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Reporting on Indigenous Issues: Some practical suggestions for journalists

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Abstract

The National Media Forum was established following the 1992 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The Forum brings together journalists, Indigenous community members and media researchers, which meets biennially to discuss the representation of Indigenous people in the Australian media. The theme of the 1998 National Media Forum in Perth, Western Australia, was 'Reporting on Indigenous Issues'. This two-day workshop aimed to move away from more common polarised debate about reporting, which is characterised by sweeping Indigenous accusations of racism and defensive accounts of 'standard journalistic practice'. This paper offers practical suggestions from delegates useful to working journalists and journalism students considering the complexity of covering Indigenous issues in the Australian media.

Background to the National Media Forum

The 'Reporting on Indigenous Issues' workshop was the fourth biennial National Media Forum event. The Forum was established in 1992 in direct response to recommendation 208 of the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody:

In view of the fact that many Aboriginal people throughout Australia express disappointment in the portrayal of Aboriginal people by the media, the media industry and media unions should encourage formal and informal contact with Aboriginal organizations, including Aboriginal media organisations where available. The purpose of such contact should be the creation on all sides, of a better understanding of issues relating to the media treatment of Aboriginal affairs.

The Forum was founded by Dr John Hartley, then of Murdoch University, who organised gatherings in 1992, 1994 and 1996. All were held in Perth, Western Australia, and reports have been issued about each of these (see Bunbury, Hartley and Mickler, 1993; Hartley, 1994 and Hartley and McKee, 1996). One of the most challenging issues to emerge over the course of these Forums was recognition that the discourses for enabling discussion between non-Indigenous media practitioners and Indigenous community members were underdeveloped. Too often, the discussion became adversarial. Non-Indigenous media practitioners asserted that Indigenous people failed to understand the realities of journalism practice. Indigenous participants the claim that non-Indigenous journalists were racist in their practice. The 1998 Forum set a more positive and collaborative tone by setting as its aim the creation of a set of practical guidelines designed to improve Indigenous affairs reporting.

The more than 80 delegates to the 1998 Forum included Indigenous and non-Indigenous journalists, (print, radio and television), from the ABC and commercial channels in four states (New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia). The journalists who attended ranged in seniority from commercial television news directors and a high profile current affairs journalist to cadet journalists from urban and remote parts of Western Australia. Other speakers included prominent Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, including Stolen Generation report author Sir Ronald Wilson and Federal Opposition Spokesman on Aboriginal Affairs Daryl Melham. Delegates also included researchers in the area of Indigenous representation, journalism educators from several Australia states and journalism students.

Guidelines for Journalists

Despite the wide-ranging nature of the debate, several points of agreement emerged strongly and can be summarised broadly in four deceptively simple points:

1. Concepts such as 'objectivity' offer little practical guidance to the writing of stories;
2. Do not be afraid to ask Indigenous people what to do (who to speak to, what

- language to use);
- 3. Consciously set out to extend your network and contacts;
- 4. Check facts and assumptions, paying attention to context and history

As guidelines emerged from the debate, it became clear that three areas of reporting were perceived to be most likely to directly affect the representation of Indigenous people and the relationship between Indigenous people and the media.

- 1. Choosing stories to write about;
- 2. Getting information for these stories and
- 3. Presentation of stories about Indigenous people and issues.

1. Choosing stories

Recognise that journalism can be pro-active as well as reactive

Several journalists worried that they could only follow the agenda set by public figures. They expressed concern that this meant Indigenous issues are only covered when, and in the way in which, politicians and other public figures raise them. Delegates agreed that investigative journalism can always set its own agenda and cautioned against simply disseminating the position put by public figures.

>No journalist ever reports everything anybody says. Just because a public figure has said something does not mean that it should be given equal status in reporting. 'Jane over here says two and two is four, and Jo over there says two and two is three, are you going to represent both those views?' (*Rubena Colbey, ABC*)

Recognise that news stories do not always have to be about 'conflict'

Hard news stories traditionally demand conflict. However, other genres of story do not. It is possible to have news stories that are not conflict driven. Journalists from Indigenous newspapers reported that they work successfully with a model of news reporting that is not conflict driven.

Don't just tell 'positive' or 'negative' stories.

But do tell a range of stories, and give a range of viewpoints. There is no simple definition of what makes a story 'positive'. It is more important to tell a range of stories, in all different journalistic genres. This includes hard news stories, human interest stories and feature stories.

Learn to spot which stories are not 'about' Aboriginality.

If the Indigenous people involved in a news story do not say that the story is 'about' Indigenous issues, then journalists need not make it so.

For example, when an Aboriginal family in Perth spoke in newspapers in 1997 about the death of their son at the hands of the police, they did not claim any 'special' Indigenous rights, but only common 'citizen' rights. Some media practitioners turned this story into Aborigines wanting 'special rights'.

Look out for stories so obvious that you often overlook them.

Sometimes something is happening all around you and you don't see it, because it's part of your "taken-for-granted world". TV Journalist Jeff McMullen described how, when he returned to live in Australia after many years overseas, he was troubled by things he had never noticed before.

"I didn't see a TV commercial that had an Aboriginal person selling. So an early story that I did was simply to ask why. I went to an ad man and said, 'Why don't we have some of these people selling some of these products?'" (*Jeff McMullen, 60 Minutes*).

Accept that the workplace culture may not be supportive of Indigenous issues, but do not use that as an excuse.

Several of the journalists at the Forum recounted experiences of difficulty in getting Indigenous stories published. Each advocated writing stories in ways that would appeal to editors and meet their existing news values. They emphasised persistence - refusing to give up in trying to get these stories published.

2. Getting the information

Familiarise yourself with protocols of local Indigenous communities.

Develop a range of contacts in local Indigenous communities rather than identifying one person as a spokesperson on all issues. Find out who does what in the Indigenous community you are reporting about. It shows you are interested in getting things right and that encourages people to trust you to report fairly.

"You're far more likely to get people to talk to you if you've got a great range of people as your contacts," (*Rubena Colbey, ABC*)

Don't be afraid to admit your own ignorance.

How do you know the right protocol - who is the right person to talk to, whether you can use somebody's name? Well, you ask. Just to declare the fact that you don't know. Say, "This is what I'm trying to do, If I'm not in the right place, where should I go, who should I talk to?@ That's the respectful thing to do - but it's also giving up some of your power as the person in charge of how this story is going to be told, and who's going to be asked for comment. ADon't hesitate to build on the expertise of the Indigenous people you're talking to. Don't assume that you are the carrier of all knowledge of the topic you're talking about,@ (*Rubena Colbey, ABC*).

Do not look for an 'Aboriginal spokesman'.

No single person is a spokesman for Aboriginal people. When you are speaking to a representative from a community, always check their status, their role within a particular organisation. "Are they an accepted spokesperson for a given community? Are they speaking purely as an individual?" Don't assume.

Never question the Aboriginality of a speaker.

The Federal Government's definition of Aboriginality (1980) is "a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted by the community in which he (she) lives." It is a social definition rather than a racial one.

'The colour of your skin does not have anything to do with what percentage of you is Aboriginal. Absolutely nothing' (*Charmaene Scott, ABC, Brisbane*)

Do not take refusal to speak as hostility

If somebody says, "I don't want to talk to you", don't be offended. Say AIs there anybody else I could talk to? Can you give me a direction?@ Because when that person says they won't talk to you, they might not mean "I hate journalists", they might be saying "I'm not the right person to answer these questions@.

Don't assume that an Indigenous will give you an interview

Journalists sometimes assume a right to ask to questions, and think people must automatically answer them, give the journalists what they want. A potential Indigenous interview may require some reciprocal activity from the journalist before or as a condition of helping the journalists by giving an interview.

Be patient: it may take longer to interview Indigenous people.

This should not be taken as a sweeping generalisation. However, cultural differences may mean that dealing with Indigenous people takes longer.

>It=s 'blackfella time ... you can't push these old fellas out in the bush - you've got to do it in their time ... From about twelve hours of travelling and talking, I got one interview and, about three minutes of tape.'(*Adrian Shaw 6AR*)

Don't be embarrassed by silence in interviews

'If an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person doesn't have something to say, they won't say it' (*Rubena Colbey, ABC*).

Be aware that in some Indigenous cultures, staring is rude.

For a lot of Indigenous Australians, staring is rude. That can be an authority situation, or a seniority situation - young people don't necessarily stare their elders in the eye. If you're about to talk to an elder, and you're a young journalist, it can be difficult.

“Don't expect them to stare at you while you're speaking. Some Indigenous people may not look at you while you're talking, and you think, ‘Are they really listening to me? Are they taking it in? Are they intelligent?’” (*Rubena Colbey, ABC*).

Seek advice about how to describe an Indigenous speaker.

Use community names rather than the blanket term 'Aboriginal' to describe people and communities. Using the Indigenous name of a community is a really significant way of showing the diversity of Indigenous cultures'. This is not 'inconsistency' of news style, it is recognition of difference.

>Never mix up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'If you're unsure, ask. Even if it seems the most ignorant question in the world' (*Charmaene Scott, ABC*)

>Do not use 'Aboriginal spokesman' to describe a speaker. Use their institutional or community status - it is more accurate and clearly establishes the interviewee's authority to speak. Ask each interviewee how they would prefer to be described.

“In some communities, people would quite happily refer to themselves as "half caste" and be terribly offended to be called "black". Yet you go just a few kilometers down the road and it's totally different' (*Journalist, National Media Forum workshop*)

Ask about cultural differences when reporting grief.

In some Indigenous communities, the name of a recently deceased person should not be used. To respect this belief, you should always seek the permission of the deceased's family.

“When Kath Walker, died, the ABC was in a bit of a dilemma. ‘What should we do? Can we mention her name?’ And we simply contacted a family member, and they allowed the use of Kath Walker's name in the reporting of that.” (*Rubena Colbey, ABC, Brisbane*).

Beware especially careful when presenting unfolding stories

Remember those with authority to speak don't necessarily have all the facts. When a story is unfolding, it is easy to find yourself reporting “facts” that turn out to be untrue and can be quite damaging. Delegates gave several examples, including this one:

△You're doing hourly bulletins and you're under pressure to come up with a few pars of copy, and you're getting these words coming at you - do not use them verbatim...

We had in Western Sydney a brawl, it happened overnight. We're getting all this stuff from police that there's a major brawl out there, and the Aboriginal community's responsible for it. 2UE was running with exactly the same line.

“We chose to run it as a very simple story, the fact that there was a brawl, three police officers were injured, 16 people had been arrested over the incident. I tried to go a bit deeper, and I found out from the Mayor that there had been a funeral of an Aboriginal man. We still hadn't any evidence of the link between the brawl and the funeral. Another reporter wanted to run the line that the brawl was following an Aboriginal funeral.

“But I said, ‘Do we know for a concrete fact that the incidents were related? Do we even know the ethnicities of the people who had been charged?’ And we didn't. So I said, ‘Let's leave it out.’ And it turned out later that the people who had been charged were quite mixed, and the events were separate - there had been a domestic brawl and the passing police had intervened. All morning the commercial radio stations were running this line - completely and utterly wrong.” (*Danuta Kozaki, ABC*).

3. Presenting The Story

Don't use 'objectivity' as a rationalisation for the way you write a story. Be aware of your own assumptions and position.

Everyone, including all journalists, has a cultural perspective. Everybody comes to reporting loaded with what they already know - what they already think is normal, all those things. Step back and see that you already have a particular view of the world - and be aware of that.

When reporting 'other cultures', be aware that you are speaking from within your own culture.

A better aspiration might be to be 'fair'. Be aware of your own assumptions, and read your writing with this in mind.

Don't give only two sides to a story.

Simply reporting two opposing opinions is not objective. There is never one non-Indigenous and one Indigenous opinion. On any important issues, there will be a range of stances, both in Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. If journalists are committed to impartiality and fairness, it is necessary to present as many opinions as possible: and not to present any as the 'white' opinion or the 'Aboriginal' opinion. “

Journalists have a responsibility to discipline themselves to not to go for the easy grab.”

(Rose Crean, *Journalist ABC Adelaide*)

Consider giving historical and contemporary context to stories.

Even if you do not have the time to go into a history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, be aware that the kind of contextual material you use will often define the kind of story you're writing. For example, if you were discussing a violent incident involving an Indigenous person, you might only quote a police officer describing the damage to the community, or also give the perspective of an Indigenous community member explaining mitigating factors. This is your choice.

Don't shy away from showing violence: but don't make it your whole story

There was some concern voiced at the National Media Forum that the media too often show violence relating to Aboriginal people. It was agreed that these stories must be reported but it is important to show other Indigenous perspectives in reporting about crime rather than perpetuating an “us-and-them” discourse.

>Only 3% of stories in the *West Australian* in the previous year linked Indigenous people to crime= (Leeroy Betti the *West Australian*).

Al=m not an angel, l=m a journalist. If there=s violence at an incident, l=ll show it@ (Rose Crean, *ABC TV Adelaide*).

When looking at 'social problems', consider presenting solutions and active responses from community members

Show a variety of Indigenous perspectives. Although images are important, do not rely on them to tell the whole story. Both print and television journalism focus on dramatic images to a tell a story and this can misrepresent the real situation.

“For every kid I showed sniffing the petrol, there was another kid who said ‘I know what it's doing to them - it's screwing their brains up. I'm smart enough to know I don't want that’... If you don't hear from the second child, of course the rest of Australia gets the idea that in Central Australia, everyone is sitting there with the petrol can up to their face’. (Jeff McMullen, *60 Minutes*)

Include Indigenous voices when doing general vox pops on any subject.

Without being about Indigenous identity, this reaffirms that Indigenous people are part of the general Australian community.

Show a variety of Indigenous perspectives.

There is no 'Aboriginal perspective' on any issue. Like any group, there is always a range of opinions within Indigenous communities. Don't use race as a label unless you have to. the MEAA Code of Ethics (Point 15) states:

Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious beliefs or physical or mental disability.

Recognise that multiple Indigenous viewpoints do not mean that there is a 'schism'.

Just as there is no one “white Australian” political viewpoint, or one view that represents all Asian Australians, it is simplistic and unrealistic to expect all Indigenous people to think the same. Division is not a sign of disorganisation, but of mature debate.

'Indigenous politics can be very factionalised, but I've never bought the argument that says "Why can't Aboriginal people agree with each other?", which is a favourite political line to discredit Aboriginal politics. But if you look at the South Australian Liberal Party, or the way the ALP is going, there's all sorts of factions and barneys' (Forum participant).

Rethink the language that you use.

No word is ever really 'objective' and many terms come loaded with inferences. For example, the term “so-called stolen generation” is a very partial phrase, implying that the reporter

disagrees with this interpretation of the historical events or at least that there is some contention about the nature of the facts.

Politicians often repeat certain words in their discussion of an issue and in doing so, can frame debate on the issue. For example, politicians often describe native title as a 'special' right or a 'race' privilege. In fact, the Native Title Act does not allow all Aboriginal people to claim any piece of land; it allows particular groups of people to claim rights to land with which they have a connection. These are 'common law' rights, under the common law which applies to all Australians - anyone who has such a connection to land could make such a claim, and not just Aboriginal people.

Another example is that of the reporter who consciously seeks to avoid racism in their reporting, and yet has no hesitation in using the term "Aboriginal crime" to describe a specific range of criminal activities.

ⒶDo not use the binary 'Aborigines' versus 'taxpayers'. We're professionals, we're sports people, we pay taxes as wellⓂ (*Adrian Shaw, 6AR*).

Check your facts before reporting, especially sensitive or sensational material.

This might seem like basic journalistic practice, but sometimes a story seems "too good to check" and there's a temptation to run with a story, even if it later turns out to be wrong. Several examples were given at the Forum of the failure to check basic facts in stories about Indigenous issues resulting in completely inaccurate reporting.

'In Queensland in January 1998, the Premier launched an attack on backyards being under threat from Native Title claims in the town of Roma ... the press picked up on that, the ABC's PM program went to Roma, interviewed a householder, he said, 'My backyard's under threat.' But the fact is, there are no Native Title claims in Roma ...' (*Media Forum participant*).

Accept that you never have the time or resources to find out everything about a story - and be honest about that.

Don't delude yourself or your audience that you have *the* answer. Ultimately you're going to have to cut short your research, and you know that there's other research that you could have done, and that would reveal the limits of what you have done. It's a question of whether you declare your story to be the whole truth, to be complete.

Don't fall back on rationalisations.

There's a culture of rationalisation found in some workplaces that excuses almost all journalistic transgressions. There are plenty of examples. ⒶWe've got a lot of deadlines... We couldn't get all the information...He didn't ring me back... I thought it was true when I wrote it ... If I hadn't written it, someone else would have ... The News editor made me do it ... I sleep well at night, therefore everything I've done is ethical... "

Don't kid yourself. You are ultimately accountable for everything you write.

Accept the inevitability of criticism.

Good reporting is a complex process, especially when reporting issues on which people have strong and divergent views. Don't expect a pat on the back for your reporting, because it is likely that someone will always be opposed to it. This makes it even more important that you satisfy *yourself* that reporting is balanced and well-informed. Matt Price (*The Australian*) told how he was congratulated for good reporting and abused for being a racist - in relation to the same story.

'I've been accused of being a pinko-liberal-bleeding-heart, and at the same time I've been accused of being a biased racist' (*Leeroy Betti, The West Australian*)

Future Directions

As well as producing a series of concrete suggestions for journalists facing the complexity of reporting Indigenous affairs, the "Reporting Indigenous Issues" workshops demonstrated that it is possible for Indigenous and non-Indigenous journalists and non-journalists to work together constructively in their mutual interest. It is anticipated that *Reporting Indigenous Issues*, the edited proceedings the 1998 National Media, will be published in 1999. Future meetings will continue to address these issues and to examine the ways in which reporting on Indigenous issues is developing in Australia. The next meeting of the National Media

Forum will be held in Brisbane in the year 2000, convened by Rubena Colbey (ABC) and Chris Lawe Davies (University of Queensland).

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