

# media bills threaten Papua journalists

by John Millet

**T**wo legislative proposals are currently stirring up concern in Papua New Guinea: the National Information and Communication Bill, and the Media Commission Bill, both of which are intended to place the country's mass media under stringent regulation.

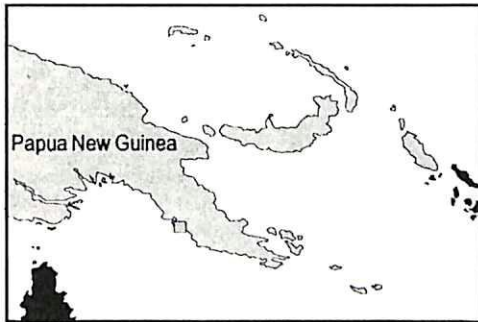
Media owners are required to obtain a certificate from the authorities before commencing operations. Without a certificate, they face possible imprisonment up to four years. Moreover, "where the authority considers that it would be in the interest of the public to do so," the certificate may be suspended or revoked.

All journalists—writers, announcers, television hosts (comperes), presenters—must register with the government. They would be subject to the authority of a Media Commission, which could direct or order them to write or say anything. Failure to comply with an order or direction could bring a fine up to K2000. Furthermore, Section 28 of the Bill makes it mandatory for the commission to withdraw the journalist's certificate of registration if the latter is found "guilty of a serious offence which is detrimental to the interest of the public."

Key appointments to the National Information and Communications Authority, including representatives of particular interest groups, are made by the Minister in charge. As for the Media Commission, the Minister nominates the chairman and deputy chairman while various interest groups nominate the other seven members.

The main direct risk therefore would be for media owners rather than for media workers. It would take the form of the Minister or agencies under his control closing premises down "in the public interest" after having given the owner the opportunity to present his case. Of course, indirectly, owner's risk is also workers' risk.

A brief reading of the two Bills strongly suggests that their drafters have come up hard against the truth, faced by many would-be regulators before them in liberal democratic societies, that it would not be easy to limit freedom of expression without destroying it. They have resolved the dilemma nevertheless with the heavy-handed approach, imposing unacceptable risks on society. The Media Council should quickly propose alternative arrangements.



Source: *Post-Courier* (PNG), in *Pacific Media Watch*, 6 December 1996