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| Speak Up-Kōrerotia  Exposing human rights through (citizen) media  12 July 2016 | |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with Speak Up-Kōrerotia, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: Speak Up-Kōrerotia.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  Nau mai haere welcome to Speak Up-Kōrerotia. Today’s topic we’re exposing human rights abuses through citizen media. I guess we’ll be thinking about what is media and what is citizen media and what role do these two types of media play in uncovering human rights abuses.  We’ve got three exciting guests with us on the show today, Steven Livingston - and we’ve got a long list of titles I need to read out: Professor at George Washington University, Senior Fellow at the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy at Harvard and visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution… So we’re pretty lucky! You’re just in Christchurch for a few days and we’ve managed to grab you while you’re down! Jaya Mangalam Gibson, who is a bit of a local actually so it’s nice to have you on board on as well, I’m particularly looking forward to hearing about your work with Tibetan refugees in Nepal. And we’ve got David Robie coming over the phone from the Pacific Media Centre at Auckland University of Technology.  Now if you could introduce yourselves and provide us with a bit more background to your work and research? |
| Jaya | Yes well my original background was I was trained as a graphic designer, I did that for five years in London, didn’t enjoy it very much, didn’t find it very challenging. So I came to New Zealand and started a snowboard and skateboard clothing company and did that for seven years, somehow managed to start up a newspaper with some friends of mine in New York during all of that, that newspaper is called the *Epoch Times* and I ended up as the global marketing director until 2011 when the New Zealand earthquakes happened. I married a Kiwi lass and their home was on top of that and so I made my way back here and during all of this I got involved with an investigation into the organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience in China. That’s about as potted as I could get it. |
| Sally | Sounds great. David how about you? |
| David | Ok thanks very much for that and really I started off in journalism quite a long time ago, originally in New Zealand but most of my career was in other countries particularly in Africa for quite a number of years and I worked with the French news agency as one of the editors there and also correspondent and following that specialised in the South Pacific. I came back to New Zealand - as rather an irony - because I got an interest in the South Pacific through being living in Paris and being quite interested in the French nuclear testing programme and human rights issues that stemmed from that. And then I ran my own news agency for quite a number of years - about a decade all - told specialising in Pacific affairs for many news organisations there. And this was at a time when very few mediators had specialist Pacific journalists so it was quite an era for freelancing. And then I moved into the academic life; I was appointed Head of Journalism at the University of Papua New Guinea so I moved straight from journalism there to that academic role and was head of the programme there for five years and then became head of the programme at the University of the South Pacific which is a university basically bringing together something like 16 countries in the entire region. So that was a very stimulating time as well. And then I joined Auckland University of Technology and in 2007 I was appointed First Associate Professor and then became Professor but my role there was basically to establish the Pacific Media Centre which is quite an interesting blend of both research and independent alternative, if you like, media production of our own produced by senior post-graduate students and staff. |
| Sally | It sounds really exciting and I’m looking forward to hearing more about it as we go through the show. Steven? |
| Steven | Thank you. I have been a Professor at George Washington University now for 25 years and in that time I’ve written several books, most of them having to do with US foreign policy, international affairs in American and global media. One of the things that occurred is that I’ve written a lot about failure, one of my books is called *When The Press Fails* which was an examination of how the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* failed to hold the Bush Administration to any degree of accountability for its claims in 2003 as it invaded Iraq. Following that book I’ve had an opportunity to travel to about 52 countries in about the last ten years, many of them war zones or places where conflict has occurred and given those experiences I sort of made a conscious decision that I was going to change the focus of my attention and my research to looking for ways in which human rights organisations and non-state actors generally use various kinds of resources, tools, technologies to further the goal of improving on the condition that people find themselves living in around the world. At this point I have the great opportunity of pursuing that research this year at Harvard as well as at the Brookings Institution in Washington. |
| Sally | So it sounds like you’re coming from… all three of you from journalism - maybe with the exception of you Steven - but from a journalism type background of sorts although it’s obviously been quite… you’ve come at it from various different angles . And I guess if we’re going to be talking about media and citizen media to start the conversation, maybe we could think about what are the differences between those two types of media? |
| Jaya | Sure. I am quite heavily involved, I would say, in citizen media. I’m a part of another podcast called Twice Podcast that’s about local - when I say ‘local’ [I mean] national - creativity and innovation and social enterprising stuff. I’ve also had a podcast called Join or Die which was about New Zealand politics but the newspaper I helped start up in New York, the *Epoch Times*, it was created out of a need to talk about what was happening inside China because the western media was failing to do so and they were sort of regurgitating the party line and Chinese state media, they weren’t doing their own investigation into it. And the sort of aspiration of the Falun Gong practitioners in the world to create their own Chinese media and in 2004 they didn’t have any traction with the western media so they asked myself and some others to start a western version. So that very much started off as citizen media through a need to expose human rights abuses in China and I would say that now it’s in some ways legitimised as a non-citizen media now because it’s ten years on, it’s over ten years now that it’s been running.  We were almost refused entry into the World Bank IMF [International Monetary Fund] Conference in Singapore, the media director there said “Oh had I known who you were I wouldn’t have given you a main media pass because I considered you citizen media.” And I said “Oh, so you’re throwing me out?” And he said, “No I would have given you a different type of pass, like an NGO media pass, which is slightly more restricted.” And that illustrates some of the problems being citizen media; it doesn’t matter about the quality or your ability to report well but it does in terms of credibility and access make it harder. So that’s one of the main differences, is the ability to get access to situations and people and stuff like that. But I think in this day and age the quality of citizen media is every bit as good. I was at the New Zealand Journalism Conference this weekend and there were lots of citizen media journalists there and some great examples of great work done by one-man-bands and very small institutions. |
| Steven | Well just to follow up on that one-man-bands, I mean if we can think of the impact of Glenn Greenwald on the global dialogue and he for the longest time was a one-man-band and now he is head of something called Intercept which is Pierre Omidyar’s effort at creating a permanent sort of investigatory journalistic organisation that fills in those gaps that you’re talking about. In my case the kinds of things that I’ve been studying in the last several years, and what I’m writing about now in various venues, is a bit more complicated than just to call it ‘citizen journalism’ and the challenge that I have here is this conversation is usually a 50-minute time block so I’m going to have to condense it down into something that’s a bit more manageable.  The closest to the citizen journalism part of what I’m interested in is the crowd sourcing of information and news. There are some examples of that; for instance, we can point to, in Syria there is something called Syria Tracker and then the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, also has something similar to that. And it’s a little complicated to say but basically what these news organisations - if that’s what you want to call them - are doing, is they’re calling information from various streams of data found on social media. Sometimes people who are living in Syria are actually texting and calling in the situation, they’re sending videos, they’re sending pictures and what Syria Tracker is doing or what the Carter Centre in Atlanta is doing (Jimmy Carter’s organisation) is taking that information and curating it, putting it on a website that allows for an accumulation of information, evidence over time that hopefully down the road it can be used for tribunals and investigations of human rights abuses.  But that’s only a start. I’m also in my research interested in how human rights organisations, especially Amnesty International USA but also other Amnesty affiliates along with Human Rights Watch and a variety of other non-state actors, are actually using technologies that used to be the sole preserve of the most powerful nations on earth - I’m talking about remote sensing satellites. In the last ten years or so there’s high resolution commercial remote sensing satellite imagery that is now down to about 31cm resolution which is a fancy way of simply saying that you could put a piece of paper on the ground, you wouldn’t be able to read the writing on the paper but you could see it would be a piece of paper. NGOs are accessing that kind of imagery to find mass graves, to document the destruction of villages in places where they don’t have direct access… This is not a replacement for direct access entirely but it fills in that gap when places where a human rights investigator cannot go him or herself, or a team can’t go simply because it’s too far or too dangerous. So these human rights organisations are using these technologies to fill in that vacuum that’s created by danger and distance. These are the kinds of things that I’m interested in. Some of it could be understood as citizen journalism but it goes beyond that. |
| Jaya | They’re also using drones now a lot as well to create a safe distance between them and what they’re exposing. It’s quite fascinating really. |
| Steven | We’re a bit on the cusp on the drones but certainly I know that the people I talk to at Amnesty USA are interested in drones and there are other human rights organisations, you’re right, that are starting to use drones. |
| Jaya | I came across a fascinating website yesterday at the conference. I was attending a workshop on how to search for sources and research people and there was a perfect example of citizen media, a website called bellingcat.com and they scour the internet for photographic evidence, video evidence and they manage to figure out the missile, the MH17, how and where and what kind of missile that was actually used and where it was shot from just through scouring the internet of video footage and what not. It’s very impressive, the tenacity and dedication that they did, and they put the Russian Government in a very difficult position, the Russian Government had to lie about what it did. |
| Steven | I want David to jump in here in a second, but Bellingcat is actually another really great example, you’re right, in that respect. But what’s interesting to me is that Elliot, the guy who is associated with Bellingcat and the Russian Foreign Ministry are doing, is they’re going tit for tat back and forth at one another claiming that each is lying.  Which actually is a way for us to get into one of the concerns; there are two concerns that emerge with your listeners immediately. First of all, what about the privacy concerns of individuals with remote sensing satellite capabilities that have that level of precision? And secondly, what about the ability to spoof the system, to spread a lot of lies if you’re using crowd sourcing as your mechanism for getting events? Those are two really important concerns and we can talk about them a little later on, but I’m really quite excited by Bellingcat as well. |
| David | From our experience with the Asia Pacific Report, which is a website which we launched earlier this year, but that followed when the Pacific Media Centre set up Pacific Scoop in partnership with the independent scoop media but ours was quite an independent branch of that, we ran that for six years. A lot of our work was pretty much with citizen journalists throughout the region particularly in West Papua where I think we have certainly been one of the new services that have actually created a lot more awareness certainly in New Zealand and in this part of the world, the social media revolution there has taken off quite a lot.  But if we went back to the person who was accredited with coining the notion of citizen media, it was a Columbian researcher Clemencia Rodriguez and she very much sort of developed a branch of research, an alternative media and I think the trends that we have with our website that we’ve been able to establish there’s a whole network of citizen journalists if you like throughout the Pacific but particularly in areas where media have not been able to…[ or simply ignored and that’s one of the disserving things I found as a professional journalist for a long time before I went into the academic life and in the academic life I’ve been able to combine the research and look for areas that have simply not been exposed in the mainstream media. So we sort of see the role of this website we have, the Asia Pacific network as something of an agenda setter because we’re able to identify information and get multimedia evidence and so on from remote villages in West Papua for example, the human rights atrocities of the Indonesian military is just one example and no other media in this part of the world has really done that at all. |
| Sally | David we might pick up these ideas in the next segment, we’re just going to have a quick break now and we’ve got Steven’s song, would you like to explain your choice? |
| Steven | I chose a song by Victor Jara who was a Chilean theatre director, a singer/songwriter and a supporter of Salvador Allende’s regime and Victor Jara was assassinated shortly after the coup in September 11th 1973, he was killed. And just in the last couple of weeks, the person who ordered his execution has been found guilty of civil charges which we hope will open up the possibility of his being convicted, or at least brought to trial on criminal charges, for the assassination of this very talented man Victor Jara. |
|  | **MUSIC BY VICTOR JARA – TE RECUERDO AMANDA** |
| Sally | Welcome back to Speak Up-Kōrerotia, here on Plains FM 96.9. We’re going to start with David speaking about some of the work the Pacific Media Centre does. |
| David | One of the inspirational events I found was very much the Saffron Revolution, if you like, in Burma/Myanmar back in 2007. And this to me was really when the citizen media phenomenon really took off in terms of what influenced us. We used the film that was made - *Burma VJ: Reporting From a Closed Country* by Anders Østergaard - as very much a training and educative resource and showed that quite widely around media, freedom groups around the South Pacific and used it in our teaching of a course, post-graduate paper that we call…it’s Asia Pacific Journalism Studies which is a combination of research and study on countries in the Asia Pacific region but particularly in building a portfolio of articles over a period of the semester that’s involved in the course. And part of that, we actually send students to various parts of the Pacific to do an investigation and reporting from that. And *Burma VJ* was just such an influence on us for quite a period of time. Certainly much more so than… and Arab Spring - and of course Arab Spring was not really a spring at all - I think just had an Egyptian researcher who has actually done extensive interviews with a number of journalists all around in the countries that were involved in the so-called Arab Spring and how that actually really played and certainly very disillusioning but in other areas.  Way back in my career I was a journalist specialising in environmental affairs and was on the *Rainbow Warrior*, Greenpeace’s environmental ship that was bombed in Auckland, and so as a result of that I’d written quite a bit over the ten weeks prior to that going into the Marshall Islands with the US nuclear tests and so on. But 30 years has elapsed of course last year since that bombing and we combined with a number of citizen journalists, if you like, but also people who were involved in that whole period way back there and did oral histories and created this amazing microsite, it’s called Eyes of Fire: 30 Years On. It’s a tremendous resource, it’s a public resource that we’ve produced and we combined with a publisher in New Zealand to do this. And since then we’ve gone on to a new project called Bearing Witness about essentially reporting on the realities of climate change in the Pacific today and that’s a combination of students that come through in our course but also those around the region who generally are working with non-state NGOs, if you like, but are very active throughout the region and a combination of an activist edge, if you like, and an approach to journalism which is quite independent and drawn from the critical studies that we have as a base of our programme. I’m quite excited by what I see young journalists doing today coming through programmes such as this. But what is rather depressing is seeing what’s happening in a country like New Zealand where the mainstream media is simply being dumbed down and reduced investigative teams, if you like, and so more and more I believe that there’s actually responsibility on communication programmes at universities to actually be independent media themselves. |
| Jaya | I would like to pick up on that point about the mainstream media, the pressure. As I said, I was at the New Zealand Investigative Journalism Conference over the weekend and there was a lot of talk with the journalists themselves. They were saying they’re really feeling the pressure and they’re all quite upset at their organisations who they feel are taking the wrong tack just to stay alive. They’re competing with every other aspect of media to get the ‘clicks’, as it were. I felt that the journalists that I met there had a lot of integrity and really had the desire to do a lot more reporting on this issue but they can’t get their organisations to buy into it because they don’t generate any money and have very little readership and actually statistics, web statistics are actually supporting that. And they’re trying to talk about what do we do to get around this issue to get people to read more investigative stories, more human rights stories? What’s the mechanism for doing that? So I think they’re aware of it themselves and I’d just like to say that Tim McKinnel from Greenpeace, he was there, he talked about *Rainbow Warrior* and Greenpeace’s work is in journalism so that’s citizen journalism, it’s been around for a long time. I believe *Rainbow Warrior*; the anniversary is today isn’t it? |
| David | On the 10 July. |
| Jaya | Which is interesting.And *Burma VJ* is an amazing documentary; if you haven’t seen it I would recommend it, it’s a huge influence to me on my documentary work. |
| Steven | On this theme that conventional and mainstream news organisations are sort of dropping the ball on human rights investigations or investigative reporting of all kinds I think is something that certainly is an American or an American perspective you see quite a lot these days. If Donald Trump tweets something its front page news but everything else falls away and it’s really quite frustrating. So in my own research I’m certainly interested in citizen journalism filling in that void. But an important distinction I would make is that I’m also just as interested in how a non-state actor, how NGOs, are filling in that void. And it may not necessarily be oriented towards getting people to read or be aware of something but rather just creating a historical record of events. And so you have a variety of non-state actors, NGOs, civil society organisations that now have access to capabilities of recording events, building up an evidentiary base that can be used down the road. And I have in mind specifically, for instance one of the kinds of sciences that’s now available to human rights organisation has to do with DNA sequencing. We don’t have the opportunity to go in depth except to say that now, today, DNA sequencing is something that is done in an automated fashion. It doesn’t require a large laboratory, it does require some costs, start-up costs with some of the equipment that’s more generally available though to human rights organisations around the world, how is it used? It’s used to find the identity of people who have been deliberately disappeared, massacre victims where their bodies have been treated in a way that makes it very difficult to even find the body at all. It doesn’t matter as much these days; there are now technologies available where one can take the smallest trace of a bone or tooth and do the sequencing and if you have a living family member you can make that identification. With that identification you’ve got a murder case rather than a disappeared person’s case and that makes all the difference in the world legally. So these are examples of the way in which non-state actors now have access to science that’s empowering them in exciting new ways. |
| Jaya | That’s fascinating, that’s really quite exciting to hear the DNA development. |
| Steven | The 42 students who were killed in Mexico several months back, their bodies were completely obliterated yet smallest fragments were found and the last time I was aware of it two of them have been identified through the world of forensic scientists at the University of Innsbruck. At the Hague there’s an organisation called the International Commission for Missing Persons which was responsible for the identification of the remains of the 8,000 men and boys who were killed in the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia, in that instance the people who were killed were put in a mass grave and then once their killers realised that they might be discovered the bodies were actually dug up again and put in secondary and tertiary graves which meant it was very, very difficult to identify them through conventional means of assembling skeletons and looking for the clues like that. But instead what investigators were able to do - principally the International Commission for Missing Persons - was use DNA sequencing and advance that technology to the point where almost all of the disappeared men and boys, the massacre victims in Srebrenica, have been identified. This was used in 9/11, for instance, for identifying the remains of the people who were killed in the attacks and in other instances around the world as well. So bioinformatics, remote sensing satellites, crowd sourcing platforms are all of the sciences and technologies that are now available to human rights organisations that’s pushing their ability to hold people accountable for what they do. |
| Jaya | I think we should also…. |
| David | One of the problems though with accountability and this makes me think - and I found this really exciting what you’re talking about there, Steven - and I think of a massacre that happened in Maguindanao in the end of 2009 where in the largest massacre of journalists has ever happened in the world, 34 were killed. There’s actually a larger group that were massacred, more than 50 people but the vast bulk of the group were in fact journalists, 34 of them. The bodies were sort of put in shallow graves and covered with banana leaves etc. etc. but of course the bodies were found fairly quickly so there wasn’t really an issue about identification so much but it’s the impunity in the Philippines. And not just the Philippines; [there are] many countries throughout the world where assassinations and murders can happen with impunity. And in the case of this Maguindanao massacre, there’s no justice six years on and even though the culprits are fairly well known and it was private militia of one of the local political warlords involved and more than 100 of them were actually identified and arrested and so on but then witnesses started being killed and lawyers bribed etc. etc. So six years on there still has been no justice and the fact that these killings can carry on with impunity…. And that also happens in Indonesia and many other countries and this I think is a very frustrating thing for anybody working in human rights because the media can expose so much of the terrible things that happen but to actually bring justice and to hold those who are guilty to account for their crimes is a very difficult problem. |
| Steven | You’re absolutely right, David, and I mean you can point to examples of that all over: Sri Lanka could be pointed to, Kenya could be pointed to with respect to the 2007/2008 post-election violence where the President and Deputy President were brought before the ICC and through witness intimidation the ICC couldn’t proceed with prosecution. You can point to all kinds of examples; yet on the other hand you can also point to Rios Mantt in Guatemala who in his 80s and 90s, it’s a bit late, but he has been brought before a tribunal. You can look at Chile and Argentina where just in the last year some of the perpetrators of human rights abuses in the 80s, 70s even have been prosecuted.  So on the other hand you’re right, there’s too much impunity but yet there are those examples where people have been brought to trial and they are being held accountable if not in a tribunal then at least in history. They will be known in history as the perpetrators of human rights abuses and that’s something that they and their families will have to live with too. |
| Jaya | It’s an interesting situation when it comes to accountability. When it comes to China it’s a huge elephant in the room because there are American organisations that are complicit in human rights abuses in China, there are Canadian companies and British companies and it’s not the same as an arms manufacturer selling arms to a country to fight a war, we’re talking about CISCO who actually named human rights dissident groups in China and said we can build you software that can target these specific groups. Now, CISCO was taken to court, they did not get charged guilty which I think is criminal in itself because the evidence was just blatantly there… it was a CISCO PowerPoint presentation which named the groups and it said we can help you target these groups. So in my opinion red handed, the evidence was undeniable.  But the power of China is very worrying. Here in New Zealand we cannot get any hearings in Parliament, we’ve been told do not bother, don’t even try, we will not endorse any parliamentary hearings about human rights abuses in China, forget it. And I’ve heard that from every single party, including the Green Party which I was very shocked to hear. You cannot touch that subject of Falun Gong or whatever and so that’s why the *Epoch Times* came about to just, like you say, just to record historically the crimes. And they’re very systematic about recording the names and addresses and where the perpetrators live and we’re talking right down to the local police officer in an area in a remote province that has done something. So they have a database, the Falun Gong group have a database of everyone that they know that has committed any crime against Falun Gong or others. And that’s going to be a very interesting time when it does come about, that this database is used to hold people to account. But who is going to hold CISCO to account? Who is going to hold the US Government to account who have not acted on significant evidence? For not holding their own citizens to account, if you know what I mean? So that’s a massive task, it’s just really hard. |
| Sally | It seems like a good point, sorry to break it up but we’re just going to have a quick song, David this was your choice. The Lani Singers at the Cambridge Museum. |
| David | The Lani Singers, I was really inspired by their music, they’re a group from West Papua and music has been very much part of the social evolution in terms of the West Papuans getting their story to the rest of the world. Unfortunately it’s largely gone unnoticed in New Zealand in particular and to some degree in Australia as well but certainly it’s gone very global and music has played quite an important role in that. Benny Wenda is an exiled parliamentarian from West Papua based in the UK and so most of the singers involved are in fact his family and wherever he goes, when he’s got his family with him, The Lani Singers are really quite inspirational and this was a performance that they gave in Cambridge. |
|  | **MUSIC BY THE LANI SINGERS PERFORMED AT THE CAMBRIDGE MUSEUM** |
| Sally | Welcome back to Speak Up-Kōrerotia on Plains FM 96.9. We’re speaking with David, Jaya and Steven about exposing human rights abuses through citizen media. Steven, I think you were going to kick us off with some examples of when citizen media or NGOs have successfully exposed some human rights abuses. |
| Steven | I think I would like to actually use as an example the way in which Amnesty International USA, the American Chapter of Amnesty International, has been using a remote sensing satellite, something I talked about earlier. Just in the last year actually, in April 2016, Amnesty was able to identify a mass grave in northern Nigeria where the Nigerian army surrounded an entire village called Zaria, it’s a Shia village that fell into the disfavour of the Nigerian army which has a reputation for being not very well disciplined etc. Up to 350 people were killed; some think it was as high as 500. And if you were to go to Amnesty International’s website you would be able to find if you just Googled that, you would be able to find satellite imagery of the mass grave. There was no way that Amnesty or anyone else could necessarily get into that village to actually identify the mass grave but it’s clearly visible in the satellite imagery that Amnesty was able to pull up.  Another very recent example from just about a week ago, an organisation in Washington DC called the Centre for Strategic and International Studies commissioned satellite imagery from the same company, it’s a satellite imagery company called Digital Globe where they were able to assess the fact that it appears that the Chinese government actually is in a sense punishing the North Korean Government for its nuclear weapons programme. They were able to track over time the flow of goods going across the border from China into North Korea and they were able to do that by counting the vehicles again using satellite imagery and you could see that imagery on the website. We can actually go all the way back to 2003 when a non-state actor, an NGO called the Institute for Science and International Security, used satellite imagery to find the Natanz heavy water nuclear processing facility in Iran. It wasn’t a government that exposed to the world the fact at that time the Iranians were pursuing nuclear weapons, it was actually an NGO.  There are other examples, if I have time I could turn to just one more. An organisation called the Satellite Sentinel Project, that is in part run out of Harvard University, used satellite imagery particularly in 2011/2012 to look at the conflict between the South Sudanese and the Sudanese Government and among other things they were able to identify the occurrence of a massacre in a town called Kadugli and they were able to do that again with satellite imagery. I’m looking actually as I speak at an image of body bags that were collected in the centre of Kadugli using satellite imagery. So again to my point, these are examples of where non-state actors have access to places that they through one technology or another that they would not be able to get to physically on their own and this is a way in which NGOs are able to gather information and create global awareness of these kinds of events. |
| Sally | We sort of flagged the point before around protection and one benefit… not only are they able to expose these abuses but they’re able to do it from a distance so they’re not physically going into these locales. |
| Steven | I like to think of the satellite imagery as the ability of a non-state actor to reach into a situation and try to understand what’s going on. But there’s flip side - and often they work together - local citizens are often able to reach out of local area by tweets, by pictures that they send via the internet to tell organisations like I said earlier, the Carter Center collects and curates these kinds of things to keep track of what’s going on in Syria. The concern with the safety and wellbeing, though, of citizens who send texts, who send video is that they can be identified, they are in harm’s way if their photo has metadata, if it has information attached to it that identifies the sender of the information. Then that puts them in considerable danger. And so there are efforts also by technology companies such as Benetec in the Silicon Valley which is a sort of a good samaritan IT company, non-profit, of creating platforms that allow people to send photos that can be verified yes this is a photo that took place at this place and in this time and it looks to be real, it looks to be correct without at the same time giving away too much information about the sender. So it’s striking a balance between individual safety and still getting the information out to the world. |
| Sally | Jaya do you have any comments on that? |
| Jaya | Yes technology is a double-edged sword. One of the journalists I work with, Ethan Gutmann in the States, he says the internet is poison for a lot of the people we work with. But there’s also some smart dissidents out there who have created their own Tor Browsers, the practitioners have created their own version of Tor called Dinoweb and it’s very sophisticated software that the dissidents in China can use to get information out and they have by necessity become very, very smart about how to protect themselves, how not to expose themselves through using technical means.  But I think broadening the scope about protection, one of the ways sometimes when we’re dealing with witnesses and sources, if the source so desires they can actually gain protection through exposure and sometimes that’s the best way to protect someone who is alone in the country. And I’m thinking of Gao Zhisheng who is a famous human rights lawyer in China and they would have disappeared him if it hadn’t been for the huge exposure in the west about his work and that’s probably the only reason he’s still alive today is through the efforts of the Chinese dissident…the diaspora over here doing everything they can to make sure that Amnesty International and others are exposing the fact that he’s been persecuted and Amnesty International itself played a role in that as well looking after Gao Zhisheng. It’s a constant issue and it’s an issue for citizen journalists themselves, protecting themselves, not understanding that the tools they use, the phone can give them away. And there was a lot of conversation about that at the conference, about how to protect yourself. And that’s one of the dangers and it worries me a lot; I worry about citizens sort of taking on a gung-ho attitude and going, “I’ve got a phone, I’ve got internet access, I can expose this” and I’m like yes you can but you really need to be careful about what you’re doing because it can be a life and death situation. And so anyone out there, if you’re thinking about doing that it’s not something to take on lightly, you really have to be very, very careful. |
| Sally | I wonder as well another layer to this protection… is not the physical security but also the mental security of being exposed to these sorts of very difficult to deal with issues. And David I wonder as well with sending some students in to do some of this journalism, do you give them training in these sorts of mental wellbeing type practices as well? |
| David | Oh absolutely, it’s a very charged ethical situation and this is integrated into Asia Pacific Journalism Studies course, we collaborate with a number of NGOs around the region and I think of West Papua Media in particular and they run training courses and we integrate with those. Primarily the training courses are designed for citizen media, citizen journalists inside West Papua itself but in the process, much of what is taught, is actually invaluable for our students as well. They’re all post-graduate students who are involved in this and so they’re quite mature and have quite a bit of life experience even before doing this course but West Papua is where the main areas that we’ve been mostly concerned with over a number of years and we’ve written actually quite a few stories and exposed internationally the situation for many indigenous people that are at great risk.  I’d like to just cite one example in particular because quite a few of the students have actually won awards for the work that they’ve done. There was the multi news media report series about the torture of a fugitive prisoner from Fiji - now Fiji of course had a military coup in 2006 and then had elections in 2014 - and so the coup leader eventually won a mandate in 2014 but the time that this was done it was still very much a military backed government and under quite a lot of tension at the time. And one of our students at the time, Daniel Drageset, he was a journalist from Norway but was with us working on a project called the Pacific Media Watch Freedom Project where we collaborated with reporters from Frontier in Paris and International Federation of Journalists and a number of other groups and organisations as well. And we monitor what’s happening in the social media realm right through the region, it’s quite an opportunity where we get a break in stories especially when they’re in different languages and so on as in Fiji or in West Papua, it means that we have to draw on resources very often to do translations but because we take the trouble to do this we tend to break quite interesting stories. And in this case, this was a multimedia news report about a series of… what happened was the torture of a fugitive prisoner and of also his suspected accomplice by the security forces or Fiji prison officers. They found these two escapees in a forested area and then subjected them to brutal torture, both physical and sexual. And probably more than one but certainly one of the group actually made the mistake of videoing it and then sending it to colleagues who sent it on to further colleagues and eventually we picked up on it on You Tube. And of course the media in Fiji at that stage were certainly very nervous about it and wouldn’t actually screen it, no other media were screening it as well. So we did exhaustive checking on the authenticity of the video footage and then put together a story and then once we had put together a story then the local media, broadcast media and so on in Fiji ran with the story as well and then it went viral, the story about what happened. And the student concerned, Daniel, he stayed with this story over a number of weeks and then investigations that were carried out and so on and as a result he won an award from the DART Asia Pacific Centre for his contribution to investigating police torture. So this is the sort of things that independent groups, even with limited resources can actually do and then it has an impact, it actually sets an agenda for other media. |
| Sally | I think that might be a good point to finish up on, actually, is how do we see this sort of citizen media or NGO activism influencing the mainstream? |
| Jaya | I think it won’t influence the mainstream because it’s very hard to make money from it and that was the recent discussion. The interesting thing is you’ve got Fairfax and the other organisation, APN, merging and that situation is the last action of a dying industry. The media is not just competing with other media, it’s competing with everything, everything is competing with everything else now because it’s all online, you’re all in the same channel. So citizen media will have as much opportunity as a big organisation. So I just think it’s… I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, I don’t think many people have very solid predictions, it’s just becoming really noisy, it’s just becoming quite chaotic, there’s no clear channels forward anymore I don’t know. What you think about that, Steven? |
| Steven | I don’t think you’re wrong but from my perspective, and the kinds of things that I pay attention to, I’m a bit more optimistic. I’m starting to see science and technology being folded into the reporting and coverage. There’s some pretty still serious news organisations - I’m thinking of the *Guardian* - and if the *Guardian* itself doesn’t go under because of its financial pressures that would be a place I would turn to for news organisation that’s using science and technology, that’s being produced by the non-state actors in interesting ways. The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* in the United States use the evidence that’s produced quite regularly. There’s practically not a day that goes by that my Google alert feed doesn’t give me more examples to turn to somewhere in the world. |
| Sally | David, any final comments? |
| David | Yes well I would say that it’s very depressing in countries like New Zealand where the shrinkage of the media organisations and cross mergers to the point where there’s no real independent media anymore. Frankly, as a journalist for many years, I’ve given up on reading newspapers. I do read for part of my role, part of my job, but the dependable media sources are not newspapers anymore in New Zealand. But I am heartened by what I see in the region that we cover, in the Asia Pacific region and particularly micro states such as Papua New Guinea which does have a bigger population than New Zealand and so on. But the fragmentation of the media there, the mainstream media have lost trust essentially integrity has been eroded and people just don’t trust the mainstream media anymore, but yet you see digital media emerging rapidly throughout the region that have established greater rapport with their audiences and establishing trust. There is this view that the main international media and the *Guardian* is a good one of course but they will retain their mojo if you like, others may rapidly be eroded over time. But I think elsewhere in the world there is some really heartening developments. I think of Media Power for example in France, an investigative website which employs something like about 40 journalists now and was just started off by the police reporter who broke the *Rainbow Warrior* story or at least broke the fact that the responsible people were in the French Government going right up to the French President, Mitterrand at the time,. Some years ago he left, he was a journalist for *Le Monde* and he broke away until he wanted to try something new and he’d built up quite a reputation as an investigator journalist. And so he started this new website MediaPower and journalists have flocked to work with him. And in some ways even major TV network like Aljazeera, because they are not dependent on the numbers and the click baits if you like, they have been able to run a whole series of really interesting programmes as well as outside their news services. I think they’re quite unique in this way. Tremendous documentaries that are being run on Aljazeera. So there quite a few developments internationally that still bring some hope. |
| Sally | Well that’s a nice positive place to finish up I think. I’d like to thank you all very much for your expertise and for your time, it’s been a particularly fascinating conversation. And for all the listeners out there, make sure you check out our Facebook page to find the links to some of these resources that we’ve been discussing today. Just search for Speak Up-Kōrerotia. |