Papua. This is validated by Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O’Neill being quoted saying, “Pictures of brutality of our people appear daily on the social media, and yet we take no notice” (Garrett 2015).

An analysis of the activities carried out on Facebook pages reveals that pages such as the “We Bleed Black and Red” page and the “Free West Papua Campaign” page have been utilized as a means to disseminate a wide variety of information relating to the West Papua campaign. For example, when both West Papua and Indonesia applied for membership to the Melanesian Spearhead Group in 2015, the aforementioned forums were used as a means to spread this information to the public. Based on online responses to the news, online lobbying campaigns were organized, which also translated into protests and awareness events. As stated by an interviewee,

We used it [Facebook] and told them about what they [Indonesia] were trying to do. Get in MSG? They are not Melanesia[n]! We also spread the word round that West Papua as well was trying to get in

[to the MSG] and people really talked about it on Facebook. Social media helped [us] raise awareness and from there? Well you were at the protests so you know how that worked out.

This clearly indicates the increasing role and efficacy that social media have in being an avenue for information on West Papua to bypass media censorship and be disseminated and raise awareness. This also encapsulates the online public sphere envisioned by academics whereby citizens are able to access information and carry out political discourse relating to the West Papua issue. Furthermore, the power of social media to overcome the media restrictions in West Papua and grasp the attention of people from all walks of life around the region is showcased (Johannessen 2013; Kellner 1997).

### **Social Media as a Means for Communication between Campaign Members**

The capabilities and affordances of social media greatly facilitate collaboration and communication (Valtysson 2012). Social media platforms such as Facebook offer instant text messaging, group instant messaging, and video calling features. This capability of social media platforms is limited solely by the reach of the Internet (Mayfield 2008). Such features have proven valuable for members of the campaign in maintaining contact with each other and coordinating movements in a timely and effective fashion. Interviews with members of the Free West Papua movement revealed that through the use of the messaging features offered by social media, members are able to contact each other and also share breaking news on transpiring events that are related to the campaign. Through this connectivity, information is shared among members of the campaign before being disseminated to a wider audience. Activists interviewed spoke of how, before release, they often shared with each other draft press releases and/or multimedia content via social media, as they found this timelier than using e-mails. This clearly reflects the capabilities of social media noted around the world, which, as stated by Mayfield (2011), are

Changing the way that information is passed across societies and around the world . . . events that only a few years ago could have remained state secrets indefinitely are being reported around the world in minutes . . . citizens with cell phone cameras can transmit damning images to the world, unfiltered, in the time it takes to make a phone call.

In the case of the West Papua campaign, this social media presence has proven to have the ability to reach out to a large number of people. Basic analysis of Twitter statistics revealed that activists using the slogans “free west papua,” “FreeWestPapua,” “papua barat,” and “irian jaya” on Twitter had an impression rate of 400,747,695 people, meaning that using such slogans or catchphrases to articulate messages on West Papua had a potential audience of more than 400 million people (Twitter Tweet Archivist 2015).

### **Coordinating, Promoting, and Organizing Events and News Related to the Campaign**

While effective at disseminating information and raising awareness on issues in West Papua, social media in the context of the campaign have not simply been limited to being a proxy news source. Tactics employed for social media usage in the campaign strategy have focused on a proactive approach whereby social media platforms are currently being used not only to inform but also to organize and mobilize activists and interested members of the public. As stated by a Hawai'i-based member of the We Bleed Black and Red movement,

I have been keeping an eye and saying things about West Papua since I was in undergrad at USP (University of the South Pacific) many . . . many years ago, at no time in the past have discussion on West Papua matched the amount of talking that is happening online right now about the situation over there [West Papua].

In raising awareness and helping to organize advocacy on the West Papua issue, a number of social media features have played a role in facilitating this. This section discusses three key features, their purpose, and their usefulness.

#### *Multimedia Content*

Multimedia, such as images, videos, and news articles, are a powerful means to capture the attention of social media users. Platforms such as Facebook enable images to be easily uploaded. It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Hence, the interactive picture capability of social media, through its multimedia content, not only captures but also has the ability to convince thousands of users. Naturally, this attribute would translate into questions, discussions, and debates around the issue of focus: on social media content.



FIGURE 5. Collage of Images, Artwork, and Educational Content Used in Online Activism. Image sources: “We Bleed Black and Red” Facebook Page.

Consequently, this feature is widely used by the campaign. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been used by activists to disseminate news articles, images, artwork, and video footage relating to West Papua (Fig. 5). Activists have also revealed that they find Facebook’s multimedia sharing attributes to be highly effective to the campaign. As stated in an interview with an activist,

We [Pacific Islanders] like art. It [art] can be like music or painting or photographs or even poems. Our culture has art. We have oral and artistic traditions. So pic[ture]s and videos and songs will catch more attention. So we use them and post pictures and paintings and videos on West Papua. It’s been so helpful, more people know now on what is happening.

This clearly highlights the utility that multimedia content has in disambiguating information related to the Free West Papua campaign. Furthermore, as

noted in relevant literature, the nature of social media and its connectivity with the Internet greatly expand on the potential outreach of social media messages. In essence, the extent of connectivity, participation, conversation, and community that can be created on social media is limited solely by the reach of the Internet (Mayfield 2008).

### *Hashtag Tool*

Social media hashtags are one of the tools used for coordinating the West Papua campaign. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook offer a feature called hashtags.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the campaign, these hashtags have been utilized to ensure cohesion, to link messages, and to provide ease of access to social media activities carried out around the Pacific region in relation to the campaign. Using hashtags has meant that those interested in West Papua are able to, at the click of a button, view all social media content related to a particular West Papuan theme or matter.

The hashtag tool has proven to be an essential social media feature in streamlining online activism. Hashtags create nodes of activism within the enormity of social media communication, acting as a kind of anchor. The hashtag also combats Facebook's and Twitter's temporality and feed systems by organizing the space differently. The curatorial function of the hashtag allows for a community, even just a temporary one, to be built around the issue.

These hashtag features have resulted in the online Free West Papua campaigns, organizing and creating various hashtags, all of which, while related to the campaign in general, are used to coordinate and articulate specific messages. Through such hashtags, West Papua-related movements and campaigns that span the Pacific region are able to use these tools to coordinate their events and campaigns. Examples can be found in the existence of movements related to West Papua that span the region and are not simply locally based movements in various countries. Movements such as the We Bleed Black and Red movement are comprised of members in multiple countries, such as Fiji, New Zealand, Hawai'i, and Papua New Guinea. Use of hashtags has enabled end users who access the hashtags to view all content related to the hashtag from the various chapters of the movement no matter where they are located.

Excellent examples of these are recent events when both West Papua and the state of Indonesia applied for membership to the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) at around the same time. Activists coined various hashtags aimed at, respectively, supporting and opposing West Papuan and Indonesian membership. Hashtags such as #WeBleedBlackandRed



**FIGURE 6. Collage of Activists with Social Media Hashtag Handles That Were Promoted on Facebook. Image sources: “We Bleed Black and Red” Facebook Page.**

#IamNesia, #IamNESIANotINDONESIA, #INDOnotNESIA, #WP4MSG, #WestPapuaIsMelanesia, and #IStandUpMSG4ULMWP were widely utilized around the region (Fig. 6). These hashtags were aimed at unifying all social media content aimed at supporting the West Papuan application for MSG membership. As a result, end users who opened such hashtags were able to view all social media content posted by groups and individuals from around the world relating to supporting West Papua and opposing Indonesian membership to the MSG.

Overall, hashtags, while seemingly insignificant, have greatly contributed to the cohesiveness of the campaign’s online activities. The use of this tool greatly demonstrates the idea posited by Shirky (2011) on the potential of social media to provide a means to coordinate and organize groups at a greatly reduced cost.

*Event Invitations*

Platforms such as Facebook offer a feature known as “events.” This feature allows individuals and groups to create an event, provide a description of the event, and, using this in conjunction with online mapping tools, visually provide a location on where the event shall occur. Once this event is created, anyone can access information on this event and invite people in their social networks to attend and participate. This precipitates a snowball effect whereby the creators of this event invite people from their circles, and these invitees in turn invite others within their own circles. This feature has been used by activists around the region to coordinate, promote, and organize events. Online mapping features mean that it has become the simplest task for interested participants to learn the exact date, time, and venue at which an event shall take place. Using this in conjunction with the aforementioned hashtag feature ensures that other activists around the region are kept aware of events taking place in relation to the campaign. Examples include the launch of the Fiji Solidarity Movement for West Papua’s Freedom on February 20, 2015, where an estimated 100 people turned up.

Another example includes the Wansolwara<sup>4</sup> Voices for West Papua event, which took place at the University of Hawai‘i and where more than 100 academicians, students, and members of the public attended. For these events, a Facebook event was created and used to invite and mobilize activists and interested members of the public to participate in the launch of a song articulating a message of solidarity with West Papua. Interviews with participants at these events revealed that apart from traditional advertising methods, such as flyers and e-mails, Facebook events tools also played a helpful role in disseminating news of the event and encouraging attendance. Furthermore, the nature of the events tool enables interested citizens and potential participants to direct queries at organizers (Fig. 7). This encouraged discourse and debate and is in keeping with the nature of online political discourse and activism as highlighted by several scholars of social media (Johannessen 2013; Joseph 2012; Obar et al. 2012).

**Bottom-Up Public Regionalism through Social Media**

Regionalism is conventionally understood as a means of state-to-state relations that encompasses cooperation among states. The Pacific’s history of regionalism has featured mainly states interacting and engaging around common interests. This is typically exemplified with a top-down focus in planning and action on issues, pushed mainly at the government and official state representative levels. However, there are instances where a bottom-up push and pressure on issues instigates and complements regionalism in the Pacific (George 2011).



**Free West Papua Campaign**  
Page Liked · June 3 · 🌐

**There will be a Free West Papua demonstration outside the Indonesian Consulate in Noumea, Kanaky/New Caledonia on 20th June.**

**We hope that many of our fellow Melanesian brothers and sisters in Kanaky will join and show support for West Papua, including joining the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG).**

**West Papua is calling to come back to the Melanesian family of the MSG. Please help to support. Thank you very much**

Like · Comment · Share

👍 317 people like this. Most Relevant ▾

🔄 48 shares

 **Barbara Gianazza** I woul like to be there first because in Italy there is no support for Papua second is a selfish reason PAPUA MERDEKA  
Like · Reply · 👍 4 · June 4 at 12:01am

FIGURE 7. Event Invitation in New Caledonia on “Free West Papua Campaign” Facebook Page.

A bottom-up push was usually seen with the engagement of student activism and social movements in the Pacific, ultimately garnering state-level attention and cooperation. In the early years of nuclear testing in the Pacific by metropolitan powers, student and social movements created a bottom-up pressure that ultimately drew the attention of varying states involved. These movements included the likes of the Against Tests in Murorua Committee, which was modified into the Pacific Peoples Action Front, and the Fiji Anti-Nuclear Group (Naidu 1968). Antinuclear movements began to organize across the Pacific and expressed ardent disapproval toward nuclear powers while encouraging the Pacific states to act accordingly for its people. These

movements galvanized focus from the bottom, influencing state-to-state relations at the top. Regionalism to that extent was no longer limited to state officials; it had then begun to involve actors outside and beyond state representation. The power of these movements lay in the fact that it was able to form and propel public opinion by its moral conviction. The bottom-up momentum toward regionalism emphasized a collective threat that was sought to be addressed through cooperation and resistance to dominating interests.

From these instances, three key attributes can be derived from a bottom-up public regionalism approach. First, this approach features social movements that are organized but not limited to nonstate actors and university students. Second, it has a strong public involvement by virtue of its bottom-up focus and drive. Finally, it creates a moral sphere of consideration in what is considered mostly an amoral web of engagement, in diplomacy and state-to-state affairs, at the top.

This form and method of regionalism appeared to have waned over the years; however, it has now reemerged prominently with the use of social media. The issue of West Papua and its atrocities has now reignited a bottom-up public regionalism that again symbolizes its three key attributes. Once again, social movements, encouraging mass public involvement coupled with the moral consideration of focus, have reemerged as they were during the antinuclear days. However, now a new attribute can be observed from the current reemergence of bottom-up public regionalism. This new key feature consists of social media and their galvanizing ability to harness moral conviction while fueling public opinion.

Through social media, strong public involvement and bottom-up pressure have transcended borders and regions. This is evident with the Free West Papua movements that are widespread across the Pacific states and the world and that are communicating, organizing, and sharing information constantly. From the campaigns that have been detailed in this article, it is clear that bottom-up public regionalism has reemerged and strengthened itself through the communicative power of social media (Fig. 8).

The nature of social media fosters interconnectivity among individuals and larger groups and forums (Boyd and Ellison 2007). The amount of connectivity, participation, conversation, and community that can be created on social media is limited solely by the reach of the Internet (Mayfield 2008, 2011). The monitoring of pages related to the West Papua campaign reveals a wide cross section of online activists hailing from a broad spectrum of backgrounds and ethnicities. Events such as the Wansolwara Wave Dance,<sup>5</sup> which took place in Madang, were attended by more than 100 individuals representing the bulk of islands around the Pacific. Recent solidarity events, including but not limited to online protests, street marches, and festivals,



**FIGURE 8. Hashtag Campaign for the Melanesian Spearhead Group to Support West Papua.**

have been attended by significantly diverse groups hailing from a multitude of backgrounds and ethnicities.<sup>6</sup> Social media have acted as a platform through which these varying individuals can connect based on their shared interest in West Papua. These factors are extremely worth noting given the continued increase in ICTs and social media penetration levels around the Pacific. Further studies into this phenomena and its evolution may well prove to be a rich field of research.

### Conclusion

The increase in penetration levels of ICT and social media platforms is changing the way that information is spread around the Pacific. Social media are acting as an empowering way to permit West Papuans to disseminate information on what is transpiring in their homeland. Through social media, not only West Papuans but activists from all around the region are able to coordinate and organize themselves in dissent against the issues faced in West Papua. The decentralized nature of the Internet and the ability to reach large numbers of people in a short time has enabled West Papuan activists' ability to raise awareness and organize support from a growing number of people from across the globe. Facebook has further empowered activists to become active content creators, journalists, commentators, and organizers. In turn, this has widened the public sphere, making it more pluralistic in the area of news, commentary, and information.

While extant research suggests there is still no general consensus on the effectiveness of social media in activism, the findings of this article indicate that social media have proven to be a valuable tool for facilitating and organizing activism in the Free West Papua campaign. The value and significance of social media are due largely to the strict media regulations in

West Papua. With journalists being restricted from entering West Papua, social media have become the only option for West Papuans to share their plight with the rest of the world. The stories and images depicting the harsh atrocities faced by West Papuans have spurred multiple online campaigns in various countries in the Pacific. These online campaigns have also translated to offline campaigns, such as protests and marches. Some headway seems to have been made with Indonesia's new president relaxing the ban on foreign journalists into West Papua. Other prominent Pacific Island politicians have also come out in support of West Papua, such as Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neil, who specifically referred to images shown on social media. This article contributes to the scant literature on online activism in the Pacific using the case of West Papua. Future research in this area would greatly benefit from carrying out widespread interviews with individuals and activists who are part of the campaign. Additionally, employing social media analytics tools to carry out a systematic analysis of West Papua-related pages would provide significant insights into the online stratagems employed by the campaign and their overall effectiveness.

### NOTES

1. Social Media Free West Papua campaign refers to the various interest groups and individuals who have employed social media as a tool for their activism and dissent.
2. Warning: graphic images.
3. This feature refers to prefacing a phrase or slogan with a hashtag symbol (#), such as #FreeWestPapua. This transforms the phrase or slogan into a hyperlink that, when clicked on, will show an end user a complete list of events, images, and text statements that contain the hashtag.
4. Wansolwara is a pidgin derivative of "One Salt Water." It means "One Ocean, One People."
5. Refers to a five-day activists' conference that took place in Madang, Papua New Guinea, in September 2014.
6. West Papuan events occurring around the Pacific region, such as the solidarity marches in Fiji and poetry events in Hawai'i, make up a wide demographic cross section of ethnic groups.

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