

Cybercrime, diversity and resilience in the Pacific: a short visit to Papua New Guinea

Alexander Seger, 2 March 2026

In February 2026, I travelled to Papua New Guinea. The purpose was the delivery of a set of courses on cyberlaw and cybercrime, and to help PNG over the line to becoming a party to the Convention on Cybercrime.

PNG has always been an intriguing place to me. In the early 1980s, while studying at Heidelberg University in Germany, I prepared a paper on “ecological anthropology”, on how human culture adapts to its natural environment and the role of rituals in this process. It was based on research that Roy Rappaport had carried out in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.¹

And now I made it there, finally.

A story of diversity and resilience

Papua New Guinea is an unbelievable story of diversity and resilience over more than 55,000 years:

- It is the most linguistically diverse country ever and by far: its 12 million people speak over 800 languages – about 11% of all languages worldwide. Isolated communities have been scattered over rugged highlands and more than 700 islands, and had thousands of years to develop their own languages and cultures. When also Polynesian people

arrived in PNG around 3500 BCE and then European explorers from the 16th century CE onwards (Jorge de Menezes, a Portuguese, got there around 1526 CE), they added further to the linguistic mix. In the 19th century, “Tok Pisin” evolved as a common language for communication between diverse local populations – forced to work on colonial plantations – traders, settlers and German, English and then Australian colonial administrations.

- Diversity extends to the ecology. New Guinea hosts the world's third-largest rainforest and comprises 7% of all biodiversity. It is home to over 700 bird species, including 38 (out of 45) species of birds of paradise, and some 20,000 plant species, including up to 3,800 species of orchids. The environment, however, is at risk of degradation caused in particular by logging, mining operations and climate change.
- Around 60,000 years ago, Sapiens – via Southeast Asia – arrived on a continent called “Sahul” comprising present day Australia, Tasmania, and New Guinea. In around 10,000 BCE, New Guinea and Australia were disconnected due to rising sea levels after the ice

¹ Rappaport, Roy (1968): Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People.

age. According to recent DNA studies, the ancestry of Papua New Guineans can be traced back to a first “Out-of-Africa” event when Sapiens spread to Asia and Oceania thousands of years before they dispersed to Europe. The “Papua New Guinean genome – like that of Australian aborigines – carries a significant percentage of Denisovan DNA”.²

- Communities in the highlands do have a history of endemic “tribal” warfare. Traditionally these may have had limited impact in terms of casualties, but nowadays they may involve firearms and drones causing higher rates of mortality. And yes, in the past there was also a history of headhunting and ritual cannibalism among some communities.

Is there anything to be learned from populations that survived in splendid isolation for tens of thousands of years?

Jared Diamond has written a fascinating study about solutions that traditional, small-scale communities in Papua New Guinea have preserved to address recurring human problems and that are transferable to modern societies.³ For example, solving conflicts through mediation, de-escalation and restorative justice; ensuring resilience through broad social networks and reciprocal relationships; educating children for autonomy and responsibility; integrating the elderly with dignity; or developing risk literacy to think clearly about risks and responsibility.

My visit in February 2026 covered a very different topic: namely the question of

international law in cyberspace, and what PNG could do to enhance cooperation on cybercrime. But everything is connected.

Why the question of cybercrime and electronic evidence is relevant

PNG is facing many issues that seem more important than problems of cybercrime and e-evidence. But everything is connected.

In 2025, Papua New Guinea celebrated 50 years of independence. In spite of political instability, the Bougainville civil war (1988 – 1998) and its extreme diversity, it has remained a democracy. But challenges are numerous: Some 40% of the population live in poverty, youth unemployment is very high and so are crime rates in urban centres (armed robbery, car-jacking, gang (“raskol”) activity), violence against women (including sorcery accusation related violence, SARV),⁴ corruption and many others.

Information and communication technology can contribute to addressing such problems, for example, by improving transparency and accountability in government operations, streamlining the delivery of public services, creating new business opportunities, or enhancing access to education and health services also in rural areas.

However, such technology can also amplify current or create additional problems:

- In October 2021, for example, it was reported that the payment system of the finance ministry of

² <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2025/09/250914205853.htm>

³ Diamond, Jared (2012): *The World Until Yesterday*. What we can learn from traditional

societies. Viking Press. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_World_Until_Yesterday

⁴ <https://www.stopsorcerviolence.org/>

Papua New Guinea was hit by a ransomware attack. Hundreds of millions of dollars were frozen and offenders reportedly demanded ransom payments in Bitcoin.

- On 10 January 2024, a computer glitch in the government's payroll system was misinterpreted as an unexpected tax hike for government employees, leading to strikes, including by members of the police force. In the absence of law enforcement, riots and looting spread across Port Moresby during which some 20 people were killed. That day became known as "Black Wednesday". A 14-day state of emergency was declared and a shut-down of the internet or blocking of Facebook were considered.
- On 29 January 2025, it was reported that the Internal Revenue Commission (IRC) of Papua New Guinea had suffered a significant cyberattack taking systems offline and potentially exposing sensitive data of individuals and businesses.

However, it is in particular the role of social media that is of concern. Numerous issues are related to Facebook and WhatsApp being used to organize and spread riots, such as during the "Black Wednesday" events, and that are also significant with regard to tribal, gender-based, intimate partner and other forms of violence:

"The online sharing of gruesome images and videos showing dead and dismembered bodies on social media is commonplace in Papua New Guinea (PNG). For instance,

when a horrific massacre took place in Enga province in February this year [2024], it was images shared on WhatsApp that alerted many to the violence.

Social media in general has also helped proliferate violence, such as in January [2024], when riots erupted in Port Moresby and other cities across PNG. According to many we have spoken with about the riots, social media, particularly Facebook, played a significant role in spreading the violence around the city – and even between cities and towns. In today's social media landscape, there is also a notable proliferation of horrible images, videos and viral narratives surrounding sorcery accusation related violence (SARV), along with justifications for employing violence against those who are accused."⁵

[In Port Moresby in January 2024 in] "their social media posts, looters openly shared their spoils and encouraged others to loot as well. It's the first time we've seen social media used for something like this in PNG. Within a few hours, the news of the Port Moresby riots spread across the country. As a result, we saw copycat riots erupt in other urban centers the next day."⁶

Joining the Convention on Cybercrime

So, yes, the matter is relevant; and this is why Papua New Guinea is striving to join the [Convention on Cybercrime](#) of the Council of Europe.

In May 2019, in Vanuatu, I had breakfast with John Laule from the Attorney General's Office of Papua New

⁵ Barak, Joe/Chakma, Anurug/Forsyth, Miranda (2024): The Relationship Between Social Media and Violence in Papua New Guinea

<https://researchportalplus.anu.edu.au/en/publications/the-relationship-between-social-media-and-violence-in-papua-new-g/>

⁶ ACLED (2024): Q&A The worsening trend of violence in Papua New Guinea. [PNG-QA-2024.pdf](#)

Guinea. He was part of the PNG delegation that participated in a meeting on cybercrime of the Pacific Island Law Officers Network (PILON) held there with the support of Australia and the Council of Europe.⁷ We agreed that it would be beneficial for PNG to join the Convention on Cybercrime. Five years later, in 2024, PNG formally requested accession to this treaty and was then invited to accede.

At the time of my visit in February 2026, the Government of PNG had yet to complete the process of becoming a party to be able to make use of this framework in practice. Some other Pacific Island States – Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu – had already joined this treaty, and so had Australia and New Zealand.

The series of training sessions in Port Moresby from 9 to 13 February 2026 on international law applicable in cyberspace was an excellent opportunity to follow up. It was organized by [Cyberlaw International](#) in cooperation with the National Information and Communication Technology Agency of Papua New Guinea ([NICTA](#)), and with the support of Australia.

During these sessions we concluded with NICTA and other institutions that domestic legislation was broadly aligned with the Convention on Cybercrime, and that – since the Government of PNG had recently received parliamentary approval to go ahead – there should be no obstacle for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to deposit the instrument of accession at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France. On the final day of the course, the acting Minister of ICT, Peter Tsiamalili, then confirmed that accession was imminent.

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<https://www.coe.int/en/web/cybercrime/glacvpl/usactivities/>

So, hopefully, PNG will very soon take this crucial step. Obviously, many challenges are still ahead – obtaining cooperation from multi-national platforms (META in particular) – and further capacity building will be needed. But becoming a Party is more than just a political signal; it is a solid prerequisite for domestic action and public/private and international cooperation on cybercrime and electronic evidence in line with human rights and rule of law requirements.

In the 1960s, Roy Rappoport, using the example of a community in the highlands of PNG, showed how the culture of a society is shaped by its environment. Information and communication technologies are now part of this environment and are shaping culture in Papua New Guinea as elsewhere. Given the resilience of communities here over millennia, they will probably also adapt to these technologies and related challenges in their own diverse ways while, at the same time, being part of a common international framework for cooperation on cybercrime.

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