

## Reflections: Challenges Faced by Journalists in Multiethnic Fiji

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The media offers people an opportunity to air their views, regardless of race, religion, creed or gender. This is important in a multiethnic society such as Fiji. The country has had four coups in the last 20 years. Each time there is a coup, a new level of debate on the racial differences between the two major races — Indians and Fijians — emerges. The debate is usually conducted or intensified in the media. Discussions usually focus on the rights of each group and their alleged marginalisation. Cultural and religious differences are also thrown into the mix, which often cause social tensions between the two major societies.

In Fiji there is a fine line between racism and a healthy debate over racial and cultural issues, and journalists need to take the initiative to learn and understand this. They need to know when discussions are healthy, constructive and objective, and when they are negative and destructive. What is right for one race can be wrong for another, or what is relevant for one group of people can be irrelevant for another.

Journalists in Fiji belong to different races. Given their backgrounds and their racial, clan and religious affiliations, they are bound to have some leanings and loyalties. The complex socio-political environment that they work in is an added form of pressure. Like all journalists, we are bound to have our own biases. Such biases and prejudices, which are often seen and experienced in Fiji, are formed in our homes, school systems, churches, sporting institutions and at political levels. Furthermore, our leaders have done little to promote multiethnic societies.

The voting system does more to isolate than to unite people. The issue of a common identity, for example, has become quite divisive in Fiji. Some believe in a common name, 'Fijian', for all citizens of Fiji, regardless of race. Others believe the name should only apply to the indigenous. At the same time, some believe there is nothing much in a name and that it has no power to unite people.

Sometimes, when writing on issues dear to our race, our leaders, or our church, we start to identify with these issues. The challenge for journalists when writing on such issues is to remain objective. The best journalists can do is give the right of reply and strive for balance. It is, thus, imperative for journalists to understand what their roles. Otherwise they can easily become influenced by those with hidden agendas. It is our job as journalists to get the news out but at the same time it is vital to get it right and to be responsible in the way news is gathered and disseminated. There have been cases of skirt and envelope journalism in Fiji, when reporters received favours or became uncomfortably close to their sources. Some say poor pay is the cause, but I believe it happens when ethics are ignored and journalists fall in the trap of forgetting their roles.

Journalists should respect those they interact with, and at the same time know when to call a spade a spade. Culture, tradition and custom are sometimes cited as a hindrance when it comes to reporting.

I believe such claims are often exaggerated. When a paramount chief or Head of State dies, the press in Fiji waits for the state to make announcements before they go ahead with the story. This happened when Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara died. The media did not disregard traditional protocols in terms of going ahead and publishing a 'scoop'. Being sensitive to protocols allows our readers to appreciate that we are respectful and builds trust and confidence.

People in the villages tend to be more conservative and protective when it comes to stories that affect them. But things are changing fast and people are beginning to understand the power of the media. Even then, reporters cannot just expect to walk into any village and start taking pictures, especially when there is a traditional gathering taking place. I recall Prince Charles' visit in 2006. As head of the news team in the west on that assignment, I advised our Indian photographer to wear a sulu vakataga. That made a difference because he was able to move around the chiefly village of Viseisei freely while the ceremonies were going on. That is where understanding and observing tradition comes in handy.

I have realised that when you observe the protocols of another race, it is easier to gain their trust as they open up to you. I recall how foreign journalists covering one of the Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting were criticised for their dress code that was deemed disrespectful.

It should be the role of the local media to advise foreign journalists to observe the dress code in Fiji.

When one covers a village meeting and the chief is a personal friend, it does not mean one can just walk in and demand an interview. In

his village the chief is the most respected person, and there are protocols to follow before one can talk to him.

The media has an important role to play in our society. Greater responsibility is needed on the part of journalists today than perhaps ever before, especially with the coups of 1987, 2000 and 2006. These political upheavals have created a lot of suspicion and misunderstanding between Fiji's multiethnic societies. We journalists need to take it upon ourselves to spread the gospel that racial discrimination is wrong. Attacking people who differ from us in their beliefs is also wrong. Everyone should be allowed to have a right to their opinion and should be able to express themselves. Journalists should be the conduits for such expressions.

Fiji socio-political environment is especially challenging for journalists. It is however our responsibility to condition ourselves to leave our biases outside our newsrooms. This means adhering to the rules of neutrality and objectivity. Our own opinions on issues should not colour our stories because our role is to tell it as it is. According to the Fiji Media Council Code of Ethics, journalists should not allow personal interest, position, role, belief, commitment, payment, gift, benefit, or traditional customary obligation to undermine accuracy, fairness and independence. The Code of Ethics should be our guiding principle at all times.

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