

# Copy versus custom

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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



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not have deteriorated as quickly as it did if the media had played a more responsible role. But therein lies one of the dilemmas of Pacific Islands political systems, the tribal and chiefly system and customary obligations may blur the view of the journalist, especially if he or she is indigenous.

### **The Speight rebellion**

Customary obligations are a burden on indigenous peoples. For political reporters such obligations are obstacles. Under pressure they can succumb to the demands of traditional loyalties. The problem that arose during the Fiji coup was not so much one of reporters taking sides, as it may have seemed at the time, but the inability of many reporters to function objectively under the pressures of the crisis. A lack of leadership in newsrooms was one reason.

One media organisation under early criticism was state-owned Radio Fiji, which seemed to suffer from a combination of confusion over who was in power or who was going to end up in power, and lack of newsroom discipline and leadership — especially in the first two days of the hostage crisis. The station allowed supporters of George Speight to make inflammatory statements live on radio, first to try to legitimise the events that had taken place and later to call for support to move into the parliamentary complex to bolster Speight's forces.

The commercial radio station FM96 exercised a higher level of responsibility and set strict rules on how to deal with the responses and statements from people and groups looking for a piece of the action.

Obviously it was a difficult and testing time for Fiji journalists: a time when a higher level of professionalism was expected. Some met those expectations and some didn't. During the coup it became clear that some reporters stayed too long in the parliamentary complex, making the outside world believe they were enjoying the hospitality of the terrorists and becoming too familiar with them. It helped give Speight the publicity he craved, effectively glorifying him and his cause. This turned him into an important political player when in fact he was a terrorist who had kidnapped members of the Government and was holding them hostage at gunpoint.

Could the coverage have been handled differently? Writing in *Noted*, the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation newsletter, Radio NZ's Shona Geary asked: "Were we manipulated?" She admitted that Speight and his advisers were media-savvy.

They . . . held daily news conferences justifying the ongoing coup.



negotiations the rebels talked through the media to the military authorities. Speight has freedom of movement, he claims to represent a groundswell of grassroots feeling about the indigenous cause and he had many of his demands met.

The military, not the media, defined his status from the outset. He is not only a hostage-taker but a key political player in shaping Fiji's future. We could not censor the story by not talking to him. At times there was also competitive peer pressure. We couldn't reach unanimous decision to boycott the rebels. The nature of the story required a response from Speight's camp everytime the military rulers made a move.

There are questions about the ethics of giving Speight such a loud clear voice to the world just a few metres from where the hostages are held. It would be unthinkable in most other criminal situations to imagine the media chatting away happily, in public at least, with the villains.

This, of course, is something not confined to the Pacific region. The coverage of the Gulf War in 1991 also came under scrutiny because it was perceived some journalists were getting preferential treatment from the Iraqis.

During the Fiji coup, the *Daily Post* newspaper, which was owned mostly by the Government, decided from the beginning to apply greater caution to its coverage, by putting greater emphasis on the coverage of the effects of the people and the economy.

The paper's guidelines said it would:

1. Not use the word "coup" in its coverage, and it would report the event of May 19 as a kidnapping and hostage situation. The newspaper believed that reporting George Speight's action as a coup would give it some justification in the minds of indigenous Fijians;

2. Report Speight as either the "leader of the kidnappers" or as the "leader of gunmen", or as "leader of the hostage takers" and never as coup leader;

3. Report Speight's group as "gunmen", "terrorists" and "kidnappers";

4. Restrict the use of photos taken of Speight and his supporters in the parliamentary complex to stop them getting too much publicity;

5. Not refer to Speight as a nationalist working for indigenous Fijian interests, but as Suva businessman George Speight, leader of the kidnappers or the terrorists;

6. The *Daily Post* regularly switched reporters covering the events at the parliamentary complex to prevent them getting too close to the terrorists.



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The terrorists soon resented the *Daily Post* and banned its reporters and photographers from the complex. These examples help to remind us that it is important not to be personally involved with political events or to be too close to political contacts.

### Reporting principles

Reporting principles are universal, whether you are covering politics, the environment or sports and whether you are in Fiji, Samoa or the United States. For our purpose, we will consider the three key rules as espoused by political scientist Harold Lasswell.

*Surveillance:* Investigative journalism in the region has increased in recent years, which has resulted in greater political surveillance by the Pacific media. This has been fuelled largely by competition in countries like Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Samoa. The result has been greater public attention on the work and behaviour of public figures, the roles of public offices and the activities of public organisations and institutions. We only have to look at how the media exposed the National Bank of Fiji debacle and the logging scandals in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea to understand how media surveillance has influenced politics in the region.

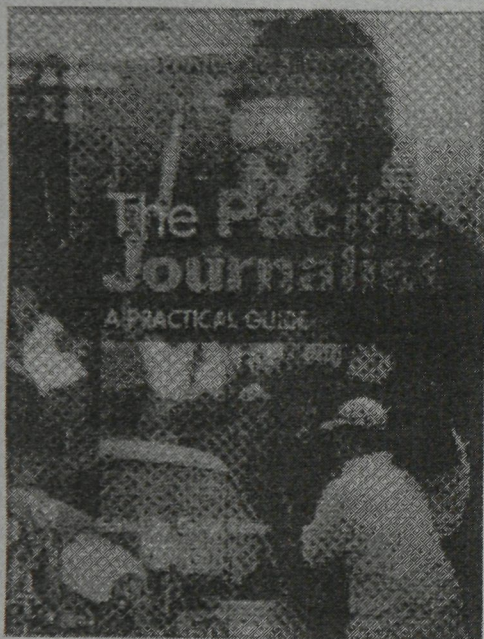
*Interpretation:* As we have said before, news needs to be interpreted to be understood and be meaningful to the audience. It is also important to remember that interpretation really depends on the journalist, his or her biases, and his or her understanding of the events and their causes. If he or she so chooses, the interpretation of the event may be selective so as to tilt the report to one particular side. Political reporting has a powerful influence on society and the interpretation of the event being reported can affect how public opinion on the issue is shaped. As we saw in the Fiji attempte coup, international opinion on how Fiji was handling the situation was shaped largely by media interpretation and reporting.

*Socialisation:* The media provides the modern world with most of its political information and in doing so influences and shapes society's political social functions. Issues like human rights, the environment, abortion and homosexuality are discussed in the media and the way opinions are argued and concluded determine public opinion on those issues. It is now easy to see that the interpretation and the social effects of political reporting may give rise to manipulation of the news to meet the particular interest of an individual or group.



# New book

*From the USP regional  
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This is something which is easily done and something which happens all the time. The political reporter is never alone and if he or she is not strong enough, will not always be in control. As the reporter craves to master the role of a watchdog, reporting on the life of other people, he or she is also under surveillance by people looking for a way to use him or her to attain their goals.

The question now is, where is the magic formula for political reporting? There is none. The best thing to do is to take things one at a time. When dealing with an issue, start with one version. The story is likely to change several times before a final result is written and approved for publication. With a version of the story, talk to as many people as possible, seeking clarification and views and aiming to cover everything .

Sri Lankan editor Denzil Peiris once wrote that the task of the political reporter is to understand the nature of the political conflict, seeing all sides of the story, checking interpretations and speculations and maintaining a stance of honest scepticism. He also believed that the self-discipline required of political reporters is an extremely difficult one. Peiris saw the characteristics of scepticism and cynicism as part of the working life of political reporters. There is a key difference between the two and Peiris explained it as:

*Being sceptical* means you entertain doubts about the official version (of the story) given to you but these doubts can be laid to rest with more facts, clearer interpretations and stronger justifications. *Being cynical* means that you take it for granted that the official version (of the story) conceals more than it reveals and that the real reasons behind the decision are malicious and/or partisan.

This is why good spade work is crucial. Dig well and dig hard.

□ *Jale Moala is one of the leading editors in the South Pacific. He has edited four major publications in the Fiji Islands — The Fiji Times, Daily Post, Pacific Islands Monthly and Islands Business. This article is a condensed version of a chapter he wrote for The Pacific Journalist: A Practical Guide, edited by David Robie, University of the South Pacific Book Centre (2000). This version was as published in the Commonwealth Press Union News, April, 2000. He now works for the Southland Times in NZ. jale.moala@stl.co.nz*