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COVID-19 and Facebook in Papua New Guinea: Fly River Forum

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Abstract

This article examines use of a Papua New Guinea (PNG) Facebook group, Fly River Forum, with reference to the COVID-19 global pandemic. From about mid-March 2020, when the PNG Government declared a State of Emergency, to early May, members of that forum shared an intense interest in the pandemic and were deeply concerned with its possible implications for the country. The great majority of COVID-related posts, and associated comments, combined delivery of relevant information with scepticism about some of that information. Most participants did not take either religious tropes or conspiracy theories as primary sources of comfort or explanation. We argue that Fly River Forum played a positive role in the ways that people engaged with what could have emerged as a health disaster. More generally, geographically focused sites such as this provide a valuable barometer of local opinion and deserve close attention by politicians and policymakers in PNG.

KEYWORDS

borders, COVID-19, Facebook, Papua New Guinea, social media

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In much of rural Papua New Guinea (PNG) access to television, public radio and even newspapers is very limited (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014). In the absence of mass media, many people rely on social media and mobile phones for information about crucial events that may affect them (Debeljak, 2014). In the 2012 PNG elections, for example, mobile phones and social media were used ‘to mobilise citizen protests concerning the proposed deferral of the elections; to engage in political debate; to record voting irregularities and to improve results capture’ (Haley, 2014). Further afield, with particular reference to the impact of Tropical Cyclone Winston on Fiji in 2016, Finau et al. (2018, p. 123) note that social media are ‘increasingly being used in crises and disasters as an alternative form of communication’.

Through the early months of 2020, the disease that came to be known as COVID-19 emerged as a global crisis. In PNG, many people accessed information about COVID-19 via social media. For example, health workers at Kokopo, New Britain, said that they lacked ‘information and training to help them manage a potentially catastrophic outbreak’ and that they relied on ‘social media, news updates and personal research to inform themselves about the virus’ (Fainu, 2020). By contrast, however, David Manning, Controller of the National Pandemic Response, cautioned members of the general public ‘not to share fake news on social media’, adding that his cybercrime unit had alerted him to ‘the circulation of fake positive cases on Facebook and through WhatsApp messaging’ (Manning, 2020).

By early June 2020 when the government-ordered State of Emergency (SOE) that began in March was due to end, only eight cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed in PNG and there had been no deaths (PNG National Department of Health, 2020). This does not mean, however, that the pandemic had little effect on the general population through this time. Rather, its impacts were felt either directly in response to impositions entailed by the SOE or indirectly as anxiety arising in a context of repeated, frightening and perhaps little-understood warnings about what might come.

In this article we examine the use of one PNG Facebook group—Fly River Forum—to contribute information about, or comment on, COVID-19 through the first 5 months of 2020. First, we discuss the use of Fly River Forum with respect to COVID-19, relative to the temporal sequence of events and responses that affected, or arose within, PNG. We then ask what aspects of the crisis captured most attention. Finally, we consider the role this Facebook group played in people’s understanding and local management of the ‘invisible enemy’, with particular reference to the possible propagation of false information. We argue that Fly River Forum played a positive role in the ways that people engaged with what could have emerged as a health disaster. More generally, geographically focused sites such as this provide a valuable barometer of local opinion and deserve close attention by politicians and policymakers in PNG.

2 | BACKGROUND AND METHODS

The telecommunication company Digicel was established in PNG in 2007, leading to a dramatic increase in mobile coverage and internet access (Logan, 2012). Take-up was rapid and continues to grow. By December 2018, about one million people in a population of over eight million had access to the internet and nearly 750,000 users were listed for the social media platform Facebook (Highet, Nique, Watson, & Wilson, 2019). Many politicians, government agencies, businesses, media outlets and local enterprises use Facebook as a primary tool of communication. With

particular reference to Facebook forums, Rooney (2012) suggested that, as in some other countries, huge benefits might accrue if PNG development agencies and others tasked with policy formulation and implementation actively engaged with civil society through social media.

Western Province occupies about one-fifth of the land mass of PNG and is home to about 3% of the total population. That low population density has hindered provision of reliable information and communication services to many areas. A partnership between Digicel and the PNG Sustainable Development Program in 2018 sought to expand access (Digicel Foundation, 2018). While some rural areas in PNG still have, at best, limited connectivity to the mobile phone network and data plans remain expensive (Watson, 2020), internet access is now readily available in more populous areas.

The geography of Western Province shaped local and national discussions of COVID-19 in one other crucial way. To the west, the province shares a 460 kilometre border with the Indonesian province of Papua, to the south in Torres Strait the border with Australia is as little as 5 kilometres away, and to the east and north it shares borders with four other PNG provinces. The border with Indonesia bisects several Melanesian language groups, is very porous and was considered to provide many possible points at which the virus might enter PNG; it became a focus of much discussion and anxiety (Blades, 2020).

The Facebook group Fly River Forum was created in late 2011 ‘to draw together the various citizens, friends and stake holders of Western Province living in the province, around the country and abroad into a VIRTUAL COMMUNITY’.¹ Membership in early June 2020 was recorded as 18,513, English is the primary language used and, judging from names, Facebook profiles and often photographs, contributors are predominantly male.

We used two sampling methods to examine the use of Fly River Forum in relation to COVID-19. For the period December 31, 2019 to June 2, 2020 we used the site’s search tool to record the number of posts, and comments on posts, that included the word ‘COVID’ (or ‘corona’), ‘border’ (or ‘boarder’) or ‘lockdown’ (or ‘lock down’) at least once in either the post or an associated comment; posts that received many comments usually included at least two of the search terms (or their alternatives). Our start date was based on the fact that the virus SARS-CoV-2 was first reported from Wuhan, China, on December 31, 2019 (World Health Organization, 2020). Our finishing date was based on PNG’s intended end date to the COVID-related SOE on June 2 (see Table 1).² Retrieved items were checked to eliminate both duplicates (e.g. the same post appearing under ‘COVID’ and ‘corona’) and false or irrelevant positives (e.g. posts with ‘boarder’ used correctly, many posts with the word ‘down’ but not the combination ‘lock down’ and, once, ‘Toyota Corona’). We then tallied posts for two-week blocks commencing on December 31, 2019.

In addition, we retrieved posts to Fly River Forum that had been uploaded on March 13, 16 and 24, April 1, 9, 17 and 25, May 3, 11, 19 and 27 and June 4. We did not commence retrieving samples until early April. To ensure our survey spanned the period from before the pandemic was declared to be a PNG national security issue (on March 17) to after the planned lifting of the SOE (on June 2), we scrolled back to obtain the March samples. This exercise, however, required frequent restarts, with the search tool limiting retrievable scroll length. While March 16 was deliberately chosen for sampling, as the last day before declaring the national security issue, scrolling back further became increasingly difficult. We reached back only to March 13, but would have preferred March 8 in order to maintain a standard 8 days between samples, the interval we had chosen to avoid sampling on the same day of each week.

¹Retrieved from Fly River Forum Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/flyriverforum/about>.

²The State of Emergency order was subsequently extended to June 16, 2020.

On March 24 and April 1, 9 and 17 we limited the sample size to 50 posts; on all other dates there were fewer than 50 posts and all were retrieved. We pooled tallies to provide six sets of records (i.e. March 13 and 16; March 24 and April 1; April 9 and 17, etc.; see Table 3). Retrieved posts were initially classified as ‘COVID-related’ or ‘other’. In turn, ‘COVID-related’ posts were classed as PNG news, world news, health, religious, miscellaneous and false, with ‘PNG news’ posts broken down further (see Table 4). For the 12 surveyed dates, we retrieved 492 posts. The content of 40 (8%) of that 492 had been removed; those posts are not included in our final samples and we do not know whether they were COVID-related. Approximately 67% of all posts in these samples were either reposts from other internet sites (e.g. Facebook, You Tube) or photographs of printed media releases.

There are now major limitations on what can be done, and the accuracy of outcomes, when using Facebook search functions (Hotham, 2018). The number of posts retrieved in a repeated search may reduce over time, even though missing posts have not been removed from the Facebook site. This complication is greater where the number of posts is higher. In the present study it is likely to mean that counts shown for March in Table 2 are less than the actual number of posts.

3 | COVID-19 IN PNG: A CHRONOLOGY

Table 1 provides a summary of COVID-19 events with reference to PNG. On January 26, 2020 the PNG Minister for Immigration and Border Security called for surveillance at all PNG ports (EMTV, 2020). An SOE came into effect on 24 March, imposing constraints on travel and gatherings of people. Throughout April, announcements that some SOE restrictions would be eased were subsequently cancelled as new cases of COVID-19 were identified. The cases announced on April 16 were from villages in Western Province that are close to the Indonesian border. Restrictions were further tightened in provinces with known cases, including the addition of a curfew from 8.00 pm to 6.00 am. Travel to Western and Sandaun Provinces, where border-crossing arrangements between Indonesia and PNG were of concern, remained tightly regulated. Lockdown restrictions were relaxed in early May, including the gradual reopening of schools. On June 2, the SOE was extended for a further 14 days, retaining restrictions on entry to PNG and on crossing borders between provinces within PNG.

4 | PATTERNS THROUGH TIME

Table 2 records the numbers of posts, and comments on posts, that included at least one of the selected search terms in either the post or an associated comment. Retrieved posts and comments on posts were most frequent in the period March 24 to April 6, reflecting implementation of a lockdown as part of the SOE. This affected day-to-day life for everybody.

A seemingly prescient post appeared on January 4, 2020. Without reference to, or probably knowledge of, a currently emerging viral disease, this post referenced Bill Gates’ now well-known 2015 TED talk,³ and also asserted that ‘there is an epidemic coming’, argued that ‘our border protection in terms of disease outbreak and epidemics is NO Joke at all’ and wrote of the

³In 2015, Bill Gates gave a TED talk in which he said that ‘Today the greatest risk of global catastrophe ... [is] most likely to be a highly infectious virus rather than a war’ (Gates, 2015).

need to establish a task force to monitor the border with Indonesia. Subsequent posts by the same correspondent favoured conspiracy theories, with particular mention of the 5G network that was ‘being rolled out globally under the guises of the corona virus’.

From late January to early March, the focus of posts that directly or indirectly referenced coronavirus was on events happening elsewhere in the world (e.g. the disease ‘spreading like wildfire’ in other places and a ‘London flight placed on lockdown after a passenger shows

TABLE 1 A chronology of events related to COVID-19 relevant to Papua New Guinea

Date	Event
Dec 31, 2019 ^a	SARS-CoV-2 reported from Wuhan, Hubei, China
Jan 5, 2020 ^b	WHO publishes first Disease Outbreak News on the new virus
Jan 25, 2020 ^c	First Australian case is a man returning from Wuhan, China
Jan 26, 2020 ^d	Minister for Immigration and Border Security calls for surveillance at PNG ports
Jan 27, 2020 ^e	PNG newspaper reports ‘Government agencies on alert for Coronavirus’
Jan 30, 2020 ^a	WHO declares outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern
Mar 11, 2020 ^a	WHO declares COVID-19 a global pandemic
Mar 13, 2020 ^f	First COVID-19 case detected in PNG
Mar 17, 2020 ^g	Pandemic declared a PNG national security issue
Mar 24, 2020 ^h	PNG State of Emergency comes into effect
Apr 2, 2020 ⁱ	PNG State of Emergency extended for 2 months to June 2, 2020
Apr 6, 2020 ^j	Second COVID-19 case detected in PNG
Apr 16, 2020 ^k	Five more COVID-19 cases detected in PNG—three from Western Province
Apr 23, 2020 ^l	Eighth COVID-19 case detected in PNG
May 4, 2020 ^m	SOE restrictions eased; schools reopen, though not in Western Province
May 13, 2020 ⁿ	Some Western Province schools allowed to reopen
Jun 2, 2020 ^o	State of Emergency extended for 14 days

Note: Source links to itemised events are:

^a<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>

^b<https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unknown-cause-china/en/>

^c<https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/first-confirmed-case-of-novel-coronavirus-in-australia>

^d<https://emtv.com.pg/nukundj-calls-for-surveillance-at-all-png-ports/>

^e<https://www.thenational.com.pg/government-agencies-on-alert-for-coronavirus/>

^f<https://news.pngfacts.com/2020/03/png-confirms-first-case-of-coronavirus.html>

^g<https://postcourier.com.pg/covid-19-elevated-to-a-national-security-issue/>

^h<https://www.pmnec.gov.pg/circular/Official%20Statement%20from%20PM%20-%202020320.pdf>

ⁱ<https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/413340/png-extends-state-of-emergency-for-two-months>

^j<https://postcourier.com.pg/resident-in-kokopo-tests-positive-to-covid-19/>

^k<https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/414459/png-confirms-new-covid-19-cases>

^l<https://www.thenational.com.pg/woman-tests-positive/>

^m<https://covid19.info.gov.pg/index.php/2020/04/24/prime-minister-announces-resumption-of-universities-and-schools/>

ⁿ<https://www.facebook.com/wpainformationsservices/photos/pcb.562813911277185/562813817943861/?type=3%26theater>

^o<https://covid19.info.gov.pg/index.php/2020/06/03/controller-manning-revokes-first-37-orders-and-issues-13-new-emergency-orders/>

TABLE 2 Posts to Fly River Forum that included nominated search terms

Search terms	COVID corona		border boarder		lockdown lock down	
	Posts	Comments	Posts	Comments	Posts	Comments
2019–2020						
Dec 31–Jan 13	0	0	1	8	0	0
Jan 14–27	2	3	3	3	2	7
Jan 28–Feb 10	25	241	16	314	1	0
Feb 11–24	7	4	2	5	2	0
Feb 25–Mar 9	12	56	5	37	1	8
Mar 10–23	24	266	22	252	14	199
Mar 24–Apr 6	86	1,784	98	1,982	100	1,731
Apr 7–20	66	1,382	49	1,300	56	1,216
Apr 21–May 5	68	1,009	44	854	47	908
May 6–19	49	584	27	424	19	435
May 20–Jun 2	50	486	13	235	19	280

symptoms of corona virus’) or on threats that outsiders might pose to PNG (fly-in-fly-out workers at Ok Tedi, Chinese nationals with business interests in Western Province, and Indonesians illegally crossing the border to trade).

The detection of the first COVID-19 case in PNG (March 13), declaration of the pandemic as a national security issue (March 17) and, finally, declaration of an SOE with associated lockdown (March 24) led to a huge increase in posts and comments, combined with an emphasis on both potential threats internal to PNG and the need to maintain personal safety by attention to hygiene and ‘social distancing’. Through this period, reposts of announcements arising from within PNG featured prominently (e.g. from the prime minister, Police Minister and SOE Office of the Controller).

The intense interest in all things ‘COVID’ began to abate in late April. The number of COVID-related posts and comments on posts declined. Increasingly, particularly in comments rather than in the originating posts, contributors argued that the apparent low impact of the virus within PNG meant that restrictions—especially on travel—were not warranted. Throughout May, the decline in posts, and the re-emphasis of comments, were suggestive of ‘crisis fatigue’, which Flinders (2020) has described as ‘the tiredness that comes as result of the constant fear associated with repeated warnings about crisis, disaster or catastrophe’. Correspondents were moving from an experience that accepted constraints as a necessary inconvenience to an experience of irritation and frustration. Extension of the SOE on June 2 elicited little immediate response. One correspondent asked why Western Province political leaders were silent during the parliamentary debate on the extension. Another wrote: ‘two weeks is too much, people are suffering out there ...’ There was very little support for the extension.

5 | ANALYSIS OF CONTENT

Table 3 provides a content analysis of sampled posts between March 13 and June 4. The number of posts per day, and the percentages that were COVID-related, were highest on the 4 days

sampled between March 24, when the SOE came into effect, and April 17; 89% of posts examined on those days were COVID-related (91% for the combined sample of March 24 and April 1; 88% for April 9 and 17). In contrast, only 13% of posts (7 of 55) were COVID-related in the combined sample of May 27 and June 4.

Posts classed as ‘world news’ provided updates on the global spread of coronavirus, noted countries where healthcare systems were ‘overloaded’ and others where ‘herd immunity’ was being considered. One post reported that ‘residents in the US are lining up to buy guns’. These posts received few comments.

Early posts classed as ‘health’ provided information about symptoms associated with infection and ways in which people could minimise becoming infected or spreading infection. Some later posts strongly supported the need for more testing and reported or challenged information about COVID-19 cases in PNG. One correspondent told readers to ‘stop worrying about buai [betel nut], you wont die without buai, looking for buai on the other hand may be the death of you!’. Most comments on these posts expressed appreciation for the information provided.

Posts classed as ‘religious’ included assertions that COVID-19 was a punishment for people’s sins, heralded the ‘second coming’ or had brought people back ‘to their Creator and to their morals’. Other posts asserted that God, the Holy Spirit or Jesus Christ would save the world, or just PNG, from coronavirus (see also Minnegal & Dwyer, 2020). Most respondents to these posts simply wrote ‘Amen’. One wrote that ‘we’ll go with science’.

Most posts classed as ‘miscellaneous’ sought updates on COVID-related information. One asserted that ‘the poverty virus does not appear on TV because it does not kill the rich’; others sought to deflect attention from current anxieties by reproducing photographs depicting the ‘heritage’ or ‘natural beauty’ of Western Province. Two-thirds of the comments on these posts were heartfelt responses to questions asked by a new forum member: ‘Do we have Doctors from Western province? If so, then how many?’

Posts classed as ‘false’ included those that attributed the cause of COVID-19 to 5G technology, reported cures such as drinking one’s own urine or asserted that knowledge of a known

TABLE 3 Content analysis of posts to Fly River Forum on 12 sample dates (shaded values are percentages)

Sample dates	Mar 13	Mar 24	Apr 9	Apr 25	May 11	May 27	Total posts	Comments per post	
	Mar 16	Apr 1	Apr 17	May 3	May 19	Jun 4			
All posts	80	100	100	68	49	55	452	5.16	
COVID-related posts	37	91	88	45	18	7	286	4.29	
	% of COVID-related posts								
PNG news	49	50	73	69	55	86	175	4.91	
World news	21	7	2	9	6	0	21	0.67	
Health	13	10	6	9	11	0	25	2.20	
Religious	3	15	5	2	0	0	20	5.75	
Miscellaneous	3	3	6	4	22	0	15	8.93	
False	11	15	8	7	6	14	30	1.67	
Other posts	43	9	12	23	31	48	166	6.67	
	% of all posts that were COVID-related								
	46	91	88	66	37	13	63		

cure had been suppressed. One post in this group asserted that Barack Obama had declared COVID-19 an ‘evil act white people want to do to Africans’.

Of the COVID-related posts, 61% were classed as PNG news. These posts, and responses to them as both comments and emoji reactions, are further distributed into 11 categories across four main groups: national issues; mobility issues; Western Province issues; and other PNG issues (Table 4).

We classified four sets of posts as predominantly addressing national issues. Prime Minister James Marape’s updates to his own Facebook page were often reposted to Fly River Forum. So too were National Emergency Orders released by the Joint Agency Task Force, updates from the COVID-19 National Operations Centre and reports from news media and government officials about detected COVID-19 cases and associated testing. Though informative, these posts did not elicit large numbers of comments. Posts concerned with the PNG economy either directed attention to an expected ‘Economic Stimulus Package’ or pessimistically suggested that PNG would be ‘hit’ by a recession or that ‘the seeds of the next debt crisis will be corona virus’. One post reported that the Chinese Government had given PNG US\$300,000 (approximately K1 million) ‘in the help to fight against the Covid-19’. This elicited a strongly worded response charging China with ‘criminal negligence in allowing their virus to infect the whole World’.⁴ Apart from that comment, however, these posts—like those from national politicians and administrators—did not generate much engagement. It may be that, even when the actions reported had direct implications for their lives, readers did not feel that their own voices would have much effect.

Three sets of posts—about the lockdown, travel and borders—were all concerned with mobility as threat or as freedom. Early posts concerned with ‘lockdown issues’ reported

TABLE 4 Breakdown of COVID-related posts classified as ‘PNG news’

	Posts	Comments per post	Reactions per post
National issues dominate			
PM James Marape releases	11	2.1	17.9
Government advice and orders	29	2.0	10.1
COVID-19 cases	22	2.7	11.1
PNG economy	9	2.1	8.1
Mobility issues			
Lockdown issues	28	4.3	30.9
Travel issues	23	1.2	16.4
Border issues	10	6.0	22.8
Western Province issues dominate			
Policing	5	2.2	14.4
Education	13	1.7	9.8
Western Province funds	10	34.8	80.0
Other PNG posts	15	13.1	33.9

⁴Anti-Chinese sentiment has a relatively long history in Papua New Guinea (Kemish, 2020; Smith, 2012) and featured often, both in national media and on Fly River Forum, through the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

requirements and reasons. Later posts were split between those asserting the worth of continuing social distancing practices and those highlighting inconvenience or arguing that lockdown was unnecessary. Several posts directed attention to instances where smugglers, refugees, town markets, businesses or government officials had failed to comply with government edicts. In almost all cases, Western Province was the focus of both posts and comments.

Early posts classed under ‘travel’ referenced help provided by PNG in repatriating some American citizens to their home country (163 reactions), the fact that about 300 PNG citizens were stranded overseas and the refusal to allow 13 people to disembark from a flight to Daru because they had failed to fulfil quarantine requirements in Port Moresby (‘PNG police turn back travellers’, 2020). Different versions of this last post were uploaded by eight correspondents on the one day; they received 52 appreciative reactions. Most later posts in this category were concerned with calls for, and announcements of, the resumption of commercial flights to and from the major Western Province towns of Daru and Kiunga.

Posts concerned with ‘border issues’ focused attention on the border between Western Province and the Indonesian province of Papua, reporting deployment of police and military to monitor the situation and asserting strongly—especially in comments—that Indonesians entering PNG to trade should be treated harshly. Late in April one post argued that if security forces were adequately funded the border would be secure and the SOE controller could ‘uplift restrictions’ so that people in Western Province could ‘resume normal business’. This post elicited 29, primarily supportive, comments.

In combination these three themes attracted nearly a third of all posts, and a disproportionate share of comments and reactions, in the category ‘PNG news’. The importance of not moving, to protect against coronavirus entering or spreading through the province, was clearly acknowledged and efforts to constrain movement were endorsed. But many correspondents also recognised that this imposed immobility was a serious burden on both livelihoods and aspirations. Negotiations to lift, or provide exceptions to, bans on movement attracted much attention. In nearly all of these posts there was a strong concern with the impact on, or threat to, the agency of those writing or responding.

Another three sets of posts comprise those in which Western Province issues dominated; they concerned ‘police’, ‘education’ and ‘funding’. Several posts credited police for ‘working very hard day and night’ to manage the lockdown but noted that they had not been provided with personal protective equipment. Two posts reported instances of purported lockdown-related police brutality from outside Western Province. Most posts classed under ‘education’ were concerned with the opening of schools in Western Province, some noting that for a ‘border province’ considerations might be different than elsewhere in the country.

Concerns about Western Province funding issues were not raised until early April. Some posts suggested that COVID-19 needs should be funded by the PNG Sustainable Development Program. Intense interest, reflected by more than 200 comments and over 500 reactions, was associated with an assertion that an unnamed district administrator had mismanaged K1 million provided to prepare for COVID-19 and a response to that assertion by a local member of parliament.

In these three sets of posts, the concern was less with personal agency than with the responsibility of authorities and institutions (police, teachers, administrators) to care for those with whom the posters identified.

Finally, posts that could not be easily placed in one of the foregoing categories were treated as ‘Other PNG posts’. They were often idiosyncratic in the theme raised and a few attracted many comments and reactions. Some asked whether PNG or Western Province was equipped

to handle the pandemic. Others asserted either that the COVID-19 team had ‘failed the people of Western Province’ or that the failure to release ‘facts’ had led to a ‘PANIC MOOD’. One asserted forcefully that if Peter O’Neill was still the prime minister he would have listened ‘to the cries of the people of PNG regarding this outbreak virus’. Quite different posts in this set included a photograph showing the ‘COVID-19 Tabubil night crew’ at work keeping ‘our town safe for the next day’, a suggestion that Ok Tedi Mining Ltd should provide COVID-19 testing kits for Western Province, and mention of donations of relief food for people in need. The last of these received 130 appreciative reactions.

6 | DISCUSSION

This analysis of posts to the Facebook group Fly River Forum through the first 5 months of 2020 reveals that, from about mid-March to early May, members of that forum shared an intense interest in the global coronavirus pandemic and were deeply concerned with its possible implications for PNG. Many people access and contribute to the forum. An analysis of four posts that received a total of 409 comments revealed 274 unique commentators. These posts concerned screening procedures at Daru hospital, supposed failure to comply with lockdown requirements at Kiunga, an assertion that unemployed Kiunga residents would die of hunger unless they received government support, and the statement by a local member of parliament concerning actions he took in relation to alleged misuse of SOE funds. Information appearing on the forum will have been widely shared with others who lack access to the internet; as Rooney (2012) wrote, ‘engagement through social media has the potential of being translated and amplified through various offline networks’. Fly River Forum is thus an important source of information and opinion for people of Western Province.

Overall, the great majority of COVID-related posts, and associated comments, to Fly River Forum through March, April and May 2020 combined delivery of relevant information with scepticism about some of that information. For example, correspondents were dissatisfied with official information, or the lack thereof, concerning the three cases of COVID-19 reported from Western Province, asked for proof that drinking urine was curative, or observed that ‘the dangerous thing about any contagious viral diseases is not the disease itself’ but one’s unproven assumptions about it. Some actively sought information: ‘please share and also state your source’. Posts asserting that COVID-related funding had been misdirected or seriously mismanaged attracted many comments. Others that reported acts of generosity, especially gifts of food to people in need, received many appreciative reactions. Correspondents frequently challenged each other, doing so in language that was often robust and colourful.

Neither ‘religious’ nor ‘false’ posts featured prominently in our samples. Though many comments on posts included a Christian blessing, ‘religious’ posts comprised only 7% of all COVID-related posts and accounted for only 9% of the comments on those posts. Again, ‘false’ posts comprised only 10% of all COVID-related posts and accounted for only 4% of the comments on those posts. Most of those who used the forum were not prey to the sorts of misinformation that have been reported elsewhere (Depoux et al., 2020). False posts had little currency on Fly River Forum.

On all these counts, we consider use of Fly River Forum in the context of the ‘creative possibilities that often emerge in response to change and uncertainty’ that staff from Divine Word University emphasised in a recent blog about moving online in response to COVID-19 in PNG (DWU Teaching Staff, 2020). In many parts of PNG, the social media platform Facebook

provides far more than a medium of contact between ‘friends’. It facilitates the spread of local and national news, and discussion of that news, more widely than may be achieved by print, radio and television. It can also influence how that news, and responses to it, is understood. In the course of the COVID-19 SOE, Prime Minister James Marape wrote in a Facebook post that ‘sometimes, the formal media have editorial space limitations. So I will be using this medium for information I personally feel are important for public noting’ (‘Tough measures crucial’, 2020). The prime minister is one of very many Papua New Guineans who make effective use of Facebook in this way.

Our analysis points to some intriguing patterns in the ways that readers engaged with posts on Fly River Forum. Posts addressing the impact of COVID-19 at the national or global scale, though appreciated and sometimes solicited, generated relatively little discussion. Reactions and interactions were much stronger when posts spoke to constraints on the movement of individuals, or on the delivery of services to local communities. Within the latter category, posts concerning provision and (mis)management of COVID-19 funds by Western Province officials generated by far the strongest response. This may reflect awareness of previous instances of serious financial mismanagement in the province,⁵ but also intense concern over how wealth generated within the province from the Ok Tedi mine should properly be deployed to benefit the people of the province. Whether this intense scrutiny is effective in promoting accountability, however, remains to be seen.

The different patterns of engagement suggest that use of social media forums to disseminate information and influence behaviour may be most effective when posts are couched in terms of individual agency and community responsibility, rather than merely as reports of government action and expectations.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

By mid-June 2020, in PNG, COVID-19 was the ‘invisible enemy’ that for the vast majority of the population, had failed to arrive. Its impacts, however, were tangible. In Western Province towns, the cessation of air travel combined with curfews and other lockdown restrictions limited access to needed food resources and, in places, led to inflated prices for those resources. In more remote Western Province village communities, availability of customary foods was seldom problematic but the privilege and excitement of travel and access to some ‘modern’ resources now seen as essential—soap and salt were high on this list—all but ceased.⁶

Recent analyses suggest that, in the longer term, many people in PNG—particularly in urban settings—will experience a serious decline in living standards in the aftermath of COVID-19 (Hoy, 2020). In this context, it is notable that despite persistent warnings of threat to all, and actual hardship experienced by some, most participants on Fly River Forum did not take either religious tropes or conspiracy theories as primary sources of comfort or explanation during the COVID-related SOE. Contributors to the forum were attentive to a diverse array of relevant information. For a month or more after the declaration of the SOE, people sought information, questioned information, shared information and responded to information.

⁵In 2016, the governor of Western Province and the provincial administrator were both sentenced to 10 years in prison for misappropriating provincial funds (‘Men of faith and education’, 2018).

⁶These observations are based primarily on 14 telephone exchanges between Melbourne and a remote Western Province village in March, April and May 2020.

Through this period, at least, this Facebook group played an important and positive role in the ways in which many people engaged with what could have emerged as a health disaster.

Social media are often castigated for their potential to facilitate the circulation of ‘fake news’, and the creation of echo chambers and ‘bubbles’ that may distort perceptions of reality (Mair, 2017; Pariser, 2011). That was not what we found among the contributors to the discussion of COVID-19 on Fly River Forum, or from those who posted comments or reactions. Perhaps this openness is a reflection of the dearth of alternative sources of news and interpretation in Western Province. People must actively seek and interrogate information, and they recognise a responsibility to pass on what they know to others.

Perhaps too, as Dalsgaard (2008) has argued, the forms of sociality expressed through Facebook are in some ways analogous to the relationality that characterises Melanesian sociality. In both contexts, it is through social exchange—the sharing of ideas and mutual recognition—that identities are constructed; on Facebook, as in Melanesian society, the accumulation and display of relationships with ‘friends’, and the nurturing of those relationships through expressions of care, is central to constructing a person’s sense of self and self-worth. This resonates with our observations above about the salience of individual agency and responsibility for those with whom one identifies, in posts and comments. The attention to pronouncements from distant authorities, but lack of engagement with these, may also be understood in this vein.

Some writers recognise that the ‘Facebook bubble’ may be a misnomer, and that social media may provide a potent means of increasing exposure to news that matters (Scharkow, Mangold, Stier, & Breuer, 2020). It is also a crucial means, for many, to have their own voices heard. Geographically focused sites such as Fly River Forum provide a valuable barometer of local opinion that politicians and policymakers in PNG would be wise to monitor. Increasing the capacity for people in remote regions of PNG to access the internet, through increased mobile coverage and cheaper data plans, has the potential to enhance both dissemination of crucial information and engagement with government initiatives.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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