

2. A clash of cultures for foreign correspondents

ABSTRACT

When the author of this commentary was teaching or consulting—but not ‘foreign correspondensing’—in Malaysia, Singapore and later India, as he was in the early and mid-1990s—he met and spoke with many journalists who were employed as correspondents to report on events in those countries for Australian newspapers and broadcasters. None of them considered their colleagues to be total masters of the art of delivering an accurate and informed report on Asia-Pacific events in which Australia (and also New Zealand) should be interested. It was not a case of defaming the opposition, since every one of them admitted that at times they might fall short and themselves commit one of the sins of which foreign correspondents have so often been accused. The author believes that when they read today’s newspapers or watch today’s television, they find that today’s foreign correspondents still face the same cross-cultural problems they faced in the past and are guilty of the same shortcomings.

MURRAY MASTERTON

Editorial consultant, New Zealand

THOSE of you who are, or aspire to become, a foreign correspondent may reconsider after reading some of the observations made to me more than a decade ago when I was working as a journalism educator at the Universiti Pertanian, near Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, then with the Asian Media and Information Centre (AMIC) in Singapore and finally when I was a consultant with the *Indian Express* newspaper group in Southern India. In each instance our conversation was about the professional standing and behaviour of foreign correspondents as those journalists assessed them. Most of the speakers were foreign correspondents themselves at the time and all of them were so employed at some stage in their career. Many were far from flattering. What they had to say may cast doubt on the value of some foreign correspondent reports today.

If the speakers frequently refer to Australia, it is because at that time I was living and working in Australia and was only on leave from Deakin University while in Southeast Asia. Also, many of the foreign correspondents in Southeast Asia, at that time, were Australian. I'm sure many would agree that their observations would apply just as readily to New Zealand journalists fortunate enough to win the experience of being posted to the region.

But times have changed. Newspapers around the world, even figurehead newspapers, are in financial trouble and are cutting back on expensive foreign correspondent appointments. These days we get more of our foreign reporting on television than from any other source. After reading what the correspondents of the newspaper world said about their colleagues' shortcomings, can you assess whether foreign reporting is any better today than it was? Can we accept as accurate and balanced what we see, hear or read from today's correspondents in Washington, London, Singapore or even Suva?

Professional data on each of the speakers appear at the end of their collected comments. Here, more or less subject by subject, is what they said:

About journalists' arrogance

It was my fourth or fifth visit to Cambodia but I found myself among thousands of journalists who had never been there and who knew no more about the country than they had read in their own newspaper, which obviously wasn't very much. The way they flailed around trying to find a suitable story made me understand the term 'media circus' as I never had before. It's a good word for it.—*Sridar Krishnaswami*

There was a case where an Indonesian dissident was being interviewed on the ABC and the interviewing was so culturally insensitive that within three minutes the dissident was defending the Indonesian government. Why? Because the interviewer was so aggressive and expected the dissident to agree with comments about the Indonesian government that were either exaggerated, or wrong, or both. The dissident, who knew the facts and recognised the interviewer's exaggerations suddenly burst out with 'That's not true' and ended up trying to tell the Australian journalist that he had his facts wrong. I was amazed. Here I was listening to – I won't name him – a man virtually condemned to banishment from Indonesia actually defending the Indonesian

government because the interviewer took such an aggressive approach. This is where so many Australian and other journalists fail. It is a clash of cultures but it can be avoided by better journalism, deeper understanding and some sensitivity on the Australian side. Better research in the first place would have helped.—*Dewi Anggraeni*

Giving offence is very rare, much rarer than the claims that some Australian journalist has been guilty of it by his behaviour or by writing something offensive. I still think it's mainly officials trying to pressure individual journalists or media organisations. It's right that no one has ever challenged the accuracy of what an Australian journalist has written, even when they object to what has been written.—*Lindsay Murdoch*

It is not easy for a British—or American-based—journalist, or a Sydney-based one for that matter. They come to Asia with the superior attitude of a citizen of an affluent state, and an advanced and industrialised country. They look on Asia as a group of extraordinary little countries trying to make it in a Western world and they can't resist telling them how to go about it. After all, they accept Western aid and loans, so the West has a right to tell them what to do. But there is no way a journalist can get away with that sort of attitude, certainly not for very long.—*T.J.S. George*

The trouble is that most of the journalists reporting in Seattle at the APEC conference in 1993 were 'parachutists'—they dropped in to cover a specific event and brought no understanding or sensitivity with them. They were not people who understood the situation in Asia, which was really the region they were trying to report on. Such a situation reflects the arrogance as well as the ignorance of the reporters and the insensitivity of the people who posted them to do the reporting.—*Sridar Krishnaswami*

About 'culture clash'

Such a clash is real enough, but it's not a mountain, usually not even serious. It can be overcome easily enough with resilience and a little thought. An example: in Indonesia, when you interview someone of note you straight away have to take a lower stance. You have to caress his or her ego or you will not get anything out of them. You have to make sure that they know

that their minister or their minister's assistant will get the credit for what is reported. This is very important, so you phrase your questions accordingly. It's very different from the Australian approach.—*Dewi Anggraeni*

Do our cultures clash? Yes, they do. Culture clash exists and is serious but it can be overcome. Of course a cultural clash exists because journalism itself is a product of a people's culture. In Australia, journalism has grown out of our West European cultural background with its emphasis on individual rights, freedom of speech, an emphasis on social and self-analysis and criticism. We see it as our journalists' job to keep politicians and other authorities in line.—*Trevor Watson*

Not many people look dispassionately on what they see as a culture clash. If a reporter can keep his or her questioning on a professional level, there is usually a way round the problem, though other elements, including politics, make it more difficult. Too many political leaders use the press and their culture to support their own position. Like Mahatir¹ they all claim to be the spokesperson for Asia, or at least Southeast Asia. They use religion and cultural difference to support themselves while deploring that religion enters into politics at all.—*Sridar Kirshnaswami*

I have heard it said that your press, including Mr Jenkins, reports Indonesia accurately, but when it is insensitive how can it be accurate? Even when you are factually right you can be culturally wrong if you are insensitive to the perceptions of others. Obviously our cultures are not the same, and they do not have to be while we try to understand each other. —*Alit Wiratmaja*

I don't think many of these culture clashes and complaints about giving offence happen because of any arrogance or ignorance on the part of Australian reporters. I know there have been instances of a fireman, or parachutist or whatever you call them, dropping in from Australia, knocking over a story in a sensational way and then dropping out again, but I can't think of an example. It is certainly isolated and infrequent. By and large, the Australian journalists working in this region do not cause offence. When someone claims an offence has taken place it is usually because the government does not want what is coming out to be published.—*Lindsay Murdoch*

About 'Asian-ness' in journalism

People here use their 'Asian-ness' and their perceived cultural differences to avoid addressing themselves to their real problem. Deep down, Singapore and everywhere else in Southeast Asia is becoming westernised. I don't think either the leaders or the people of this region have resolved in their own minds the difference between modernisation and westernisation. They are very taken with the symbols of westernisation, the glamour of it and its consumer delights, but every so often they feel called on to say 'but we are not really like that. We are Malay Bumiputras, or Chinese mandarins, or whatever, which they are not, because they have ceased to be. It is a lingering falsity, even a legend. The West has its legends, too. —*Sunanda Datta-Ray*

Journalism in Asia is a product of a different culture with different social values. In countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and some others, they do not have the tradition of questioning authority, so journalism is required to serve the dominant political authority and not to question the cultural and social philosophy of the country. —*Trevor Watson*

The [David] Jenkins² article is a good example. It's not a case of him telling Indonesians something they didn't know. Most of them did. And it's not a matter of whether the *Sydney Morning Herald* is read in Jakarta or not. It is simply the fact that criticism of Indonesia was splashed across a newspaper, especially a respectable Australian newspaper, for Australians to read. It was symbolic. And it was not the content which offended as much as the headline which compared Suharto to Marcos... By contrast, Indonesians think it rude to criticise neighbours.—*Dewi Anggraeni*

Only since I came here to Southeast Asia—what India still calls the Far East—did I become aware of what people call a culture clash. I wasn't aware of it at all in India. They speak here of 'Asian journalism'. I've been practicing Asian journalism all my life without ever thinking of it as a different genre with its own rules and guidelines. That is how they seem to see it here... as if it calls for a different set of guidelines which don't apply to Western journalism. Of course it's not so.—*Sunanda Datta-Ray*

While Asian journalists are guarded and controlled in their coverage of their own government and countries, they are free to cover Australia and most other countries as they see fit. If denigration is seen to be in their country's national interest, they will denigrate, with little regard for the facts. Here in Singapore we have a heavily controlled media and a government with a deliberate policy of bolstering its own position by denigrating the world outside Singapore, especially the West. The press here is more lenient on other ASEAN countries, but not to the extent it is in other ASEAN members, but it is always denigratory of the West. The Singapore media writes nothing but positive domestic news but almost every report from the United States or Australia is negative. —*Trevor Watson*

About cross-cultural understanding

I think Indonesians have learned more about Australia from their media than Australians have learned about Indonesia. There is more interest in the outside world shown by the Indonesian readership than by the Australian. Australians tend to navel-gaze.—*Dewi Anggraeni*

For too long the onus of understanding has been placed on us, and it is time the media in Asia informed itself about Australia. The level of ignorance of Australia among Asian journalists is much higher than the level of ignorance about Asia in Australian journalists, no matter how Asian politicians protest to the contrary. It sometimes suits their political ends to have their journalists remain ignorant.—*Trevor Watson*

When I started to interview Australian ministers and people of importance I had no idea how to take an adversary position. I still find it difficult. I usually ask a lot of mild questions, as I did then, but I still get the answers. Australians in Indonesia can learn from that. —*Dewi Anggraeni*

Indonesia has about five correspondents in Australia and some have been here for a long time, 15 years in one case. That man knows English as well as he knows Indonesian and probably knows Australia as well as his own country. He has immersed himself in the Australian way of life, so there is no risk of cultural clash or insensitive reporting from him. There are about 30 Australian correspondents in Indonesia but only some of them

are equally diligent. The rest are just Australian reporters satisfying their home audience regardless of the effect on others. They are not foreign correspondents. —*Marihot Siahaan*

Given the level of development in parts of the region it might not be helpful to have a media as staunchly independent and cynical as Australia's. I remember Rafina Aziz, then Malaysian Trade Minister, pointing out that a trade agreement which may have taken years to negotiate could be ruined overnight by an ill-informed and inexperienced Western reporter. She's right and she has a valid point. —*Trevor Watson*

About the status of journalists and the media

They [foreign newsmaking officials] have to respect you and you have to report in a way that will earn that respect. You've got to deal with these countries in a way that makes sure you get the story right and they know you have it right, so a relationship is built on respect. At the end of the day they know you are not to be cowed into not writing a story. It's a bit different in Malaysia because Mahatir and his government can be fiercely critical of Australian journalists. Yet while he has been very critical and damning, Malaysia has never introduced any restrictions on Australian journalists. There has been no visa ban, no kicking out of journalists. —*Lindsay Murdoch*

I see journalism as a nationality by itself, a jurisdiction on its own. Journalism is a strong constituency. When you operate as a true journalist you rise above your own nationalistic considerations. If we do this, a lot of the problems of cross-cultural reporting solve themselves, but it rarely happens. Whether the journalist is American, Indian, Japanese, Australian or anything else, the end result is usually the same, and it's sad, but that's the way it is. —*T.J.S. George*

In Indonesia, there is sometimes a problem for Australian journalists when they ask a question of someone whom they know can answer, but who won't. They pass it on, with any excuse, to someone else, usually someone higher in the administration. It's not that they use the cultural difference to avoid answering, it is because they feel they don't know you well enough yet to answer such

a question. You have to get to know people to get information from them in Indonesia, and probably elsewhere in much of Asia as well. They have to know you well enough to trust you not to betray what they tell you off the record. Journalists who just blow in and blow out don't show this responsibility so they usually find officials guarded and unproductive. —*Dewi Anggraeni*

I believe it depends on the conduct of the journalist in question. If you are known to a Japanese cabinet minister or businessman as a reliable correspondent you will get your answers without suspicion. This is because your contact knows you and your newspaper or television station or whatever. If you are a credible journalist working for a credible organisation, then the problems caused by suspicion will not last long. Wherever I have gone ... I have never had any problems because I was Indian or because I was working for the *Far East Economic Review* or *Asiaweek*. I don't recall any real problems getting honest answers. It depends on the ability of the journalist and the perception of his ability and integrity within the small world in which he moves. His contacts should see him as an honourable journalist. That's all that's required.—*T.J.S. George*

Arrogant reporters want to hit page one every day and to do it they don't give a thought to the sensitivities of others. They're not really interested in reporting what really goes on, only to win prominence for themselves and their own organisation with headlines that attract attention rather than give information. The true correspondent does his job by reporting honestly and in an unsensational way what is really happening and why. If the story is truly sensational it will be self-evident. The reporter who seeks sensation in every report does not have the personality to be a foreign correspondent. The true correspondent has no trouble being understood by editors and subeditors at home because the copy is always absolutely clear.—*Sridar Krishnaswami*

About foreign correspondent education

Before accepting any overseas posting, the correspondent must understand the sensitivities involved in reporting across cultural boundaries, especially the sensitivities of the country or area of the posting. In this region (Singapore and Southeast Asia) the sensitivities are religion and ethnicity as well as politics. The job of a reporter is to report, not to make value

judgments, so in this region the rules are very clear: be alert to the sensitivities and never let them get out of context. —*Sridar Krishnaswami*

It might not be the first rule for preparing a correspondent for overseas service everywhere, but in this area it is: you have to be aware of sensitivities on both or all sides. And in Singapore you have to be even more conscious of the sensibilities in Singapore itself. I don't have to worry about what I write for India or about how Indian readers will react to what I have written, but I must always remember that what I write for India can be played back to Singapore and cause a reaction here.—*Sunanda Datta-Ray*

The first thing a prospective foreign correspondent in Asia must learn is not to lecture, and not to appear to be lecturing. He or she is reporting on people of nations who are now on their own. They have been through the mill and have leaders who are primarily interested in the welfare of their own countries, not in pandering to a colonial power. They are not there simply to make money for themselves, as some in the West suggest. They can't run away and don't want to, never intended to, and not just because there is no place for them to run. They are not like the colonial government they succeeded, where the members can catch the last flight home. That's no longer the situation.—*T. J. S. George*

If the claim that newspapers can't afford correspondents and so must use parachutists is true, they should give them better preparation for their assignments. From what I've seen here in Singapore, that is not happening, even for posted correspondents. In Singapore the BBC has a 24-hour service and I am consistently surprised by the tone of BBC interviews and comments. During a crisis in Thailand a BBC man from London questioned Chamlung, the head of the Moral Force Party, in terms both hectoring and condescending. In their references to Kashmir it's always 'Indian-administrated Kashmir'. Would they ever say 'British-administered Ulster?' or 'English-controlled Ulster?' They seem to have a pre-determined political position in cases like Kashmir, but with Chamlung it wasn't a political position, it was an attitude, and an insulting one: 'You call yourself the Moral Force Party; do you have a monopoly on morality?' That sort of question.—*Sunanda Datta-Ray*

The first rule should surely be that the reporter from overseas must learn to understand the language of the country he or she is to report on, and to speak it as well as possible. They must also be fit and be able to eat almost anything. Studying the history of the host culture will improve the quality of the reporting. I would also look at the reporter's level of ambition and be very cautious about it. Too much ambition is as bad as too little, because it makes the reporter aim only at the top people and write only what he or she thinks are the top stories. They miss too many others. If there is anything else it must be that a reporter going overseas must be emotionally detached and at the same time compassionate. It's probably quite rare, but I've seen these qualities developing. If you can spot them you spot great potential in a young reporter. —*Dewi Anggraeni*

Before I came to Australia I read many books and also many Australian newspapers. I read to see what Australia means and what it is as a country. I learned about its resources and what its people are like, and especially I learned about the high-tech generation in this country. I have no rules for journalists who may do the same work as I am doing, but I believe they should prepare in much the same way that I did. —*Alit Wiratmaja*

About globalisation

Global television, so easily available via satellite, can make things better, but on the whole it is making things worse. I don't like my children watching too much television. It breaks down their culture and family life when they prefer to watch trivial television rather than talk to each other or to us. The fact that the television is global makes no difference. It still trivialises events in the TV news chain. Television news is a string of sketches of what is happening without aiding understanding for those who watch. This is bad. About the only good thing in satellite television is that totalitarian governments are now aware that they can't hide behind the opaqueness of their rule. They know someone will let the world get a glimpse of what is happening. —*Dewi Anggraeni*

The observers (in the 1990s)

Rewi Anggraeni is an Indonesian foreign correspondent, representing *Tempo* magazine in Australia for many years when she lived in Melbourne. She is also a successful novelist who has written eight books.

Sunanda Datta-Ray is an Indian journalist with an international career. He rose in India to be the editor of one of the country's most prestigious newspapers, *The Statesman*, and went on to accept overseas postings both as a journalist and as a journalism academic. He was the first Indian to write for the *Herald-Tribune* and for *Time*.

T. J. S. George is an Indian journalist with a varied and spectacular professional record. He was head of the *Indian Express* chain's southern division, centred on Bangalore, when I met him, but he had already completed a successful career as foreign correspondent, for the *Far East Economic Review* before founding the successful *Asiaweek*.

Sridar Krishnaswami, from India, was not only a foreign correspondent but represented the Press Trust of India in Washington for several years while reporting. His earlier newspaper connection was 22 years with *The Hindu*, one of India's most successful newspapers.

Lindsay Murdoch is a long-time journalist with *The Age* in Melbourne and twice winner of the national Walkley Award for outstanding journalism. He has served *The Age* as its correspondent in Darwin as well as a spell overseas, covering Southeast Asia from Singapore.

Marihot Siahaan is an Indonesian journalist with journalism education amplified by degrees from the University of Iowa, from where he wrote for Indonesia publications. His last reported position was as an adviser on education for the Indonesian government.

Trevor Watson, Australian, was correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in the 1980s and early 1990s in Singapore and Malaysia, with wider responsibilities when stories demanded.

Alit Wiratmaja is another Indonesian journalist. His principal responsibility was to report for Dow Jones in the United States, but he was also required to report other news items when requested.

Notes

1. Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad (commonly referred to in the West simply as Mahatir) was leader of the Barisan Nasional (National Front) when he became Prime Minister of Malaysia in July 1981 and remained in that post for 22 years. During his long term, in spite of inter-racial problems, there is no doubt that Malaysia flourished.

His relations with the media were like his relations with the West—changeable. Television and most radio in Malaysia have long been state-owned or controlled. The press is another matter, since they publish in English, Malay, Chinese and Hindi. Within Malaysia, Mahatir openly favoured the indigenous Bumiputra press, whether it published in English or Malay, and was often critical of the way the foreign press—especially Australian—reported Malaysian affairs.

DIVERSITY, IDENTITY AND THE MEDIA

2. David Jenkins was Asian editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (considered one of Australia's leading newspapers) when in April 1986 he wrote a critical article headlined 'After Marcos, now for the Suharto billions'. Suharto was then President of Indonesia and his government protested angrily about Jenkins' comparison of Suharto to the openly rapacious President Marcos of the Philippines. Jenkins also wrote a book, *Suharto and his Generals: Indonesia's Military Politics*, and on the more congratulatory side, *A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia's Search for Stability*.

Dr Murray Masterton was formerly head of journalism at Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, and a consultant in Asia-Pacific journalism training. He established the original Certificate in Journalism course at the University of the South Pacific at the time of Sitiveni Rabuka's first coup in 1987. He compiled the book Asian Values in Journalism (AMIC, Singapore, 1996).

mediapr@ihug.co.nz

PACIFIC MEDIA CENTRE



The Pacific Media Centre (Te Amokura) is the only media research and community resource centre of its kind in Aotearoa/New Zealand and has a strategic focus on Māori, Pasifika and diversity media and community development. It was established by AUT University's Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies in 2007, having evolved from a cluster of research and community collaborations within the School of Communication Studies.

PMC activities include:

- International book and research publication
- Publication of the peer-reviewed *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal
- Publication of *Pacific Media Centre Online* as a media resource and postgraduate outlet
- Publication of *Pacific Media Watch*, a regional media monitoring service
- Journalism and media research opportunities
- Asia-Pacific internships for postgraduate students



www.pmc.aut.ac.nz | pmc@aut.ac.nz