

Chapter Summary

Investigative Essentials for Journalists in Multicultural and Diverse Communities

Reference details: Romano, Angela (2013), 'Investigative Essentials for Journalists in Multicultural and Diverse Communities' in (ed.) Stephen Tanner and Nick Richardson, *Journalism Research and Investigation in a Digital World*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp. 263–272.

This chapter describes how investigative journalism can uncover news that often goes unreported about personalities, problems, ways of life and pressing issues in ethnic and religious sub-communities. Romano (2013, p. 263) notes that while investigative journalism is traditionally understood as reporting that exposes corrupt, inefficient, incompetent or other inappropriate conduct in politics and business circles, investigative reporters do far more than that: 'They map human activities, landmarks, patterns and changes in the landscape, and connections across the whole of society' (Romano 2013, p. 263). This type of investigative journalism is a form of reporting that 'involves identification, deep observation and analysis of trends across society that would otherwise remain hidden or obscured' (p. 263).

Romano refers to a comment made by a member of Australia's Afghan community, who noted that local media could often discover for themselves the kinds of stories that were most commonly exposed by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or other large international news organisations in relation to conflict and conditions in Afghanistan. 'We have all the people who fought in the war and who have been victims of war—they are here in Australia and they still have their families down at the battlefield,' he said. 'Those incredible stories are here.' Romano (2013, p. 263) uses the example to introduce a discussion of how journalists can tap the potential of local communities to obtain the connections and information to 'break' significant stories.

Embedding cultural knowledge into news rounds

Romano (2013, p. 264) notes that there are two different approaches to investigating issues in ethnic and religious communities.

One approach is to have specialised reporters who have a specific round or 'beat' that focuses on ethnic- and faith-based communities. The few media organisations that have reporters assigned

to such a specific round tend to either specifically target diverse communities or offer special-interest reports or programs. However, most reporters rarely focus specifically on religious and ethnic sub-communities unless they are involved in special projects that address multiculturalism or minority-group issues (Romano 2013, p. 264).

A second approach is to embed reporting of minority communities into all rounds or beats – such as the politics, crime and courts, health, education, and business rounds – so that all reporters take responsibility for it. This approach is sometimes called ‘mainstreaming’ because goes beyond including sources from minority communities in stories that are clearly tagged as being about ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’ issues, but also uses them ‘mainstream issues’ such as employment, economics, business and politics (Romano 2013, p. 264).

Basic mainstreaming and community mapping

Romano (2013, pp. 264-5) describes how mainstreaming can occur very simply if rounds reporters identify what types of official figures, statistics, reports or data are regularly and routinely released about their round, and then prepare to speak with sources from minority communities about those figures or data. For example, reporters covering business or economics know that they will routinely receive monthly, quarterly or annual figures and reports about inflation, balance of payments, consumer confidence, unemployment and jobs growth, etc. It is easy for journalists to identify groups within minority communities that could provide expert commentary on these figures and reports. For example, with business or economics figures, expert commentary may come from bodies like Indigenous Business Australia, the Muslim Business Network, etc. Romano also points to strategies for uncovering interesting new angles in ‘mainstream’ stories by asking what the facts and figures in those stories show about different types of minority communities (Romano 2013, p. 265).

Romano (2013, p. 265-266) explains more detailed strategies, such as community mapping. Community mapping involves creating a mental map of the key formal and informal institutions within in a community, the key businesses and facilities that provide jobs and essential services, and the places where community members meet to talk and resolve problems. Each community will have very different patterns in terms of where community members live, how concentrated their populations are, the lifestyles they lead, and the types of services and places that they use and value. Romano (2013, p. 266) notes: ‘The type and number of facilities in an area can be sufficient to provide an indication of trends and issues affecting the various communities there.’

Identifying spokespeople and community leaders

Drawing from analyses of leadership by Harwood and McCrehan (2000) and Kuhr and Harwood (2006), Romano (2013, pp. 266-267) discusses the characteristics of five types of leaders – official leaders, civic leaders, experts, connectors and catalysts – and the different types of insights and information that they will potentially offer to journalists. Romano observes that the first three types of leaders are relatively easy to find, as they include leaders from government departments and business organisations, spokespeople from non-profit groups, and academic experts. Romano (2013, p. 267) notes that reporters who want to find connectors and catalysts will need to look very closely at the ways in which communities are organised:

When covering ethnic and religious communities, journalists should recognise that the most significant leaders in minority communities may not be elected or appointed figures with official titles. A valued community leader may be a teacher, religious leader or hairdresser who helps people with an array of problems, such as negotiating with council for approval for neighbourhood developments, fundraising for facilities for a local school, or mediating disputes between families. These informal leaders are often better sources than official leaders for describing their group's circumstances and voicing the community's opinions and moods.

Information gathering and accuracy

Research from the 'Vulnerability and the News Media' project found that people from ethnic and religious communities argued that journalists offered shallow or misleading reports because they had little understanding of the general nature of minority groups, the nuances and changes occurring within communities, or how contextual factors affect identity (Romano 2013, p. 268). A common symptom is evident when journalists interview an individual from a minority group but are unable to tell whether that person's views or experiences represent a predominant trend within that community or whether they are personalised or atypical. Recommendations to address this problem are that journalists should:

- Identify organisations within specific communities that can help to explain the nature of that community's structures and interests.
- Recognise that one person or example cannot symbolise an entire community, so add qualifiers and background about the individual to help establish context.
- Be cautious about individuals or groups who claim to represent the whole of the community, as many will have their own agenda and interests. If such sources are used,

ensure that individuals and groups who provide information are identified so that their stake in the issue is evident.

- Follow the ‘paper trail’. Use documents from government departments, research institutions, representative organisations and informal groups to corroborate, contextualise or background the details that they have gathered from communities. This may include parliamentary, government and business records, financial reports, budget audits and statistics; research reports, historical records, planning documents, minutes of meetings, opinion poll findings, outcomes of official investigations and inquiries, and similar kinds of data (Romano 2013, p. 268).

Romano (2013, p. 269) advises that journalists should recognise that many representatives of religious and ethnic communities have little experience of how the media works, and may need to be handled differently to official spokespeople from government and business bodies. A ‘cold call’ on the day that newsworthy data is released or a critical incident occurs may yield no response, because the community does not have spokespeople available to answer media calls at short notice. Romano recommends that journalists do not see each interview as a ‘one and done’ activity, but instead visit community meeting places and talk to people over time to build longer-term connections. Journalists who establish relationships with communities over time will have a better sense of what types of people will be available to speak when news breaks. Sources are more likely to assist someone who has an established reputation for previous interactions with their community or quality reporting on topics that they consider important (Romano 2013, p. 269).

Romano (2013, p. 270) notes that: ‘Stories about minority communities will also often require additional contextual information if audiences are to appreciate the nuances and background of issues. This will cause editors and producers who are accustomed to 400-word or 45-second stories to cringe.’ She notes that journalists will often need to invest more time and effort in creative and innovative writing if they are to reveal the important and interesting nature of these stories, without resorting to sensationalised, stereotyped or shallow storylines (Romano 2013, p. 271).

Six quick tips

Romano (2013, p. 271) concludes with six practical tips for reporters:

- Spend more time in the key places where people from ethnic and religious communities meet and talk, and embed people and issues from minority communities into ‘mainstream’ stories about politics, business, economics, health and other topics.
- Be aware of diversity within communities, and avoid portraying one person’s opinions and behaviours as if they are typical of the overall group.
- Don’t just do an interview and run. Visit community meeting places and talk to people over time to build ongoing connections.
- Be aware that there may be far more than two sides to a story.
- Only mention religious or ethnic background when it is strictly relevant to the story. A person’s culture should flavour the story indirectly, by the way that the individual’s background affects how he or she thinks, speaks and acts.
- Check facts carefully. Minority communities have often suffered misunderstandings and labels due to their perceived ‘difference’. Incorrect or misleading stories can amplify the problem (Romano 2013, p. 271).

References

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