From the World Wide Web to Village Rumours – Forms of (Mis)Information and Propaganda during the ‘Fiji Coup’ 2000

Theories of globalisation argue that increasing Western hegemony and ethnic fragmentation are dialectical components of global processes. However, the experiences of the Fijian hostage crisis and attempted coup raise questions about the validity of these dichotomous concepts.

On 19 May 2000 a group of armed men who later on got known as the George Speight group, took the members of parliament hostage and declared a civilian takeover of government. This event marked the beginning of the biggest crisis of Fiji as an independent nation and the turmoil and effects are still ongoing today. The hostages were kept in parliament for almost two months. The perpetrators played the ethnic card to justify the coup and gain support among the Fijian population. Yet, the civilian takeover attempt was about money, power and corruption. Despite the fact that within the last year 13 Fijians have died and were killed by other Fijians, especially in the Western world the crisis is still described as an ethnic one, constructing unity and dichotomy which is oversimplified. At its core the present crisis is as much about disunity between as within the different ethnic groups and about postcolonial identities in Fiji thirty years after independence. Even though the civilian takeover attempt was not about ethnic issues at the core, the perpetrators manipulated feelings of unease, discontent and fear among the ethnic Fijian population to build support for their actions. This paper explores how the George Speight group used their access to global and local information and networks to spread misinformation and propaganda and the means of manipulation they applied. These means range from the use of the World Wide Web and email to print media and radio to rumours. It will become evident that the perpetrators themselves are players on the global, national and local level who use their various positions for an ongoing construction of ethnicity and mistrust among the local Fijian population.