

Executive Summary: Understanding China's Footprint in the Pacific Islands Media Landscape

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Over the past decade, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has sought to deepen its ties with the Pacific Islands. Beijing's efforts to cultivate influence have included expanding economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Pacific Island nations as well as the PRC's footprint in the region's media landscape. In this summary, we provide findings from a May 2026 CNA report that examines efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to shape the media and information environments of 15 Pacific Island countries.

How does China seek to influence the media landscape in the Pacific Islands?

China uses a complex mix of tactics targeted at shaping three different levels of the Pacific Islands' media landscape:

- **State-level** tactics include signing bilateral media cooperation agreements, ensuring that PRC state-run media are available to local audiences, and financing, building, and operating local information and communications infrastructure.
- **Organizational-level** tactics include content sharing and coproduction among PRC state-run media and local media outlets, attempts by PRC actors to invest in local media outlets, and press engagements by the PRC embassy.
- **Individual-level** tactics include providing all-expenses-paid trips to China and directly pressuring Pacific Islands media practitioners to censor their reporting or publish specific content.

What is distinct about China's approach?

China's approach to engaging media in the Pacific Islands is distinct in three ways:

- **Objectives.** Whereas support from long-standing partners such as Australia and New Zealand is focused on encouraging the development of free and independent media, China's engagement with Pacific media is primarily aimed at shaping public discussion in ways that further China's interests.
- **Scope.** Beijing uses a wide variety of strategies, techniques, and actors—including its state-directed media complex and propaganda system—to shape the media landscapes of nearly every Pacific Island we researched.
- **Lack of transparency.** Details about media cooperation agreements between the PRC and the Pacific Islands are consistently unavailable. Unlike the region's other long-standing partners, China does not make details about funding public; as a result, how much money Beijing is funneling into the region's media and information landscapes is unclear.

How successful has China been?

Our research suggests that the CCP has had some success shaping local media discussion in the Pacific Islands, but this success has been relatively limited and uneven. These mixed results are likely due to a combination of factors.

Factors that limit China's effect on local media landscapes include the following:

- **Limited resonance of PRC state-run media.** Chinese state-run media have not yet established a strong reach in the region and do not compete with established sources of news, such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Radio New Zealand, or Television New Zealand (TVNZ).
- **Suspicion of China.** Experts mentioned a variety of suspicions about China, including concerns that China seeks to export authoritarianism, exploit local economies, and capture political elites. Experts also expressed concern that China is anti-Christian.
- **Strength of journalistic norms.** Multiple Pacific journalists voiced their commitment to maintaining independence and journalistic integrity.
- **Lack of interest in China.** PRC media tends to focus on promoting stories about China. Our research suggests that local audiences are more interested in things that are happening closer to home.
- **Continued engagement with long-standing partners.** Media development programs such as those led by ABC and TVNZ and innovative business models such as Pasifika TV figure prominently in the regional media landscape.

Despite these constraints, multiple factors may work in China's favor:

- **Financial state of regional media.** Local experts and media practitioners described the financial state of the region's media as the worst in history, which may make them more receptive to China's offers of funds.
- **Staffing challenges.** Subject matter experts cited high attrition rates in Pacific newsrooms, low salaries in the media sector, and inexperience among Pacific journalists as key challenges to Pacific media outlets' resilience.
- **Frustration with long-standing partners.** Some Pacific media practitioners expressed frustration with the types of support that they receive from long-standing partners such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom and with the time it takes those partners to respond to requested adjustments.
- **The decisions of Pacific Island governments.** Several local experts suggested that China has had the most success shaping media discussion in countries where it has cultivated close ties with the political elite.

Given the speed with which the region's media landscape is evolving and the scope of the CCP's efforts, China's footprint could expand quickly, depending on how these factors play out over the near term.

For further reading

Heidi Holz with Anthony Miller, *China's Playbook for Shaping the Global Media Environment*, CNA, IRM-2020-U-024710-Final, Feb. 2020, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/02/IRM-2020-U-024710-Final.pdf>.

Lauren Dickey, Erica Downs, Andrew Taffer, and Heidi Holz, *Mapping the Information Environment in the Pacific Island Countries: Disruptors, Deficits, and Decisions*, CNA, IRM-2019-U-019755-Final, Dec. 2019, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2019/12/IRM-2019-U-019755-Final.pdf>.

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