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Journalists, ‘remote’ Indigenous sources and cultural competence

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Journalists working in Northern Australia who participated in the Media and Indigenous Policy Project have identified cultural competence as one of the key attributes of Indigenous reporting specialists. They say it enables these reporters to find their own Indigenous stories, cultivate and maintain strong contacts in the Indigenous public sphere and negotiate the obstacles in the field to get the story. ABC Darwin journalist Katrina Bolton said:

If you don’t know how to be culturally aware with traditional people especially, then it doesn’t matter how much you try to make eye contact you’re not going any further.

Cultural competence is a concept developed in social medicine (Betancourt et al., 2003, p. 44). It refers to an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. This involves being able to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from cultures and/or belief systems other than one’s own. Cultural competence has four dimensions: awareness of one’s own cultural worldview; positive attitude towards cultural differences; knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and cross-cultural skills (Betancourt et al., 2003). Developing cultural competence results in an ability to understand, to communicate and interact with people across cultures.

Major news organisations and institutions, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Australian Press Council, have developed in-house protocols and reporting codes for coverage of Indigenous people and affairs (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009; Australian Press Council, 2001). These are regarded as important because ‘on some fronts, journalists take these guidelines very seriously, and ... they can be seen to shape the way at least some stories are told’ McCallum & Holland, 2010, p. 44). However, while they may offer more detailed guidance than the Australian Journalists’ Code of Ethics (Media Entertainment Arts Alliance, 1999) they do not go so far as disrupting the underlying news values and assumptions that have been identified as problematic, nor do they require journalists to focus on the positive self-representation of Indigenous communities (Burns & McKee, 1999). For example, both the ABC’s protocol (2009) and the Australian Press Council’s guidelines (2001) are mostly concerned with avoiding offence to Indigenous people by using certain terms or interrupting cultural practices such as ‘sorry business’. This appears to be more a form of cultural politeness designed to minimise obstacles to the journalist getting the story, rather than encouraging genuine attempts to understand, respect and reflect cultural differences.

Some participants commented that Indigenous reporting guidelines had improved news organisations’ approach and their reporting, as McCallum and Holland (2010) have observed elsewhere. Chips Macinolty, who has been a Northern correspondent for newspapers and magazines including The Sydney Morning Herald, said:

Back in the ‘80s there was pretty much outright refusal by Murdoch papers to even countenance the sort of restrictions on the naming of dead people and so on, and now it’s part of the practice of the local Murdoch papers that they will enquire as to whether or not a person’s name can be used. The ABC’s been pretty good at it for a lot longer, so that’s been a big shift.

Journalists spoke of a number of barriers that made it difficult to get Indigenous voices into their reports, from lack of cultural competence on their part, to the attitudes in their newsrooms. The ABC’s Katrina Bolton said:
The most difficult thing with Indigenous reporting is actually getting their voices. You want their voices but it’s so hard to get Indigenous voices — getting people to talk with you and share with you stories, particularly if it’s not a hip, hiphooray story because you run into all sort of barriers, the shyness barrier, the is my English good enough barrier, the cultural barriers.

Macinolty, Fairfax Northern correspondent Lindsay Murdoch and the ABC’s veteran Darwin-based indigenous reporter Murray McLaughlin all identified language as a significant barrier to reporting well on remote communities. McLaughlin said not being able to speak with people in indigenous languages was:

... a huge impediment to cutting through and being able to talk to people ... you rely on someone who has got a rough understanding of English ... or on the rare occasion you actually hire a professional interpreter, or you rely on white people who have worked there long enough that they can speak the language. So all of that means stuff is necessarily filtered so ... you can never really be confident that you’re getting it right all the time.

Macinolty also commented on the lack of education of journalists on Indigenous culture, society and politics:

I don’t know any journalist since I’ve been here ... who has made an attempt to learn an Aboriginal language, or who has made any serious attempt to go through some kind of orientation course or learnt anything much about kinship systems and political systems and so on in Aboriginal communities and it really comes out. I remember when Gorbachev came into power in the Soviet Union, within days every journalist knew how to pronounce his name, but you still get journalists who can’t even get their heads around how to pronounce Aboriginal names, personal names or community names or language or whatever, and it’s just sort of almost never ending that kind of thing.

Another barrier was the clash between newsgathering rituals and Indigenous practices. Bolton said:

... the two are really quite directly opposed often, like your time frames and your budget and the time frames that pushes on you, are really like direct opposite to what is considered polite in Indigenous culture. But sometimes it’s also knowing how to ask.

‘Knowing how to ask’ involves spending time with Indigenous people, which can be difficult for journalists for a range of reasons. The Australian’s Tony Koch emphasises this as a most important aspect of quality Indigenous reporting (see accompanying story: Tony Koch: the importance of listening and returning).

Murdoch commented:

You can’t just rush in bang, bang and get your interview. You’ve got to sit down, how you’re going, what’s going on, and then finally they might tell you what you want to know.

Koch and McLaughlin said patience was an important quality for reporters covering remote communities. McLaughlin said:

When you go there under your own steam you’ve just got to have patience because people run their own timetable. It’s no use saying I’ll see you at two o’clock next Wednesday. It’s a matter of rolling up on Wednesday and just sitting around and waiting and sometimes it never happens, and I’ve long learnt not to feel any frustration about that.

Newsroom racism was an issue some reporters identified as an obstacle in coverage of Indigenous affairs. It took several forms. The first was a lack of interest in Indigenous stories from news editors. Couldry (2006) contends that what is omitted from news agendas can tell us as much about the beliefs and values of media organisations as what is published. Meadows (2001) has shown that Indigenous people are routinely silenced by being talked about rather than heard in broadcast news on Indigenous affairs, which he describes as a form of racist discourse. Dreher (2010) argues that
entrenched news values and existing story agendas shape media discussion of marginalised groups — focusing on addressing the stereotypes and concerns of perceived 'mainstream' audiences, rather than providing an open forum where marginalised peoples’ perspectives can be aired. McLaughlin said:

... there is ... a limited appetite for blackfella stories. I can remember I’d been up here not that long really, maybe a year, and I can remember my EP [executive producer] said to me, she said, now Murray we like your stories, but do you reckon you could get a few more white faces in there? That’s the prevailing attitude.

**Crikey**’s Northern correspondent Bob Gosford has lived and worked in Central Australia over many years. He spent two years of the study period based in Yuendumu and speaks some Walpiri. He said journalists from the Murdoch press who were in Central Australia to cover the Intervention sought out routine and predictable images and stories about Indigenous dysfunction (McCallum, 2007):

*The Australian* had a bunch of journalists going around here who were basically out writing black ... they wanted pictures of kids, snotty nosed kids with dirty nappies or naked, playing in the dirt with beer cans around, or old crones standing around drunk. And they got it because there’s lots of that here.

Bolton recalled being deeply uncomfortable when she was sent to an Alice Springs shopping centre to get Indigenous peoples’ reactions on welfare quarantining for a news story being produced out of the ABC’s Canberra studios:

It was awful. And in the end someone did talk because I kind of sweet talked/charmed/batted my eyelids into it and [they] also knew our camera man who actually happened to be Indigenous ... But, it was just so contrived because of the speed and the urgency and the expectation that we could just snap our fingers and get Indigenous reaction ... I think it was worse because there were all these implicit assumptions: ‘Hi, you’re an Aboriginal person in the supermarket you must be on welfare.’ It was just awful.

**Indigenous cultural practices**

Participants identified a range of Indigenous cultural practices journalists need to negotiate to get their story. McLaughlin said sorry business was ‘the biggest disrupter of story ventures’:

The number of times I’ve turned up to a place and just can’t do anything because of the... can’t move around even because of this sorry business going on, or fortunate enough to learn about it before I go and have to cancel the trip. Sorry business prevails, that’s the reality.

Other cultural practices are not so familiar to many journalists, such as who has the right to speak about certain land, certain business. Bolton said:

So that whole thing, that whole cultural thing of not speaking out of turn, not speaking when it’s not your land, not speaking when you’re not senior enough, is really, really, really limiting.

She said many elders did not trust journalists and she would approach younger community members for information:

There’s no affection towards the media among some of the older people. When you blast in there and shove a camera in their face and want them to talk quickly or in brief answers, it’s just so culturally clashing. So you get that problem where the sort of young articulate person ... gives you a great background briefing and says all the things you need to hear and then says ‘Oh, but I can’t say it’.

Understanding the social dynamics of an Indigenous society can assist journalists in their quest for comment but this is not always apparent to reporters. Bolton described her approach on a court story at Borroloola:

I just went and said, ‘do you mind if I sit down with your mob’ and everyone kind of just stayed fairly silent and I sat down. I didn’t start talking straight away...
and slowly I did a little and not just to one person, but a few people, and suggested the idea that maybe they might talk with me and why. But also said things like if you want to sit together and pick one person to talk ... that’s OK ... Those kind of things are sort of barriers to people, but no-one ever really explains to you as a journalist that perhaps it might make — the camera men don’t like it — it might make all the difference if people could feel that they’re sitting together as a group and they pick who they want to talk out of that group, but they’re physically there together. So that’s important, might mean the difference between getting a piece from them or not.

Communication technology could also be a barrier. Bolton commented on the fact that often people in remote communities do not have a telephone journalists can call. Gosford said often people had no credit on their mobile phones and relied on text messages more heavily than other mobile phone users. He also said it was a widespread practice in remote settlements to give phones away and swap phones with family members:

You have to talk to people through their institutions. A lot of people don’t have home phones and if they do people are highly mobile so often it’s the institutions that people work through or are represented by, so you pass messages through. That’s changed a fair bit with mobiles in that — but again, because what might have been someone’s good contact a month ago is now their daughter’s contact. ‘Ah, yeah, mummy’ and people are still highly mobile. ‘Mummy’s in Alice blah, blah, blah’.

**The range of indigenous voices**

Study participants including Indigenous policy advocates, journalists, academics and policymakers commented on the lack of diversity of Indigenous voices heard through the news media. Many said the news media relied on just a handful of conservative Indigenous commentators. McLaughlin commented:

If you’re not Marcia Langton, if you’re not Warren Mundine or Noel Pearson then you know, you’re not a legitimate black voice.

This study shows it is too simplistic to attribute this to news organisations’ ideological agendas alone. Macinolty said it was also due to journalists failing to cultivate a wide circle of Indigenous contacts, and the inconsistency and high turnover of journalists covering the round:

When I was working for ministers and so on you’d have journalists who’d ring up and say ‘Oh, X has happened, who should I talk to?’ Every media organisation has its own black book sort of thing, but it’s usually pretty poor when it comes to Aboriginal affairs.

Bolton identified two other aspects to the problems with getting a wide range of Indigenous voices in media reports. The first was a form of media burnout because individuals were being approached by journalists all the time. She said there was also a ‘lot of thuggery’ on communities and that people who spoke to the news media often got ‘a hard time’ because of it:

... sometimes you’ve got people who do kind of speak up, but then the media demand is so great on so many issues that they’re getting approached all the time on different topics and they feel why me, it’s too hard, and they get shit from people. You know, awful pressure and nasty comments and that kind of stuff and that makes them reluctant to speak again.

Some journalists also commented that unlike other sources, who approached them with story ideas regularly, their ‘remote’ Indigenous contacts did not seek them out. McLaughlin said:

... if they ever come to town it’s very rare that they look you up, which is a pity. It’s just not their way, they just don’t do it ... it’s not their style to sort of come knocking on the door because I think they just naturally feel a bit intimidated.
Gaining cultural competence

A few journalists said they had gained cultural competence through their work for Indigenous organisations. Some learned in the field and from other professionals with deep experience working with Indigenous peoples. Macinolty attributed his excellent Indigenous contacts and well-developed sense for Indigenous stories to his experience working with Indigenous organisations for many years before writing for publications including The Sydney Morning Herald. He said he did not find it difficult to find agenda-setting issues:

I remember when I was working for the Herald I was getting pages 1, 3 and 5 really regularly because the stories I was getting were really fantastic.

A few specialists described how they developed their cultural competence from other non-Indigenous people with good knowledge of Indigenous cultures and people. Bolton said:

I've talked a lot with people who work [with Indigenous people] — friends of mine and my sister who works as a lawyer down in Central Australia who has to talk to Aboriginals about usually really sensitive issues like assaults. I talk to her about how she does it. I've talked to a lot of white people in communities over the years about what faux pas I might be making without realising it.

Improving coverage: Cultural competence training

Participants offered suggestions for improving the level of professionalisation and specialisation in the remote Indigenous affairs reporting subfield. Several commented on the need for cultural competence education for journalists who report on ‘remote’ Indigenous communities. Macinolty identified a strong need for reporters to undertake training in Indigenous languages, kinship and governance systems. Such courses are available, including Flinders University's Pitjantjatjara summer school, which runs for two weeks every January.

Another suggestion from indigenous reporting specialists was for large news organisations to invest in reporters’ relationships with Indigenous contacts. One said major news outlets should:

... say OK, take three weeks, go on a road trip, make connections, don’t go out, like don’t just fly in, film and [leave]. Just go out, talk to people, meet the people, find out what’s going on, get phone numbers. And then it would be such a great investment in future stories and future relationships, because you need to be able to ring up ... and go ‘What’s going on, I’ve been told this’, and if you just constantly do the blast in blast out, you lose all that.

One suggestion was that the ABC’s Darwin newsroom could be used by the corporation as a specialist training site for Indigenous affairs reporting and suggested those who were interested in developing these skills would need to be based there for a minimum of two years.

Developing practices of reciprocity was identified as a way of improving relations between reporters and their Indigenous contacts.

KEY POINTS

- It is too simplistic to attribute the narrow range of Indigenous voices heard in the news to media organisations’ ideological agendas.
- Journalists identified a number of barriers to getting ‘remote’ Indigenous voices into their reports.
- These include large costs associated with travel; a clash of newsgathering rituals and Indigenous cultural practices; journalists lacking cultural competence and newsroom racism.
- Participants identified a need for reporters to undertake training in Indigenous languages, kinship and governance systems.
- They also identified a need for media organisations to invest in relationship building with Indigenous contacts.
sources by several journalists, including Tony Koch (see accompanying story: Tony Koch: the importance of listening and returning). Bolton said:

... something happens at say, Borroloola. I've got a few people I can call because they've met me, I've dealt with them respectfully, I've done the follow-up which also wasn't supported at an institutional level, by like sending them a DVD copy of the stories that we've done and that kind for stuff. Like those sorts of things, even getting a CD I have to go and knock on someone's door and ask for one CD and one case and then I get grumbled at. When you do that then the next time you need to find out, or even get a barometer on almost anything that's going on, you've at least got one person, an Indigenous person you can call and say, 'hi, someone you know. Hey, do you know anything about this'. But without, yeah, there's just no time put in to developing these relationships or facilitating them so that they're there when you need them.

References


Tony Koch: the importance of listening and returning

In her book, *The Tall Man*, which tells the story of the Palm Island death in custody of Mulrunji Doomadgee, Chloe Hooper discusses the news media coverage of the case. She makes the observation that, of the ‘fifteen or so journalists at the inquest’, only *The Australian*’s Tony Koch did not stay with the police but rather ‘with a local family and went out on the street reporting’ (Hooper, 2008, p. 92). Mason (2012) says staying with an Indigenous family made his source relationship with the police ‘less routine and certain’ (2012, p. 173). Our research explores Koch’s expertise in negotiating Indigenous public spheres and draws on his approach to suggest the directions in which Indigenous affairs reporting needs to move.

Koch has been visiting indigenous communities in the Gulf Country, Cape York and the Torres Strait for 25 years. Hooper’s observation of the way he operated on Palm Island is an example of how these communities are not just a part of his reporting round, but the homes of longstanding professional sources and friends. He chooses one as his holiday destination every year. Koch says his passion for Barramundi fishing helps his reporting:

>I take my holidays up there ... every year I go to one of them. I’ve got a brother who’s a mango farmer up in Bowen and he’s a good boatie, so we just hook up and we go to one of the communities, stay there and we’re always with the locals. Go camping with them and getting turtle eggs and everything else. Just living with them on the beach, having a great time. Meeting all their kids.

The time Koch spends on holidays relaxing and fishing with his brother and the locals helps him to maintain trust with the communities he writes about, which he says takes time and a lot of work because ‘people are sick of journalists coming in and writing horrible things about them’. He says many of the reports he has written over the years on topics including violence and alcohol could be classed as quite negative, however, unlike many other journalists he is responsible to the people he writes about because he has connections with them that go well beyond the conventional reporter-source relationship. He is always returning to the communities he writes about and sits down with people face-to-face to discuss his work. He says he has had to justify himself to individuals and communities on many occasions, explaining his reasons for what he has written and why he believes an issue or event needs to be part of the national conversation. In academic research, this discussion and negotiation can be understood as a process of gaining and maintaining peoples’ consent for their continuing involvement in his journalistic research. Smith discusses the importance in indigenous research of the Māori concept of *kanohi kitea* or ‘the seen face’, which means ‘...being seen by the people – showing your face, turning up at important cultural events ... it is part of how one’s credibility is continually developed and maintained’ (Smith, 2004, p. 15). In Australia, Indigenous researchers point to the different layers of entry that must be negotiated when they seek information, while others describe their research as involving long-term relationships which are established and extend beyond a research relationship to one involving families, communities, organisations and networks (Rigney, 1999). Koch describes his journalism research in these terms.

*(Continued on next page.)*
According to Koch, geographical distance is a major challenge to the Australian media’s ability to report well on remote indigenous communities in northern Australia, as the major news outlets are in the south of the country and policy is made in Canberra, but implemented far away. Meadows (2005) emphasises the importance of journalists learning how to navigate indigenous public spheres and Koch provides some examples of how he does this. He says an important part of his round is ensuring that he knows when people from remote communities are attending conferences and other major meetings in Brisbane or regional centres. Koch says these events are crucial for him to find out about current issues and maintain contact with communities. Despite the significant distances and expense, Koch also underlines the importance of reporters spending time and building relationships with remote communities to do their jobs well:

With visiting Aboriginal communities, the first couple of years you don’t hear much or see because they don’t trust you. They don’t know you. In Queensland there’s this term, they call us ‘seagulls’- politicians and journalists. Because they say that we fly in, shit on them and leave. So you have to get over being a seagull, and the only way to do that is they have to see you coming back all the time... unless those reporters get off their butts and go out, and not just go out with the minister flying in the government jet and you know, be a seagull, drop in for a couple of hours and be given the candy coated version ...You’ve got to go to the communities and spend some time there, spend some days there ... to listen to the people talk ... to the old ladies ... and find out what’s really going on.