

# Investigative challenge

**'Ask people in the relevant field, ask your mother, ask your mother's friends! You never know what leads you may find simply by throwing a few theories around. Then chase them up and keep chasing them up until you find the person who is holding the tiger's tail.'**

**By JOE YAYA**

JOURNALISM is probably the most hard-bitten career any person can choose. Especially if you are sent to another country to cover something that has happened there, and if you are not familiar with the territory, things can get pretty tough. But even when things are happening in your own country, there tends to be a lack of investigation by the local media, and the public is left guessing.

Mary-Louise O'Callaghan has been a journalist for 22 years. She uncovered the plot behind the Papua New Guinea government's plan to send international mercenaries into Bougainville in 1997 to regain control of the Panguna copper and gold mine taken over by the Bougainville Revolution Army (BRA).

For her, it was the scoop of her career that won her a Gold Walkley Award for excellence in international reporting and later led to a book, *Enemies Within*. Her exclusive story on the engagement of Sandline mercenaries by the PNG government was described by many as the news story of the year in 1997. The judges, in granting her the award said: "The story culminated a decade of reporting in the region, during a period when the affairs of the South Pacific have often been ignored by the mainstream media."

Although she knew of the dangers involved in going after the story, particularly the fact that it would destabilise the nation and unsettle the people of Papua New Guinea, O'Callaghan persisted in revealing the secret agenda the

## INDEX

leaders of that nation were harbouring at that time. Even to the point that she stood on the tarmac of Honiara's airport, stubbornly refusing to move until the airport manager for Air Niugini allowed her passage on the plane bound for the PNG capital, which was full and ready for take off. She had to share a seat though with someone else's baby, which she didn't mind as long as she got on the flight.

Once in Port Moresby, she investigated the plan Sir Julius Chan and senior members of his government were cooking up, which was to secretly buy out the remaining shares of Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) and secure full ownership of the Panguna mine.

The additional US\$36 million Sandline mercenary contract was to remove the rebels (BRA) who had taken over the mine. The rebels were fighting for equal rights and ownership of the mine.

When her story was published, the mercenary mission was quashed and the soldiers deported from PNG. As a result, Port Moresby encountered 10 days of civil unrest that culminated in a siege of Parliament and eventually the forced resignation of Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan.

Based in Honiara, the 39-year-old O'Callaghan is married to local MP Joses Tuhanuku, a former cabinet minister and Leader of the Opposition. She has four children. She began her career as a journalist with a cadetship in Melbourne in 1981 and later worked as a freelancer in Beijing, China, between 1983 and 1985. Her Pacific coverage began as *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent in Wellington in 1987 before moving to the Solomon Islands. Today she is the South Pacific correspondent for *The Australian*.

"I've always loved working in Papua New Guinea," says O'Callaghan. "I never found it daunting and my assignments there were always my most exhilarating and my most rewarding."

With her vast experience in the region, O'Callaghan believes one way accountable governments could be achieved is through careful scrutiny of regional leaders, while this responsibility could be facilitated by the media in the form of investigative journalism.

"The Pacific nations are crying out for decent, sustained investigative journalism. Our societies are at a point in their development where careful scrutiny, while painful, is one of the chief ways we can ensure we build the society we want and deliver ourselves accountable government," she said.

Having accustomed herself to the different cultures of the region, O'Callaghan does not believe that most South Pacific cultures are automatically in conflict with the aims of investigative journalism. In particular, the old adage that



**Mary-Louise O’Callaghan:** On a home run.

Photo: WANSOLWARA

leaders and elders, because of customary obligations, are to be respected at the expense of immunity from scrutiny.

“There is nothing in traditional society to preclude scrutiny of leaders, in fact you could probably argue that you can’t get a more accountable leadership than one being scrutinised on a daily basis by an entire village.

“So I don’t think culture is the biggest barrier.” Rather, she believes it is the lack of resources for Pacific journalists that is the drawback while the bigger the market, the greater the need for resources. Currently, a local journalist in any South Pacific country is required to cover about four to five stories a day whereas overseas, they would normally work on one story a day.

“I think it’s the size of the market we are operating in because that dictates the amount of resources available for such an enterprise. Good, sustained investigative journalism requires time and money. It won’t feed you if you are freelancing and it can’t be squashed into the spare hours of a journalist working to a daily deadline.”

She added it was unfortunate that the size of most media organisations in South Pacific countries were often too small to be able to release staff for weeks or even months for fulltime investigative work.

Furthering her observations, O’Callaghan said media owners and the journalists they employed need to be committed to the cause of investigative work and acknowledge the responsibility they have within the framework of

## INDEX

society.

“Proprietors and editors, as well as individual journalists, need to have a commitment to investigative journalism. If there is no acknowledgment of the responsibility the fourth estate has in a democracy to scrutinise our elected leaders, than it is hard for investigative journalism to flourish,” she said.

“I believe individual journalists can put more pressure for some extra time to work on a bigger piece provided they are looking for the big picture and not simply satisfied by the daily news story.”

On the question of what it takes to become a good investigative journalist, O’Callaghan had this message for Pacific journalists:

Local journalists in the South Pacific actually have a huge advantage over the outsider because they are part of a small national community and so know instinctively where to look to find the connections between people, and the deals or events they are trying to fully understand. Sure it can get a bit too close for comfort at times but we are not in the public relations business. We would not be doing our job properly if everyone loved us all of the time.

It does take time to become a successful investigative journalist, like anything experience helps you know how to tackle a challenge. But there is no reason why young journalists can’t begin as soon as they have decided they want to be a journalist to try their hand at investigative work. “In reality, investigative journalism uses all the same skills as ordinary day to day news reporting except that it keeps asking the question why?...long after the news story has been published.

So if a young journalist comes across something that doesn’t quite add up, write the news story but keep asking why. It requires patience and persistence more than anything else and creativity. Ask yourself, ask your peers, ask your boss — and at the same time see if he or she is interested in you looking at it in a bit more detail.

Ask people in the relevant field, ask your mother, ask your mother’s friends! You never know what leads you may find simply by throwing a few theories around. Then chase them up and keep chasing them up until you find the person who is holding the tiger’s tail.

If you start doing that on small to medium size issues, then chances are you will be in a better position to recognise the fragments of the jigsaw when they start to drift together on the big one!

□ *Joe Yaya is a final-year journalism degree student at the University of the South Pacific.*