

From the Guest Editors

## Digital Media and Development in the Pacific



**Heather A. Horst**

RMIT University, Australia

**Evangelia Papoutsaki**

UNITEC Institute of Technology, New Zealand

**Christine Schmidt**

RMIT University, Australia

Digital media and technologies play an increasingly important role in social, economic, and communicative activities in the Global South, including in the South Pacific. Like other small island developing states, the Pacific Islands are characterized by their small size and scale, relative isolation, and vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change, which in turn shape national and regional development agendas as well as policies and practices associated with the media and communication environment (Kelman & West, 2009; Noske-Turner, Tacchi, Horst, & Papoutsaki, 2014; Turvey, 2007). The media and communication landscape reflects the diversity and complexity of culture, languages, geography, populations, history, politics, transnational networks, infrastructures, and policies of the region. Media industries in some countries include private, government, and community media, across radio, newspaper, and TV platforms. In other countries, mass media industries are comprised only of government-funded media (Papoutsaki, McManus, & Matbob, 2011; Tacchi, Horst, Papoutsaki, Thomas, & Eggins, 2013). These are coupled with a longstanding series of cultural practices involving systems of exchange and circulation as exemplified through the *kula* ring (a ceremonial exchange system in the Milne Bay province of Papua New Guinea) as well as systems of communication and conduct such as *fa'asamoa* (ways of being Samoan) and other informal systems of social control (Arno, 1983; Duranti, 1997; Munn, 1990).

This special issue introduces six articles that focus on use, potential use, and non-use of several forms of digital media, contextualized within the broader history of the region's media and communication practices. The digital media infrastructure across the Pacific Islands has expanded over the past decade through the laying of fiber and undersea cables (Starosielski, 2015), the establishment of mobile phone masts that provide greater network coverage (Horst, 2013), and greater access to DVDs, memory sticks, Bluetooth, and other platforms that enable the circulation of content among people (Starosielski, 2010). This special issue's attention to digital media *and* development acknowledges the entanglement of these domains in the region. As becomes evident in all the articles, investing in digital media infrastructures in small islands with small and dispersed populations is often framed as part of a trajectory toward socioeconomic development, whether *development* encompasses formal development initiatives, policies, regulations, or practices of individuals and communities and their relationships to tradition and change.

The first set of articles focuses on the implications of these changing digital media infrastructures through analyses of specific uses of digital media in several national contexts. The first article by Jennifer Anayo and Heather Horst traces the introduction and uptake of public Wi-Fi in Niue, which began describing itself as a

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## DIGITAL MEDIA AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC

Wi-Fi nation as early as 2003. Widely recognized as one of the first digital media initiatives in the region, Anayo and Horst reveal how the availability and affordability of new digital media devices have resulted in the congestion of Niue's public Wi-Fi infrastructure. The authors conclude by reflecting on how the continual upgrades required to meet demand and the need to continually locate funding to support these upgrades challenge the broader sustainability of this novel digital inclusion and national development policy. Glen Finau, Nacanieli Rika, Jale Samuwai, and James McGoon's article discusses the potential of mobile phones to address financial inclusion through digital financial services designed for unbanked or underbanked populations (Maurer, 2012). Drawing on a survey and interviews in rural Fiji, the authors analyze the factors shaping potential users' perceptions of digital financial services and the services' value and usability. While there are a number of systemic issues that underpin the usability of digital financial services, the authors suggest that age, income, and financial literacy training strongly shape the potential for consumer adoption in rural Fiji. The next article, by Mark Eby and Verena Thomas, explores how DVD circulation has led to the emergence of *haus piksas*, or village cinemas, in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Bringing together an analysis of the changing distribution networks and informal economic activities that have arisen alongside a consideration of the social spaces at play in the *haus piksa*, Eby and Thomas consider how this organic informal media infrastructure might be leveraged for more intentional development initiatives such as the production of films and other media directed toward social change.

The second set of articles takes up the challenge proposed by Eby and Thomas to explore the role of digital media as tools and communication spaces in addressing key development issues across the Pacific. The article, by Verena Thomas, Evangelia Papoutsaki, and Hebe Gouda, looks at the use of digital media for outreach related to health communication, especially noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). NCDs represent one of the biggest challenges to health across the Pacific Islands, and the authors use examples of existing health communication efforts to explore how health and development practitioners can expand their use of digital media to disseminate and increase NCD awareness in light of the existing communicative ecologies. Usha Harris, Evangelia Papoutsaki, and Sandra Kailahi turn our attention to the use of digital media and communication technologies in addressing climate change. Seeing the potential to move beyond information dissemination, the authors explore case studies of community participation in content creation around issues of climate change. Harris, Papoutsaki, and Kailahi further argue that development practitioners and communities should employ digital media and communication technologies to involve community members' participation in the process of content creation in order to incorporate local concerns, perspectives, and cultural knowledge. Finally, Jessica Noske-Turner and Jo Tacchi open up a broader conversation about the role of digital media in development. Drawing on research on the PACMAS Innovation Fund, which provided small grants to local media and communication development activities, the authors examine the ways in which *innovation* was framed in the initiative and grapple with the question of what happens when donors have less control over the focus of funded projects. The authors conclude by considering what innovation itself means in this context, paying particular attention to how the spread of digital technologies is integrated into media, communication, and development practices.

The diversity of practices within and across the Pacific region enables us to see the ways in which digital media is differentially integrated and imagined as part of a range of development agendas. Whether the aspirations for digital media be connectivity to an outside world, a way to provide digital and financial inclusion to marginal and remote populations, an economic driver, a tool for creating and engaging community, or a proxy for re-imagining development practices, digital media continues to capture the imagination of communities, nations, organizations, and funders as a way to engage in and alter the future. Increased attention to the interplay between digital media and development continues. Historically informed and critical scholarship on the empirical realities of these aspirations as they are enacted and reimagined remains essential. As editors, we hope this Special Issue is the beginning of a conversation that will inspire scholars within and beyond the Pacific Region to interrogate the interrelationships among digital media, development, and social change. ■

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**Heather A. Horst**, Professor and Founding Director, Digital Ethnography Research Centre, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Australia. heather.horst@rmit.edu.au

**Evangelia Papoutsaki**, Associate Professor, Communication Studies, UNITEC Institute of Technology, New Zealand. epapoutsaki@unitec.ac.nz

**Christine Schmidt**, PhD, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Australia. christine.schmidt@rmit.edu.au

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