

The Bure Newsroom

Poolside rumours at the Centra and the media peddling of them had much to answer for in foreign coverage of the Fiji coup. One reporter was an extreme example of the Stockholm Syndrome but others who remained in Parliament day after day also quickly became George Speight's propaganda arm.

By **MICHAEL FIELD**

WHAT the world was to learn about the Fiji coup owes its origins and directions to a poolside *bure* at the Centra Hotel, Suva's main business hotel [now the Travelodge]. There many of the dozens of foreign reporters, photographers and camera crews covering Fiji's coup and hostage crisis gathered until the early hours of the morning to eat and drink. The only locals were the Centra waiters and the odd taxi driver retained by television networks.

In an often mosquito-plagued setting, the tourist journalists worked out how to cover the coup. Some of it was downright embarrassing. People who would otherwise be covering sport happily held forth with striking inaccuracy on issues like the stability and command structure of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) or the whereabouts of President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

These prognostications used to then find their way into copy, both that of the creator of the original fantasy, and into others grasping for story ideas.

At one point a *bure* story had it that hostage Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry had a guerrilla army in the mountains of Viti Levu poised to swing down onto Suva and liberate the Government. The next day it was on New Zealand television. Another favourite were mythical Tailevu hill tribes said to be planning attacks on Suva.

In defence of the Bure Newsroom it must have been difficult for many newcomers to Fiji — and they seemed to make up the majority of the media

corps — to figure out what was going on.

While competition drives reporters — even if results can be wildly inaccurate and even endangered colleagues — they can also be a particularly gregarious lot which was why Bure Newsroom became important for journalists to tell war stories, keep their eye on the competition and reinforce rumours and inaccuracies.

The central problem for the international media was that the coup caught most of them by surprise. The worst of the foreign media were those who came from closest: New Zealand. Very few of their reporters had reported in the Pacific, much less Fiji. Few knew even the basic names of the place. On the plane up from Auckland on 19 May 2000 one reporter was reading up his newspaper library files on the Solomon Islands while another seemed genuinely mystified to discover there was a three-hour drive between Nadi and Suva.

The Australian media was better equipped with talent and experience and their more significant reporters were well known locally.

While all this might well seem to be little more than cynical anecdotes, what is significant is the way in which this behaviour ultimately leads to the formation of public opinion, not only in Fiji, but beyond its shores. In turn there is also a linkage with political and diplomatic responses. Governments respond to public opinion that to a degree follows the media (and, of course, the media can follow public opinion).

It is scary to find that a tremendously inexperienced media is moulding public opinion. New Zealand news media, other than Radio New Zealand, shows no commitment to the Pacific in normal times and looks particularly inept when it all falls apart.

The global definition of the Fiji coup was also defined by the way reporters viewed the dangers of the situation. If reporters are under pressure — such as occurred in East Timor in those last days of Indonesia rule — it comes through into their copy and tends to make the reporters themselves participants rather than observers. Reporters can believe their own hype.

Danger is entirely subjective and very relative. Many a soul has exited this world violently from the comfort of their bed. For the first fortnight following May 19, Suva was an uncertain place under curfew. Around Parliament, where George Speight and his goons held sway, it was risky; inside the parliamentary complex itself it was decidedly edgy. It was never terribly clear where the "line of control" was; no one could say with certainty who was controlling what.

It was all relative: much later in the epic, the night Speight was arrested

MICHAEL FIELD

and shots were fired, things felt genuinely more dangerous but there was a reporter from Bangalore, India, on the scene. She had come in from Sri Lanka and was politely wondering at the fuss. The roads were good, the soldiers polite and there were no bombs, she said.

For the first couple of days of the crisis it was close enough to standard hostage situation that many reporters will have experienced. A police line of a kind existed and Speight and his men were largely beyond access. It did quickly melt and reporters — and indeed hundreds of other souls — suddenly found themselves with access to Parliament.

It was not particularly an ethical issue at that point; reporters were doing only what a lot of other people were doing in a situation of increasingly lawlessness. It was a matter of unease to see the police were systematically noting down the names of the reporters going in. This could, ultimately, prove a difficulty.

The real problem was for the reporters who went inside Parliament and stayed there. Right from the beginning there had been reporters; three local reporters had been in the press gallery when Parliament was seized. Other local reporters made it to Parliament and stayed there for days. A number of foreign journalists were also inside. One became a particular liability. He had arrived in Suva with a rugby ball that he insisted on bouncing around amidst the rubble of the riot torn city, and was soon engaging Speight like a long lost friend. When the reporter began stealing rounds from rebel pistols he was pulled out by his family employers.

He was an extreme example of the Stockholm Syndrome but the others who remained in Parliament day after day also quickly became Speight's propaganda arm. Many of those inside seemed to recognise their situation and had the sense to get out after a while. Some even found the need to get counselling once they got home, as much to come to terms with the manipulative rants that Speight had engaged in.

The judgment-distorting nature of this occurred between May 26 and 29.

On Friday, May 26, the RFMF decided to close the barricade around Parliament, ending the free flow of people and material. It was a key moment. Speight marched out of Parliament and headed down the hill towards the first barricade. His armed men were around him and around them were the media pack in all its glory. There were so many of them it was not possible, from the barricade, to work out what was coming. Had the soldiers been under any orders to open fire on a break-out, the media had made that impossible.



Top: George Speight holds court with the press in Fiji's Parliament.

Right: George Speight talks to the media: "The credibility of some local journalists faded when their at times remarkable foresight at being where rebel stories were

about to happen plainly came about as they were participants, not spectators."



Photos: USP PACIFIC JOURNALISM ONLINE

Reporters were beginning to believe their own reports ... One NZ journalist at the Centra proclaimed, 'The're on their way...' Rebels were out to attack the media. A panic ensued and taxi-loads of reporters fled town in wide-eyed fear.

The soldiers were overwhelmed and yielded as the barricade came down. Speight, emboldened, then headed back up the hill to another barricade. This time his men kept his media behind him so pictures showed the coup leader boldly walking to two new barricades he knew were not going to be a barrier to him. Journalists were not covering the story; they *were* the story, the tools of Speight's tactical skills.

Media management is tricky at the best of times and on Saturday, May 27, it all went wrong. In Speight's absence on the streets outside gunfire broke out, wounding two soldiers and an Associated Press Television cameraman, Jerry Harmer. Speight later abused the media of "stampeding" and acting for a big pay rise.

On the night of May 28 things worsened when Speight's people left Parliament and went across town to attack the Fiji TV studios following a *Close-Up* programme. The group then headed back to Parliament, going past

the Centra Suva. Generously it can be said many of the reporters were tired and stressed and hopelessly misread the situation. Stories were quickly going around the world that the hotel was under attack and that hostages had been taken. In fact, nothing much happened at all at the Centra. Reporters were beginning to believe their own reports home that things were more dangerous than they were.

Next morning one of the oddest moments of the lot occurred. A large gathering of journalists was in the Centra lobby when a staff member of the New Zealand High Commission telephoned. A New Zealand journalist took the call and then quickly proclaimed to everybody else that "they're on their way...." Rebels were out to attack the media. A panic ensued and taxi-loads of reporters fled town in wide-eyed fear. Some ran right out of the country; one largish media team even celebrated their return home by running a story about how "they had survived Speight's coup", quietly ignoring the fact they had run out on the story.

That night RFMF chief Commodore Frank Bainimarama proclaimed martial law at a remarkably poorly attended press conference — one of the big international news agencies had to use a Pacific Harbour dateline on the story.

The lesson is clear; in journalism experience does count, not just in writing but also of culture and situations being worked in. The latter is important; some of the plainly very talented reporters on the ground knew nothing of the Pacific and as staff rotated through the story, the same mistakes and prejudices were repeated.

For those who went the full distance in covering the story it proved a tough assignment. Time zones meant long nights, coming on top of quite long days. We just got plain tired and burnt out. Mistakes were often made that way, attracting more criticism for the international media which, in the end, was not deserved. While the local media have been good, indeed at times plain sensational, some doubts remain about the objectivity of some, and indeed honesty. The credibility of some local journalists faded when their at times remarkable foresight at being where rebel stories were about to happen plainly came about as they were participants, not spectators. Sadly some of them don't even know their cover has long since been blown.

There is much about Fiji that will trap journalists, even the locals who know the dangers fall in often enough. And many a local reporter had his or her own barrow out front too.

Good sense often evaporates in the Pacific sun. I'd seen something similar in Papua New Guinea during the Sandline mutiny of 1997. Commercial Australian television, reporting that Port Moresby was "in flames", developed the story that then Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan had fled the country and that the Australian military was coming in. Neither was true but the stories seemed influential on the streets and influenced the situation. Tailevu hill tribes and Chaudhry's army were Fiji versions.

Truth in Fiji is a moveable feast. Rumours could be deadly. One afternoon during the hostage crisis Suva suddenly transformed from what had been a "normal" business day to shop owners suddenly putting up shutters, banks snapped closed and people melting away. A Tailevu hill tribes rumour had hit town.

Information and understanding is not the sole responsibility of the media; the authorities were supposed to provide their share. In Fiji they took the lead from Winston Churchill's dictum that truth is so precious it has to be protected by a bodyguard of lies.

MICHAEL FIELD

As in much else to do with this drama, the Fiji police ceased to be useful when it came to providing information. If they knew they didn't say, or they lied. Police Commissioner Isikia Savua called a press conference the day after the coup in an exercise that was so disingenuous reporters were left wondering at how inept he was: or perhaps was not at all.

The RFMF, first in the form of the urban Lieutenant-Colonel Filippo Tarakinikini and then with insurance salesman Major Howard Politini, went out of their way to mount a disinformation campaign.

At one point they issued a statement saying security had been tightened around Suva. A disbelieving local journalist phoned, from a nearly empty military barricade, so ask what was going on. The spokesman had no idea and simply responded "yes" as the reporter proposed increasingly fanciful scenarios of what increased security meant — extra mobile patrols, sharpshooters in camouflage positions ... Both Tarakinikini and Politini were adamant in denying frequent reports that the RFMF was split; Politini even maintained the position after the Queen Elizabeth Barracks mutiny.

Tarakinikini is one who was made by the media and destroyed by it, with the latter process aided by the capacity any small society has for jealousy at success. Everything about him from his name — touch, pinch, pinch, to his origins, part Indian — made him an intriguing fellow. His role in May 19 events was distinctly murky and while he portrayed himself as the simple soldier following orders, it was plain to those watching that he had a bigger say than he ever gave on.

There is something Stalinist in the way he has been subsequently denounced, particularly from New Zealand where Foreign Minister Phil Goff decided he was a fair target. Diplomats gain information pretty much the same way journalists do. Journalists are often more constrained than the diplomats as reporter's views are published each day and we can be vulnerable to defamation charges. This is not so for the diplomats. Indeed, while many reporters did occupy the Centra Bure, inside at the bar it was often New Zealand diplomats drinking with each other.

One suspects much of New Zealand's intelligence on Fiji these days is based on intercepts through the Echelon spy system that Wellington is signed up with. A good deal of the Fiji coup, in the first week or two, was carried out thanks to Vodafone which is immensely interceptable despite the notion that digital encoding makes it invulnerable. The big spy base in New Zealand is not there for decoration and simple logic would have it that a neighbour in turmoil would

be a primary target. What would be the point otherwise?

The morality of is another matter — gentlemen have long been reading other gentlemen's mail — but if Echelon is producing what Goff and others believe is incriminating matter it really should be put into the public court of public opinion where it will be tested. No one these days will go along with the "trust me" utterances of politicians; particularly politicians who are spying on their neighbours.

The problem, it seemed to me, with the attacks on Tarakinikini from New Zealand was that they shot down the very people who might well be able to pull the country out of its mess. Tarakinikini was no saint and he should be exposed to searching analysis, but it has to be more than gossip and innuendo.

The fudging of truth and reality had been a significant part of the lead-up to the coup — much of it hostile to Chaudhry. He is not a natural leader of the Indian community; indeed his main virtue was that he was not Jai Ram Reidy, the once popular leading Indian politician who made the fatal political mistake of joining Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka in touting the 1997 Constitution. Chaudhry's personality often enters the equation — suggesting he deserved what he ultimately got. It is abrasive and it is arrogant; there are many questions about his method, but the nature of political leadership is such that just about any politician is liable to the charge of arrogance — and the lack of a world view by the Fiji media blinded them to this.

Fiji's voting system is a complicated beast, modelled on Australia's and organised, in part, along communal lines. Chaudhry's Labour Party fairly and squarely won the election. And yet within days of the coup the local media found previously unexpressed opinions that the election had been flawed.

Rabuka generated his own speculation. His role in the events is unclear. One has the suspicion he had no role at all but created one for himself. To use an

There are many questions about Chaudhry's method ... But the nature of political leadership is such that just about any politician is liable to the charge of arrogance — and the lack of a world view by the Fiji media blinded them to this.

MICHAEL FIELD

Australian term, Rabuka is a shameless media harlot; more than adequately expressed by his behaviour during the Queen Elizabeth Barrack's mutiny when he went worldwide with a radio commentary, compete with gunfire sound effects. He loves it; he is a cordite junkie — a soldier who has seen real combat and cannot get enough of it in his ageing years. He'd played a similar game earlier in the coup when, rather than admit he had no idea of what was going on, got Fiji TV to run alongside him as he glistened and looked good in the morning sun. His longer-term problem is that this froth is, in the end, no substitute for substance. The man he overthrew, Timoci Bavadra, died a sad nomad, seeking a paragraph or two from newsrooms around the world. Rabuka's fate might be the odd headline but no new contribution to his own society.

Fiji — and the Solomon Islands — illustrated how drastically poor the international media coverage of the Pacific is. Use of the dreaded word "paradise" could well be indexed to quality; the more often it is used the less reliable the media outlet. In the end a coup and hostage drama is not the time to be running basic history, civics and political lessons on a country and yet this was what media owners were expecting of their staff.

□ *Michael Field is the Auckland-based Pacific Correspondent of the international news agency Agence France-Presse. He was the longest-serving international correspondent covering the Speight coup crisis and has extensively covered events in the country since. A profile of Field is on page 175.*
afp.nz@clear.net.NZ

COVERAGE OF CRISES 3

Copy versus custom

The coup polarised the races in Fiji — or so it seemed, thus creating a situation in which many reporters found it difficult to focus on the issues from a totally impartial point of view. They were swept away by the euphoria of the moment and the tension and the emotion that charged the event. This was true of both indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian reporters.

By JALE MOALA

OF ALL the assignments a Pacific Islands journalist gets, politics provide him or her the greatest challenge. This is so because politics in the region is so often mixed up with issues like culture loyalties that it can become difficult for reporters to maintain impartiality and direction, especially if they are themselves part of the cultural group involved. This does not mean that political reporters in the Pacific Islands are biased and lack objectivity. It simply means that politics in the region presents greater challenges for journalists of the region than for journalists from outside.

The basic principles of journalism apply here as it does anywhere else. But the social and economic environments in the Pacific Islands are smaller and developing, factors which contribute to the constriction of scope and leverage that make a political reporter's work even more difficult in this part of the world.

We only have to look at the Fiji coup of 19 May 2000 to see how easily this can happen. The coup polarised the races in Fiji — or so it seemed, thus creating a situation in which many reporters found it difficult to focus on the issues from a totally impartial point of view. They were swept away by the euphoria of the moment and the tension and the emotion that charged the event. This was true of both indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian reporters.

Fear may have also played a role. As a result, the perpetrators of the terrorist action, led by George Speight, received publicity that at the time seemed to legitimise their actions and their existence. Some argued that the situation may

PACIFIC JOURNALISM REVIEW 7:1 2001 29