The Information Superhighway in the Pacific Pacific Servers in April 1996

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Abstract

This paper reviews the state of WWW servers in the Pacific Islands countries at the beginning of April 1996. While the number of servers has increased, the full potential or publishing has not yet been realised.In addition, a number new commercial sites have opened in the USA, which set new standards for presentation, but exhibit selective and slanted information. The predicted gap between the Pacific Islands and the overseas servers and the information published therein will continue to widen unless concerted action is taken by the Pacific Island countries.

☀Introduction☀

In a previous paper the author and colleagues argued that the microstates of the Pacific were facing the onslaught on an information overload which could conceivably have serious repercussions on their cultural identity by threatening the underpinnings of a stratified and controlled transmission of knowledge and the dangers of outsiders not only projecting their cultural values, but also creating an image about the country by owning much of the information material produced. The paper argued that the anarchic attitudes prevalent on the WWW were such that minorities were ignored and that the socio-economic differences in the western world appeared to translate into the virtual world of the WWW. It was posited that small countries without the economic wherewithal would be hard pressed to establish a viable presence on the WWW as the telecommunications costs would be prohibitive (➡ Spennemann *et al* 1995).

Now, six months after that paper had been written, it is time to review the situation to to see whether the number of servers has increased and if so, whether the small countries have made substantive inroads on the information super highway.

☀The situation in April 1996☀

A recent trip to four of the five Melanesian countries (Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia) offered the opportunity to experience first hand the Pacific Islanders fascination with the 'new' WWW. This fascination is very palpable with many people realising some of the potential. This is most recognised by the expatriate community of technical advisers and 'experts', but has transcended some of the business community. Yet, for the vast majority the WWW is not an issue at all. Given the low saturation with computers this is hardly surprising.

This anticipation is of some is fueled by the conventional media **"*Vous surfez sur le web?*"** asks an advertisement in the Noumea-based *les Nouvelles Caledoniennes* drumming up business, while a company in Vanuatu ruthlessley compares the services it provides with those of a competitor. In its March issue the regional magazine ➡ Islands Business ran a feature story on the subject, focussing on the Fiji-based commercial service launched in December 1995 in an attempt to both demonstrate the system and to test the market acceptance.

Along with the provision of WWW services comes e-mail, both LAN-based and full internet e-mail services. A number of people in the governments have addresssed the issues and recognised the potential of e-mail but were worried about the connect

costs incurred and the inability to monitor the nature of the traffic (official vs. personal usage). The communications companies are obviously keen to expand the range of services they offer. As these services gain hold and become widely accepted, traditional mail with eventually decline and stamps will be even more confined to the philatelic collectors' market. Yet stamps are a suitable tool for the transmission of subliminal messages, such as the Vanuatu stamp with a cultural heritage motif shown at right. On the other hand, phonecards have become a new collectors item and may well become the stamps of the electronic age, but they are confined to the local usage and the international collectors market.

A systematic search for Pacific Islands servers was made in early April 1996. ➡Table 1 sets out the servers provided by Pacifc Island Countries with the exception of Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii, all of which are representative of affluent western societies. Of the total of 25 countries and territories in the Pacific only Fiji, Guam, New Caledonia and Vanuatu have their own web servers. Papua New Guinea has one server location, **Papua New Guinea On Line**, but the service is a US-based structure within the '.com' domain. This service has been included in the listing as it is likely to become a PNG-based domain soon. In addition, there are four Tahiti related servers, all in the US '.com' domain.

Table 1. WWW servers operated in Oceania
(excluding Australia, Hawai'i and New Zealand)

Organisation	Server URL
Fiji	
InterNet Services, Fiji Post & Telecom	www.is.com.fj
University of the South Pacific	http://kula.usp.ac.fj/
University of the South Pacific	http://www.usp.ac.fj/
Fiji Visitors Bureau, Fiji Government	http://www.fijifvb.gov.fj/
Guam	
Government of Guam	http://www.gov.gu//
University of Guam	http://uog2.uog.edu/
New Caledonia	
ORSTOM	http://noumea.orstom.nc/
Papua New Guinea	
Papua New Guinea Online	http://www.niugini.com/
Tahiti	
Tahiti Nui Travel Agency	http://www.tahiti-nui.com/
Tahiti.com	http://www.tahiti.com/
Vanuatu	
Vanuatu On Line	http://www.vanuatu.net.vu//

Compared to six months earlier, he situation had changed dramatically by April 1996 with a number of new sites coming on line especially in the Pacific Islands. Not only did the number of servers in Fiji increase with a total of four servers/subservers now online, but also new servers opened in Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea.The servers can be grouped into three classes: (i) Universities; (ii) Government agencies; and (iii) Commercial services.

Universities
On the global scene, the universities were the first to realise the academic and research potential of the WWW and so it is surprising that they do not figure prominently in the area--with the exception

of Hawaii. The University of Guam already has a well configured server, while the University of the South Pacific (USP) server is still under development (since Sept 1995) with apparently little outward change. Yet USP is a regional university with campuses or extensions in the Solomon Is., Vanuatu, Fiji, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tokelau, Niue, Western Samoa, Tonga, Cook Is. and Nauru--a situation that lends itself to using the WWW as a resource publishing tool for extension services. Not all Universities are linked up, with some major players missing, such as the French University of the Pacific with campuses in Noumea and Papeete (Tahiti) and an extension in Wallis. Further, both the University of Papua New Guinea and the PNG Institute of Technology in Lae are still not connected.

None of the Pacific Universities seems to have fully recognised the WWW as a legitimate publishing medium and thus much of the information shown is very much internal and administrative information (using the WWW as an *intra*net raher than a *inter*net).

Government and research agencies
The French overseas research and development organisation ORSTOM operates a server in France (➡ http://www.orstom.fr/welcome.html) as well as several of its overseas bases, among them Noumea, New Caledonia (➡ http://noumea.orstom.nc/), which at the time of query was still under development with a number of photos but otherwise little authorative information accessible upfront.

The Fiji Government promises to start a service operated by the **Fiji Visitors Bureau** (➡ http://www.fijifvb.gov.fj/, but the anounced launching date of 1 April was no met. The **Government of Guam** has already gone ahead with a server that provides limited information on the country, but also material on the workings of the Guam legislature (➡ http://www.gov.gu//). The **Government of Hawai'i** server is equally comprehensive (➡ http://hinc.hinc.hawaii.gov/soh_home.html). In view of its nature as the 50th state of the USA this service cannot be compared to the other Pacific Islands Servers.

Commercial services
The Fijian commercial service provider is at present a six months experimental service subsidised by the Pacific Forum Secretariat and operated by Fiji Post and Telecommunications Ltd. and Fiji International Telecommuications Ltd. in collaboration with the University of the South Pacific, Telecom New Zealand and Cable & Wireless. The telecommunications companies cosubsidise the service as a means to develop commercial interest and a viable market, ultimately to generate income.

The Vanuatu provider in fact runs through an Australian Web Service, which then provides a virtual domain (➡ "http://www.fan.net.au/vanuatu/" converting to "http://www.vanuatu.net.vu//"). This commercial service, which is authored by an Australian company, is very much oriented towards attracting prospective tourists to the islands. It needs to be seen how this development will fare with the traditional values of kustom and protectiveness of one's heritage.

✪How much has changed?✪

The graph at the left plots the development of the Pacific Island servers since December 1994. The growth of the Pacific WWW is evident. But key question is whether the new servers have in fact changed the publication landscape or not and whether the issues raised in the earlier paper are still valid. I believe that they are. Let me quote from the banner of **Vanuatu On Line**:

> ... The Ni-Vanuatu, as they are known, are a peaceful, loving, gentle race, intent on enjoying the life's simpler pleasures. They will ensure that you enjoy your time in their tropical paradise too."

As mentioned, the Vanutu service has been set up by an Australian Web design house 'Web Publishing Australia"-- and does it show! The banner text of Vanuatu On Line is paternalistic, if not patronising to such a degree that it is almost funny in the 1990s. But, unfortunately, it is reflective of the conceptualistion of Pacific countries and peoples held by much of the advertsing and marketing

industry, which in turn is presumably representative of consumer expectations. Yet it is these images that will be seen and read by much of the WWW audience and the reiteration of such stereotypes is not helping to achieve a balanced world view. What is equally disconcerting is that this service, as the only one in the country, has such a banner. The material avaliable on the service is very limited and no *in depth* information on the country is available from this source. There are a number of attempts, but they are either too brief or too slanted to represent the commercial interests

One of the more worrying aspects of the new web developments is that one commercial server provides a listing of all people subscribing to the service complete with their e-mail addresses, which would represent a breach of privacy. Some people may wish to divulge their interests, while others may simply wish to use the system, sitting on the fence.

Even if more countries are setting up their servers, the gulf between these new servers and the commercial development products is set to increase. For example, n the commercial world, there are four servers providing material on Tahiti, *ie*.

- **TahitiWeb** (➡ http://www.tahitiweb.com/), operated by KMI Tahiti, is an overview site compiling a few sites and resources on Tahiti,;
- **Tahiti Explorer** (➡ http://www.tahiti-explorer.com/). This service is extremely professionally and slick produced, making full use the new features of Netscape, that it could become the benchmark for future services -- leaving asude the discussion whether the special Netscape extensions are a desirable feature for the net community or not.
- The **Tahiti Nui Travel Agency**, (➡ http://www.tahiti-nui.com/), Tahiti's biggest local travel agent,has a site also residing at the US '.com' domain, but supplied with local information.
- Finally, **Tahiti.com** (➡ http://www.tahiti.com) is typical business advertising server run out of the USA, with a video camera located in Tahiti providing some images.

Similar to the Vanuatu server and the server of the Fiji Visitors Bureau it is clearly the tourism orientation that drives the development of the Tahiti focussed web sites, and the images and information provided on these servers is clearly reflective of it.

Given its embedding into the US system and the initiative taken by the University of Hawaii, with schools and museums participating, it is not surprising that Hawaii has an advanced WWW structure. There are a few intriguing developments, such as the Dinosaur Exhibit of the **Hawaii Community College** (➡ http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/dinos/dinos.1.html) or the online education course developed by **Asia Now online** (➡ http://www2.hawaii.edu/hptv/)

Most private servers and sevarl commercial servers clearly favour style over substance containing pure adverstising with little hard information. Information-rich sites run off the commercial domain such as Laan Laack's **RMI On Line** (➡ http://www.clark.net/pub/llaack/rmi/) are the exception in their simplicity and effectiveness. By the way. this site makes it very clear in its banner that it is **not** the offical site of the Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

In summation, at the present time the information on the countries of the Pacific is still dominated by outside sources, with travel book publishers, such as ➡ Lonely Planet becoming more elaborate and providing a Pacific-wide coverage, and other commercial sites like the above mentioned Tahiti Explorer clearly setting the trend.

While the number of servers has increased in the area, the commercial element has taken hold, as yet with little understanding of the potential the **honey port effect** (➡ Green 1995) represents. Some of the new Tahiti sites tend to confirm the fear held by many that the WWW would become characterised by style over substance.

✪What lies ahead?✪

Government information agencies in small ountries are notoriously underresourced and the information thus published is oftenn presented in a bland form. Likewise, the cultural and

environmental heritage agencies in the countries lack the economic wherewithal to afford a full presence on the WWW *and* conduct their normal ongoing business. Thus the gap which is already apparent will continue to widen. The Pacific Islands universities need to recognise the WWW as a legitimate publishing medium, one that potentially allows regional uiversities to project a truly global image. At the moment, the tourism industry dominates the Pacific Islands WWW sites and this is not likely to change dramatically in the near future.

As the information increases and as the commercial publishers provide ever more comprehensive information packaged in an ever more slick presentation, the problems for the global reader-/viewership will be to distinguish between information and **des**information. As with print media, the more elaborate and the more subtle the attempt, the more likely it will succeed.

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