

Interpreting Fiji: Australian Media Coverage of the 1987 and 2000 Coups

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Abstract

The ways in which the Australian media presented particular interpretations of the coups in Fiji in 1987 and 2000 helped to reinforce negative notions of the island nation. This paper examines how the media reinforced particular interpretations of Fijian society, and what this means for Fiji and Australia. It is based on the analysis of my PhD research, which includes a content analysis of broadsheet newspapers looking at the kind of sources used in the reports, and interviews with Australian journalists about how they went about their work in Fiji.

Introduction

My research into the Australian media coverage of the Fiji coups in 1987 and 2000 has revealed two main points. Firstly, a content analysis showed that the sources used in the stories were very limited – the majority were government sources, many of whom were located in Australia. Secondly, interviews with journalists who covered both events revealed that despite the significant differences in the situational factors – the way the coups unfolded, the limitations on the journalists, the available technology – there was little impact on the range of sources.

On a deeper level, though, the coverage reveals much about the way Australia learns about, interprets and ultimately understands Fiji. The aim of this paper is to explore some of these interpretations and the implications of them for both countries.

Communities of interpretation

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argues that the way that Oriental cultures and traditions were studied legitimised images and fantasies which confirmed the epistemic authority of the West (Huggan 2005). The negative stereotypes which were part of this Orientalist attitude came to be accepted as the basis for Western ways of understanding in many parts of the world, including in Australia's understanding of the Asia Pacific region. Broinowski claims that Australian settlers had the chance to become the English speaking people who were best informed about the Asia Pacific region. Instead, "Australians sheltered from the challenge, accepting Europe's Orientalist constructs as substitutes for knowledge" (Knight 1995).

Said stated that the inequalities which exist in how knowledge is produced are partly a result of the fact that there are different "communities of interpretation", and they all interpret reality in their own particular way. According to Said: "...the media's Islam, the Western scholar's Islam, the Western reporter's Islam and the Muslim's Islam are all acts of will and interpretation that take place in history and can only be dealt with in history as acts of will and interpretation" (Said 1981, p45).

These communities of interpretation are subject to the influence of outside forces, sometimes significantly so. Increasingly, knowledge claims are being produced globally and consumed locally (Jacubowicz, et al, 1994, p16). Multinational media corporations produce news which is given meaning according to local interpretations. These local interpretations can vary considerably, particularly when they relate to key terms and phrases which might be used in the media reports.

For example, in the reporting of the Fiji coups, the use of the term "indigenous" can be interpreted in different ways according to the locality. An Australian is more likely to interpret the term "indigenous" in the context of the Aborigine, while a New Zealander is more likely to interpret the term in the context of the Maori. Neither of these interpretations could be accurately applied to the indigenous Fijians, whose history and circumstance are completely different. The variations in these interpretations are rarely explored by the media, even though they produce significant consequences for the way the West understands nations like Fiji. As such, the way Australians were able to interpret the role of indigeneity in the coups was limited.

The media is thus able to reinforce particular interpretations, particular ways of understanding, and particular meanings. According to Hall, meaning is produced in every kind of exchange, but when events or issues arise at a distance, the media, our "representatives" overseas, become crucial conveyors of meaning (Hall 1997, p3). Indeed, they are not just representatives – they are “representors”, those who define the way an event is given meaning. This is especially the case for the way Australia understands Fiji, as the production of knowledge about Fiji occurs, for most Australians, almost solely rests with the media. The greater majority of Australians don't watch movies about Fiji, they don't read books about Fiji, they don't learn about Fiji except through newspapers and broadcast media. It could even be argued that apart from newspapers, the only things that many Australians read which give them some kind of impression about Fiji are postcards. As the means of knowledge production are focussed in one delivery system, the media, their representations are more powerful because they are not challenged by alternative representations.

More than that, as Said argues, the media acts as a “communal core of interpretations”, so that it is not just a picture of Islam which is generated, but an overall set of feelings about the picture, a context for the picture, is also produced (Said 1981, p48): by focussing on events of high drama, such as protests or funerals, the media depiction of Muslims generates a negative feeling. In Fiji, the initial reporting of the 1987 coup depicted the situation as a moment of high drama, stressing the unexpected nature of the event. Uniformed men with guns and balaclavas stormed the parliament, roadblocks sprang up over night, civil liberties were suspended, a curfew was put in place, and because the media was normally so disinterested in Fiji, it was all completely unanticipated. There were no lead-up reports, no indication anywhere in the news that this could possibly happen, despite the actual and apparent build-up of tension following the election of the Bavadra government. The subsequent reporting, which relied heavily on government and military sources, underlined an idea that only the most authoritative institutions within society had the capacity and power to determine the meaning of such an unforeseen adjustment to our knowledge of Fiji.

The resulting feelings of insecurity contribute to what Fry describes as the “doomsday mentality” (Fry 1997). The “doomsday mentality” is not just a popular conception – it derives from the perspectives presented by leading knowledge producing institutions in society, the so-called “heartland of ‘rational’ thinking; the intersecting worlds of the bureaucrat, the politician, the foreign affairs journalist and the academic economist” (Fry 1997).

Clearly, the role of the media in the creation of this imagery of doomed Fiji is critical. In *Covering Islam* (1981), Said argues that the incomplete, often misleading, outdated and/or taken-out-of-context picture of Islam presented by the Western media contributes to the demonisation of Islam and the countries regarded as Islamic by the West. While nowhere near the same scale, there are parallels between the way the West interprets Islam and the way Australia interprets Fiji.

Said said there are five main consequences of the inadequate coverage of Islam by western media (Said 1981, p44):

1. A specific picture of Islam has been supplied
2. The meaning or message of Islam has generally continued to be circumscribed and stereotyped
3. A political situation has been created which pits “us” against “Islam”
4. The image of Islam has had consequences in the Islamic world itself

5. The media representation of Islam and the cultural attitude to it tells us a great deal about Islam, but also about our own culture, institutions and policies

The application of these ideas to the Australian media coverage of the Fiji coups is revealing.

1. A specific picture of Fiji has been supplied

It is quite obvious that the reporting supplied a fairly specific picture of Fiji: this was a paradise in crisis. The conflict was depicted as a racially-based dispute, adding credence to the idea that Fiji was somehow a society unable to deal with an intrinsic problem. There was significant potential for violence, with armed men patrolling the streets. Buildings were burned, shops were looted and an air of anarchy prevailed. The limited range of sources meant the stories were not able to extend our understanding of Fiji beyond these dramatic images. The complex social, political and cultural motivations behind the coups were ignored. Even Australia's involvement in the history of Fiji, specifically through the Australian company, CSR, which was originally responsible for bringing the Indians to Fiji to work in the cane fields under an indenture system which echoed systems of slavery, was barely mentioned. Instead, the coups were depicted as a situation which was of Fiji's own making, something they had caused and something they were responsible for.

2. The meaning or message of Fiji has generally continued to be circumscribed and stereotyped

The manner in which Fiji was depicted continued a long history of belittling and derogatory views of indigenous culture in the Pacific region by European settlers. Hau'ofa argues that "the wholesale condemnation by Christian missionaries of Oceanic cultures as savage, lascivious, and barbaric has had a lasting negative effect" on peoples impressions of the region, both internally and externally (Hau'ofa 1994, p149). In particular, colonialism has made the Pacific smaller. It has, according to Hau'ofa, erected boundaries around the islands which isolate them from each other and confine their peoples to tiny spaces (Hau'ofa 1994, p155). Hau'ofa's idea of smallness is critical, as it grants the "big" nations, like Australia, a natural authority. Being small means places like Fiji are unable to think for themselves in ways regarded as acceptable in the West – they are unable to explain themselves within a modernist discourse. Being small also means that a place like Fiji can be "relegated to the corners of our minds" – nothing ever happens there (de Ishtar, 1994), apart, of course, from holidays and coups. Over time, the media is unable to illuminate the depths of Fiji – the social, cultural and political depths – because they only ever go there when "something" happens. Invariably, that "something" has to be worthy of attention – a crisis, a tragedy or a disaster. The coups were all three.

3. A political situation has been created which pits "us" against "Fiji"

The extent to which the media coverage reinforced a conflict between Australia and Fiji was obviously much less than the level of conflict between Islam and the West. Yet there was still an "us versus them" aspect to the situation, which stemmed from the colonial relationship which was the foundation of modern political and social relations between Australia and Fiji. Since the beginning of this relationship, Australia has imagined Fiji to be many things – as an unknown, savage place; as a resource-rich place to plunder; as a place where native souls

could be converted. Most recently, Australians imagined Fiji to be a safe, South Pacific paradise, the perfect place for a family holiday. The coups threatened these imaginings, forcing us to re-interpret Fiji, often against our will. Whereas the tourists resorts of Fiji had been viewed as somewhere familiar and safe by Australians, the coup imagery meant these boundaries had to be retracted, with the resorts becoming, once again, unfamiliar places of potential savagery and violence.

4. The image of Fiji has had consequences in Fiji itself

A July 1987 article, “Fiji Economy Shattered” reported some of the economic impacts of the coup on the Fijian tourist industry, which included a massive drop in the vacancy rates of 400,000 hotel rooms, the cancellation of flights into Fiji by the only US carrier, Continental, the suspension of flights by Air New Zealand, and the limits on flights by Qantas, which was mainly carrying Fiji nationals and reporters (*Pacific Islands Monthly*). Clearly, this and other severe economic impacts were not simply an outcome of the way the coups were reported. The economic downturn, the closure of factories, and the loss of jobs were an outcome of the international sanctions placed on Fiji, which included the issuing of travel warnings by foreign governments.

However, it is possible that if the Australian media had chosen to highlight the conditions as they related to potential tourists, the impact on one of the main industries in Fiji may not have been so drastic. In both 1987 and 2000, the majority of the violence was contained within Suva. While there were incidents in other areas, the main tourist hub of Nadi, located two hours west of Suva, the international airport near Nadi, and many of the popular tourist resorts, which lie along the western coast, were almost completely unaffected by the security threats associated with the coups. No doubt, there was cause for concern amongst potential Australian tourists. However, the “paradise burning” mentality represented in many media reports exaggerated the level of threat by suggesting that nobody was safe, regardless of where they were in Fiji, leading to the cancellation of many international tourist bookings.

There is another example which suggests that the reporting of the coups had an impact on Fiji itself. A number of local reporters I interviewed said that during the coups they had to continually reassure their relatives in Australia and New Zealand that it was safe to stay in Fiji. The international media reports were, according to these local journalists, portraying the situation as much worse than it really was, and the personal threat to individual safety was highlighted by repeating coverage of the same isolated incidents over and over again. No doubt, this reinforced their own sense of despair, their own feelings that the situation was out of control.

Interestingly, a conversation I had with a local journalist who covered the 2000 coups revealed one outcome of the frustration within Fiji about the exaggerated international media reports. This particular journalist revealed that, while acting as an ad-hoc translator for some Australian media, he deliberately manipulated the translation of the statements made by the coup plotters in order to try and moderate the way the situation would be represented around the world. While this might be regarded as questionable from a professional or ethical point of view, it does demonstrate that the impact of the Australian coverage was being felt in Fiji. Just as the Orientals were unable to think of themselves without the over-riding influence of the Western ideology, the way the Fijians felt about themselves was filtered through a Westernised frame.

5. The media representation of Fiji and the cultural attitude to it tells us a great deal about Fiji, but also about our own culture, institutions and policies

The Australian media coverage of the Fiji coups reflects on Australia as much as Fiji. It reveals the attitudes and practices of the mass media, from their preparation to their practices. Rather than seeking to understand the region on a broad, continuing scale by posting journalists overseas for extended time periods, the Australian media simply rushed in when the situation exploded, armed with pre-conceived notions and stereotypical notions of a developing nation. They relied on very familiar, well-established sources who were often located in Australia, and they used well-practised but simple procedures in an attempt to try and represent often complex and multi-faceted situations.

The coverage also revealed the ways in which the elite sources are able to dominate the Australia media, monopolising the most influential method of knowledge production in modern society. As with the media, it showed the government policies were based more on reaction to specific events, rather than any long-term program which might have produced greater levels of empathy and understanding in both Australia and Fiji. The threats of retribution espoused by the government – cancelling trade deals and other bi-lateral relationships, reviews of aid programs, even the potential for military intervention – positioned Australia as a dominant regional power, able to determine how the crisis was going to be resolved.

Conclusion

In postcolonial terms, the coverage of the coups demonstrates that Australia dominates the contest between the “imperial centre and the colonial periphery” (Baldick 1996). At one level, Australia stays at the centre because the journalists favour the use of Australian sources in Australia to represent what is happening on the periphery. The centre is in control and modern and responsive. Conversely, Fiji stays on the periphery, still as unknown, as unpredictable, and as potentially dangerous as it was in the early days of European colonisation.

At a deeper level, though, Australia stays at the centre because we are unable to imagine ourselves in any other position. Our history, our politics, our culture, and the way we have experienced places like Fiji, mean that although geographically we know that we lie on the fringe of the Pacific, in our minds we are the focal point. Fiji becomes but a satellite, and the only way we communicate with the satellite is through intermittent signals. If the signal is to improve, if we are to progress the cause of cross-cultural communication, we have to trust in a new interpretation, an interpretation led by a media which appreciates the “vexed cultural-political questions of national and ethnic identity, ‘otherness’, race, imperialism and language” (Baldick 1996). In short, we need a media which understands that they are responsible, in many ways, for creating and maintaining ideologies.

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