



PRIESTLEY HABRU

A Solomon Islands double major in journalism at the University of the South Pacific

Handy guide for dealing with ethnic reporting

All-Media Guide to Fair and Cross-Cultural Reporting, by Stephen Stockwell and Paul Scott, Australian Key Centre for Cultural Media Policy, Griffith University, 2000.

TO BECOME an effective reporter in any multi-cultural society, avoid embarrassment for using wrong terms and be able to adapt to the culture and

lifestyle of people different from your own, then this survival booklet is a must.

Imagine a country with 250 language groups with different cultural norms and ethnicity and as a reporter, you're striving to get across news coverage that will be accepted by these diverse people.

This is the scenario this media guide is aiming to educate for journalists. In 1788, Australia had 250 language groups. This is year 2001 and no doubt there will be more than 250 language groups in the country now.

A product of two former working journalists who are now both educators, it has proved very useful. Co-authored by Dr Stephen Stockwell and Paul Scott, this 40-page media guide is designed for journalists, programme makers and media students.

Employed as a reporter for 4ZZZ, JJJ and *Four Corners* programme of ABC Television in Australia, Stockwell is a senior lecturer in the Journalism Department of the School of Arts at Griffith University. He has written five books and more than fifteen reviews, journals and academic papers.

Paul Scott has worked as a producer and a documentary worker before his current position as a lecturer at the Department of Communication and Media Arts at the University of Newcastle. His research interests are in the

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Media and Indigenous Australians, professional education and surfing media.

Published last year at the Nathan Campus of Griffith University, the book targets Australian media workers in addressing the hindrances of covering stories in such a diverse people with diverse cultures.

Yet the book itself cannot be limited to Australian audiences only. It is also highly relevant in our case in the Pacific Islands. Read the book and put Fiji, Solomon Islands or any other Pacific Islands country in the place of Australia and the parallels are clear.

With more than 80 languages in the Solomons and more than 600 languages in Papua New Guinea, the Pacific region itself covers almost three quarters of the world's languages.

The fourteen chapters highlights in many instances the treat that Australian journalists for that matter should undertake when it comes to covering issues such as that of its indigenous people, ethnicity and multi-cultural setting of its society.

With the all-too-familiar rules for media workers to strive for truth, objectivity, fairness and accuracy, balance and honesty, the book tells how a journalist should approach these goals in its diverse communities and people.

On the whole the contents of the book, seek to erase findings by "both the National Inquiry into Racist Vio-

lence and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, that the media in Australia play an unintended but significant role in creating and maintaining intolerance and prejudice base on race". (Preface, page iv).

This media guide tries to "combat that tendency with a straightforward account of how to report cross-cultural issues fairly, combined with some practical tips to covering the diverse communities and individuals in Australian society." (Preface, page iv).

Illustrated with cartoons to portray their points, the authors also provide references to the legislation, guidelines and codes that are relevant to be followed by all media industries in Australia.

For instance, there is mention of the Commonwealth's 1995 Racial Hatred Act and Various State's Racial Vilification, the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Act, the Western Australia Criminal Code and the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act as guidelines to abide and prosecute those who are not complying. (Chapter 7, page 14-15).

The authors simplify the text into an everyday vocabulary that even a high school student can easily understand. With each chapter ranging from one page to just four pages at the most, it makes for very comprehensive but thorough information in a short and journalistic style of writing.

With input from Scott, whose research interests is in the media and indigenous Australians and from the wealth of experience of Stockwell, it is easy to identify that their intention, is to avoid the stereotyped images of racism, aboriginality, ethnicity and culture which the media can be led to pursue in their coverage and reporting.

"A stereotype is never the full story." (Chapter 6, page 12).

The pre-conceived idea by the dominant culture and its practices in any particular society can undermine other ethnic and language groups thus regarding their own as what they want the world to be. This has to be discouraged at any cost. A reporter of Fijian or Indian background has to accept the multi-culturalism of his or her society and report with dignity, fairness, without fear or favour.

Aboriginal should not be used as a noun, because it is a term with general application to the people, flora and fauna that existed in any country. (Chapter 12, page 28).

Words that they recommended be avoided are "half caste", "quarter-caste" and the overuse of collective pronouns such as "them", "they" and "those people". If they are "them", then who are "we"? (Chapter 12, page 29).

Although they acknowledge the fact that it is quite hard to get a full

account of the story in a multi-cultural society like Australia, they emphasise the need to get to know the customs, preferences, codes of conduct and dislikes of the indigenous people like the Aborigines and the Torres Strait Islanders.

This is relevant in the Pacific Islands context. Take Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, or even Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia where the society is heterogenous. Thus each nation has different language groups and ethnic backgrounds.

Customs and codes of conduct in Malaita Province in the Solomons differ from those of Santa Isabel province, as do those those of Tolai people in the East New Britain Province of Papua New Guinea from those of Chimbu province in the PNG Highlands. Differences in religion, language, customs and norms exist between the Fijians and Indians, Rotumans, Melanesians, Micronesians, Polynesians and Chinese in Fiji.

So a journalist has to really get to know the chiefly system, landowning groups, the indigenous Fijian protocol or the Chimbu people protocol and their views before trying to write a news story about them.

To guarantee fairness prevails and assuring their reporting is accurate, balance and ethical in "Australia's diverse culture and also in the Pacific

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means media workers also need a high degree of cross-cultural competence," (Chapter 2, page 2).

This means that the journalist "who aspires to tell the full story has to leave behind the familiar and approach the unfamiliar with curiosity, sensitivity, respect and moral imagination to understand the world from a cultural perspective that may differ from their own." (Chapter 5, page 10).

An appropriate approach when covering the indigenous and diverse Australian society "is to ask around and see what protocols apply in the community with whom you want to work." (Chapter 14, page 31).

One of the strengths of the book is that the authors are able to put together their wealth of experience and research in a sort of a formula-like medium that workers in Australia and the Pacific countries will find very useful.

Perhaps what they say in the book, reflects what they themselves have experienced and would like their successors to be more competent than them. It isn't selfish after all for Stockwell and Scott to help young Australian and Pacific Islands journalists today with this valuable contribution.