



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Five collective challenges facing Indigenous journalists in newsrooms

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Introduction

I returned to my Sydney newsroom one Friday night in 2018, back from an assignment involving a long flight to a remote Aboriginal community in Australia. I was almost 12 months into what I had hoped would be my dream job covering the new Indigenous affairs beat.

As I dropped my bags next to my desk and sank into my chair, I felt depleted – both emotionally and physically. I had just interviewed elders who were struggling with too few resources to address violence against women and children. The story was not unlike so many I had previously reported on in communities where families live with high levels of generational trauma.

And yet, as I tried to make sense of it, I began to question whether I could continue my career in journalism.

In about 48 hours, my script would be due. I wasn't at all confident that a 7-minute television story could possibly do justice to such a deeply complex situation compounded by 200 years of colonisation and disinvestment.

On top of this, I had yet to figure out how to deal with a colleague who, having never worked in an Indigenous community, had displayed ignorant and culturally insensitive behaviour in the field on our assignment.

I was starting to realise my 'dream job' involved navigating some nightmare scenarios in my workplace. Although I had excellent managers, I had just one other Indigenous colleague in my team who I could turn to. She understood what I was trying to say as I unravelled in front of her – these kinds of assignments were beginning to impact us both.

The pair of us had only recently started the first Indigenous Affairs desk in the national newsroom at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia's public broadcaster. As First Nations women working together, we built incredible camaraderie and friendship, but we longed for additional First Nations colleagues to share what was becoming an immense burden and workload.

My colleague and I investigated instances of widespread neglect of Australia's First Peoples for national audiences. In addition to our deadlines, we were also frequently required to advise our colleagues, managers and other newsrooms on cultural protocol, scripts, diversity policy, and the strategic direction of Indigenous coverage. On top of that, we were trying to rebuild trust with marginalised Aboriginal communities, whose struggle for agency and self-determination had historically been failed by mainstream media outlets.¹

When we started our Indigenous Affairs unit, sometimes we were told that our stories likely wouldn't "rate" very well or find large audiences. I often had to beg TV producers and homepage editors to lift our stories higher – arguing that if they were buried then it was inevitable that they would find no audience.

Thankfully, much has changed since then. That small team is now its own unit made up of several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander managers, reporters, producers, and editors. And there is a serious commitment to doing better for Indigenous audiences. But five years on, my throat still tightens when I think about that story I covered in 2018. In hindsight, I should have gone to speak to a counsellor in the days after we wrapped filming. Ideally, my colleague and I would have had senior Indigenous staff in the news division to debrief with us on the traumatic nature of the stories we were investigating.

I can see now that the pressures I faced on that story (and many others like it) were not unique to me. Indigenous affairs journalists are experiencing common stressors in newsrooms across the globe. I know this because, during my fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, I've had the time to speak to six other First Nations journalists from Canada, Finland, the United States, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and Australia. The experiences they recounted were strikingly similar to my own.

For many First Nations reporters, getting the chance to work exclusively on stories relating to our own people can be life-changing, and it can extend our careers in journalism. But too many Indigenous reporters are also feeling isolated in newsrooms. Our colleagues and managers are predominantly non-Indigenous.

¹ Thomas, A, Jakubowicz, A, Norman, H, *Does the media fail Aboriginal political aspirations? 45 years of news media reporting of key political moments*, AIATSIS Research Publications, 2019.

Since Indigenous affairs beats and desks are relatively new in large mainstream newsrooms, it can be hard to convey the toll it takes being a First Nations person covering Indigenous stories.

The global coverage of the racist abuse levelled at [award-winning Aboriginal journalist Stan Grant](#) has highlighted the “heavy price” that Indigenous people in the public sphere pay.² The prevalence of racism in newsrooms means First Nations reporters can be exposed to discrimination both online, and in our workplace.

Delving into this project, I expected to come away from feeling dispirited and despondent. In fact, the opposite happened.

I feel empowered by the tenacity and wisdom of fellow First Nations, Native, Sámi and Māori journalists I spoke with. Even though I asked them to recount some of their worst days at work, they all had so much to impart about how we can make this profession better for a new generation. Their commitment to serving our communities with rigorous public interest journalism was deeply inspiring.

A note on terminology:

For this paper I spoke with journalists who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Native, Sámi and Māori. They have worked in multiple newsrooms in Australia, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Finland. I've acknowledged their clans and tribes in the text of this paper. Somewhat reluctantly, I use the term 'Indigenous' to denote reporters from many different communities. I acknowledge some First Nations people have mixed views about this term, but it felt the most appropriate to capture the global experience of First Peoples working as Indigenous affairs reporters in mainstream newsrooms.

² Turnbull, T, Stan Grant: Top Australian TV host steps down after enduring racist abuse, BBC News, 19 May 2023.

The power of Indigenous journalism

When the investigative work of Connie Walker was recognised with a Pulitzer Prize and a Peabody this year, the Cree reporter said it was “undeniable proof that Indigenous stories matter, and we should support Indigenous people to tell them.”⁵

There are so many rich, human, engrossing stories waiting to be unearthed by a new generation of Indigenous journalists who stand ready to report on their own communities.

Award-winning Australian Indigenous affairs reporter Isabella Higgins said journalism focused on First Nations communities reveals, “the unresolved stories of our countries”.

“They are [stories] so rich with human emotion and I think they have the ability to appeal to huge audiences. And I think it's so important that First Nations people are doing them ... we know the tension, we know where the heart is.”

Indigenous journalists have the lived experience to “hold ourselves accountable”, said Tristan Ahtone, an award-winning journalist and editor and a member of the Kiowa Tribe.

“We know our own communities as three-dimensional, fully fledged places.”

In Finland, the preservation of her mother language – Northern Sámi – is a large part of why Xia Torikka is so passionate about Indigenous-led journalism.

“It’s really important to me that I can use it at work and also be a part of its development.”

⁵ Walker, C, ‘A Pulitzer & a Peabody...’, Twitter, 9 May 2023, accessed at https://twitter.com/connie_walker/status/1656029919137378304.

Instead of stories which talk *about* Indigenous people, Native, Māori, Sámi, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander journalists are producing work *for* our people.

“Whenever I’m writing a story about a Native community or an issue facing a Tribal Nation, I’m not necessarily thinking about the non-Native audience,” said Cherokee investigative journalist Graham Lee Brewer. “I’m thinking about the Native people who I want to read this.”

Building our spaces

We are in a critical and exciting era for First Nations journalism. There has been a steady stream of new independent Indigenous media outlets. And, as journalism professor Folker Hanusch has noted, in several countries, Indigenous journalism is now being “practised in mainstream news organisations, in semi- or wholly autonomous Indigenous units.”⁴

Most of these new teams have emerged in the past few years. “I think it’s been a good steady amount of growth ... and I sure hope to see it continue to increase because our communities need it,” said Francine Compton, an Anishinaabe journalist and a citizen of Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation.

“It’s only in the last five years that there’s been an appetite for stories from our community,” said Connie Walker, in an interview with [Columbia Journalism Review](#).⁵

“I remember pitching my first MMIWG story [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls] 10 or 11 years ago, and a producer said to me – in the middle of a pitch – ‘This isn’t another ‘poor Indian story,’ is it?’ There just wasn’t any appetite.”

Slowly, mainstream news organisations across the world are starting to bolster their coverage with [dedicated Indigenous correspondents, desks and beats](#).⁶

⁴ Hanusch, F, ‘Charting a theoretical framework for examining Indigenous journalism culture’, Media International Australia, 1 November 2013.

⁵ Green, E, ‘Using true crime to teach Indigenous history: Reporter Connie Walker on ‘Finding Cleo’, Columbia Journalism Review, 5 July 2018.

⁶ ‘Hires for the new AAP Indigenous Affairs desk’, Philanthropy Australia, 3 March 2023.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Yle, NRK, NBC News, Radio New Zealand, 1News, *Stuff.co.nz*, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the *Guardian*, *The Age*, *AAP* and *ProPublica* now have dedicated Indigenous affairs desks or correspondents. “I think we’re less than a generation away from huge change,” said CBC broadcaster Duncan McCue. As Ahtone put it:

“It’s a different media landscape in terms of Indigenous affairs to where it was say 10 years or 15 years ago, when folks were saying, ‘We don’t need another [Indigenous] story, we’ve already done one’. Now we’ve got an environment where Indigenous Affairs desks are actually operating. We have newsrooms that are actually clamouring for more Indigenous content.”

In the past five years alone, Indigenous journalists have uncovered multiple allegations of human rights abuses in settler colonial countries. These stories have exposed [allegations of police brutality](#), [the disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women](#), [land theft](#), [deaths in custody](#), [racist media coverage](#) and [failures to repatriate human remains](#).

One of the distinct dimensions of Indigenous-led journalism, Hanusch writes, relates to “presenting a counter-narrative to mainstream journalism’s portrayal of Indigenous affairs.”⁷

When I spoke with First Nations journalists who have recently built their own units in mainstream organisations, they said working exclusively on Indigenous stories had given them the agency to present that counter-narrative. In the words of Higgins, the Torres Strait Islander who built ABC’s Indigenous affairs team:

“Every day was meaningful. It felt like it was journalism with a purpose. Like you were meant to be there, and you were meant to be talking to these people and it should all be on the public record.”

Brewer, a Cherokee journalist working for NBC News, formerly associate editor for Indigenous affairs at High Country News, added:

⁷ Hanusch, F, ‘*Charting a theoretical framework for examining Indigenous journalism culture*’, Media International Australia, 1 November 2013.

“It’s very personally rewarding to get to cover my own community, [and] other Native communities. These communities are largely ignored. And when they are covered, they’re covering in very stereotypical ways. It gave me the chance as a Native person to say, ‘All right, well, let’s do this in a way that centres Native voices in our reporting.’

And Jamie Tahana, one of the youngest Māori news directors at Radio New Zealand, and leader of the Te Manu Korihi team (‘Song of the Bird’), said:

“It’s giving us the voice that is rightfully ours. To make others in Aotearoa New Zealand – the majority – know that, hang on, there’s other stories here, we exist here. Here’s how your policies affect Māori. Here’s how we live our lives. Here’s our story.”

Five pressures facing Indigenous journalists

Amid all the power and promise inherent in the growth of Indigenous affairs beats around the world, there are unseen pressures that – if not dealt with systematically – threaten to derail the progress made.

In my interviews for this project, five key themes emerged to explain why many talented First Nations journalists consider quitting, despite loving the work that they do. Some of these will be applicable to other journalists from marginalised communities, too.

We can start to alleviate the risk of burnout and disillusionment if we talk more openly about the factors that can make this job so challenging. This list is not exhaustive, but it serves as a starting point.

1. Pitching the story: "Imagine having to plead your own humanity"

When I asked Indigenous journalists to reflect on key stressors associated with their beat, the first challenge they mentioned was not the emotional toll of telling traumatic stories or racist abuse from audiences; it was the challenge of getting their stories greenlit in the newsroom.

Many Indigenous reporters I spoke to said they have pitched stories predominantly to non-Indigenous commissioning editors throughout their career. While all recounted working with excellent non-Indigenous executive producers and editors, to be blunt, there are still some who do not understand or acknowledge their own biases and hold stereotypical views about our people.

Multiple Indigenous journalists recall examples where their original story ideas were put in the “too-hard” basket by a commissioning editor who couldn’t or wouldn’t take the time to understand the value of a proposed story.

Tristan Ahtone is Editor at Large at *Grist*. He previously served as Editor-in-Chief at the *Texas Observer* and Indigenous affairs editor at *High Country News*. He said Indigenous reporters are spending too much time explaining and unpacking a story to editors who can’t see its worth.

“They can say: ‘Hey, go for it, we trust you to do this.’ But I think probably 75% of the time it’s, ‘We don’t understand this, so you shouldn’t do that’. We’re tending to spend a tonne of our time trying to explain why a story is important and then explain why we should tackle it in the way that we’re going to tackle it.”

Graham Lee Brewer is a reporter and investigative journalist and citizen of the Cherokee Nation. He recounts how a newspaper editor at a previous organisation rejected an investigation into corruption allegations relating to a tribal government.

“I thought, OK, well, there is obvious concern for corruption, and I want to investigate this and see what’s going on. And I remember bringing it to my editor at the time and his response was, ‘Well, you know, that’s a really tricky area and it’s kind of a quagmire, I don’t know that we really want to try to step into that world.’ And I was like, ‘Just so I’m understanding you correctly, what you’re saying to me is that you think it’s too difficult to cover this government, so you don’t want to do it?’ I think in a healthy newsroom, you would at least hear that reporter out and try to understand what the issue is.”

Indigenous affairs reporters say having to argue for our stories to be taken seriously has led them to question whether they should continue in their roles. That has happened to Brewer.

“It’s demoralising. I have been in several positions like that, and it makes me question whether or not this is what I want to do for a living. That’s not a good feeling. Why aren’t there more Native people in [mainstream] newsrooms? That’s a good example of why they’re not, because imagine not only having to pitch a story and trying to get your editor to buy it and want it, but also at the same time having to plead your own humanity. It’s not a great place to be.”

Convincing senior producers and editors that Indigenous content matters has been a “massive battle” for decades, said Anishinaabe (Ojibway) journalist Duncan McCue, who has been a television and radio reporter at CBC for 25 years.

“There was a narrative frame that was kind of acceptable of what made Indigenous news. And it was always tragedy or protest ... otherwise, Indigenous stories just weren’t considered. It has become easier in the last five years because

of analytics; we can show that our digital articles and our podcasts are top of the charts in lots of instances. They are ratings winners, if you want to be that crude about it.”

Even though audience data can prove that our stories find a wide audience, Indigenous journalists said there can be a pervasive attitude that First Nations stories aren't 'mainstream'.

Jamie Tahana is the former Māori news editor at the public broadcaster Radio New Zealand. He is Ngāti Pikiao, Ngāti Makino, Te Arawa from the Bay of Plenty on the North Island of New Zealand. He said he felt some stories reported by Māori journalists were not taken seriously.

“The fact I had to fight so much meant I kept doing less of our stories just because we kept having to argue.”

Whether it's requesting that Māori communities to be at the centre of reporting in the aftermath of natural disasters, or ensuring key cultural events are covered properly, Tahana said, in his experience, Indigenous stories are often not given the platform they deserve.

“There's a block between us making our stuff and our audience. And that block is the non-Māori editorial [...] I guess we're kind of conditioned to fight. And you sort of don't really notice when you're in it. Sometimes you just take a pause and go 'Hang on, I shouldn't have had to do that.' It is tiring, but I guess as Indigenous, as Māori, we see it as a privilege to be in that space, to have the responsibility to fight for that.”

Torres Strait Islander journalist Isabella Higgins said that when she was part of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's first Indigenous affairs reporting team, strong stories of national interest were left at the back of bulletins.

“We weren't getting spots in bulletins or rundowns or home pages that we would have liked, even though we felt like we were innovating and doing really important things.”

She also speaks about the difficulty of having to “simplify” nuanced stories because a program or producer believes it won’t appeal to a mainstream audience.

“It often felt like it was impossible to condense centuries of trauma caused by colonization and failed government policy into one neat narrative that could slot into a news bulletin and that editors and audiences could understand. And it constantly felt like you were being reductive.”

Brewer said there can be too much “over-editing” of Indigenous affairs reporting and that can be exhausting.

“It’s not always just the editor says ‘no’, it’s sometimes the editor says ‘Oh yeah, I see the story you’re pitching, but what if we tweak it like this? Or what if we did this angle instead?’ And that angle sometimes can be really problematic, and it can illustrate how the editor doesn’t understand this community. And then you have to go and explain to the editor that that’s not the story, or it might be true but it’s not an ethical way to cover it. And then that can cause its own kind of tension between you and your superior. I think that’s a difficult place to be.”

2. Moral injury: "You are watching people die in slow motion from neglect"

Indigenous affairs stories often cut close to the bone for First Nations reporters. That’s because it is often our own histories we are reporting on. Celebrated Wiradjuri journalist and author Stan Grant once wrote about the invisible scars we bear as Indigenous people. “We know this history, my people. This is a living thing. We touch it and we wear it. It is carried deep within us, mental wounds that cannot heal. It is so close we can touch it.”⁸

Having an intimate understanding and knowledge of what our interview subjects have experienced can mean Indigenous journalists feel the full emotional weight of the stories, and frequently feel dispirited after a story goes to air.

⁸ Grant, S, *Talking to my Country*, Harper Collins, January 2016.

Whether it is investigating missing and murdered women or the horrors of residential schools and the Stolen Generations, this work “can be really hard on your heart and your soul,” said CBC's McCue.

“We don’t treat people well when we go into community and start asking them about difficult stories. And as Indigenous people, I think we inherently have more sensitivity around covering traumatic stories and our responsibility to our people to minimise harm. And so that weighs on you.”

The impact of colonisation, assimilation policies, and the dispossession of our lands continues to have a profound and severe legacy for Indigenous societies.⁹ That means we deal with a huge amount of trauma in our reporting and investigative work. Our crises are ongoing, and our sources are often victims of generations of injustice.

For Higgins, the stories she investigated about injustices facing her own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were emotionally taxing.

“You never leave a story at the end of the day. There’s no transaction between journalists and [source]. You look at the people you’re interviewing, and you think ‘This could be my mum, this could be my sister, this could be me’. You almost develop a weird sort of survivor’s guilt. That’s not quite the right word, but you’re almost guilty that you’re representing an institutional industry that’s caused a huge amount of harm to these communities, you feel such a huge burden to make sure that’s not their experience again.”

For Yle Sápmi journalist Xia Torikka, reporting on the [existential threat posed by climate change](#) to her traditions and culture can be very upsetting.¹⁰

⁹ Aboriginal culture and history: Aboriginal people have a shared history of colonisation and forced removal of their children, Victorian Public Sector Commission, accessed at: <https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/pdf-download.php?postid=173862>

¹⁰ McVeigh, K, ‘This new snow has no name’: Sami reindeer herders face climate disaster, The Guardian, 17 December 2021.

“Because I’m also a reindeer herder myself. I work with reindeer, my family and ancestors have always been working with reindeers. It’s been really a struggle with reindeer herding because of climate change. Sometimes when I write about reindeer herding and the struggles with the Finnish government, yeah, stuff like that really gets under my skin.”

In 2022, veteran storyteller Francine Compton was one of few Indigenous reporters on the ground for the Pope’s historic visit to Canada.¹¹ It was a profound moment for her and her family. She describes why her memory of that day still brings up complex feelings.

“My grandmother was a residential school survivor, and I was kind of a lone journalist on the ground, even though I was with all the international media riding in the media buses, I was the one person from CBC Indigenous on the ground and [had] that responsibility. There were moments when I saw media doing things that I didn’t necessarily approve of. When we got to the first location it was where the Pope was set to apologise there was a media zone when we got there. At the media zone, [Indigenous] people were sitting there, and I saw the media looking like ‘Oh, this is where we’re supposed to be’. And I walked away. I said, ‘I’m not going to witness this. I’m not going to witness the media asking our people to move so they can have their zone.’ I didn’t want to run around with my microphone trying to stick it in survivors’ faces.”

What Francine raises here is an important point conveyed by other Indigenous journalists I spoke with. Some of the anguish we feel is not just about the content of stories, but the impossible task of balancing the expectations of our communities and our newsrooms. “It was an enormous weight to feel like you were trying to change the reputation of your organisation – of the industry,” said Higgins. “To make sure people walked away feeling like they had agency [...] trying to fit it into the narrow framework of public broadcasting and editorial standards that we were held to.”

Brewer added: “A lot of the ethics and tenets of modern journalism don’t really translate when it comes to covering Native communities.”

¹¹ Compton, F, ‘Survivors speak of separation, and hope, in Maskwacis during Papal apology’, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 25 July 2022.

It's worthwhile highlighting the [comments made about 'moral injury' by Anthony Feinstein](#), Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto.¹² He explained that moral injury happens to journalists “when you feel that somehow you’ve done something that might have compromised your own moral code of ethics, your own moral compass.” It can come from witnessing other people’s behaviour too, he said.

It seems clear that a lot of Indigenous affairs journalists feel the approach to some stories can compromise our values or “cultural compass”. Professor Feinstein has written that moral injury is an under-explored phenomenon in journalism and I would argue that it’s highly prevalent among Indigenous journalists.

Higgins suggests newsrooms should start to acknowledge that First Nations correspondents are required to do a highly complex “cross-cultural” job that requires its own supportive structure and psychological support. She often reflects on what it has been like for her to cover the war in Ukraine, and the parallels with the traumatic nature of being a correspondent in Indigenous communities.

“When I went to Ukraine ... there was an understanding that you came back with images in your head that you would remember forever. But I don’t think anyone understands that in some Indigenous communities, you are watching people die in slow motion and die from neglect. And that is so upsetting and heart-breaking.”

3. The cultural load: "I'm going to have to answer for that"

Multiple Indigenous affairs reporters said that culturally insensitive, ill thought-out and, frankly, racist coverage by their own or other news outlets can be an immense source of stress. Stories that are carried out in an irresponsible, rushed, or damaging way can cause irreparable harm to relationships with First Nations communities, and Indigenous affairs reporters have to be the ones to remedy the damage.

“[Journalists] need to understand that their news stories, when they get it wrong, it has huge impacts for Indigenous people across this country,” [explained veteran Indigenous journalist Duncan McCue](#) when he took up a new position as professor of

¹² Feinstein, A, *I've studied journalists under pressure for 20 years. Here's what I've learned so far*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 5 June 2020

Indigenous journalism and storytelling at Carleton University's School of Journalism in Ottawa.¹³

Ahtone said it is particularly stressful for Indigenous journalists running their own units inside of newsrooms when the organisation makes a mistake.

“I think the thing that newsrooms tend to forget is that if you’ve got one of these things set up and you’ve got other editors that are just commissioning sort of rogue Indigenous affairs stories that always suck, it undermines the work of everybody else. When a bad story comes out and people are pissed about it, it reflects on you, because you’re the Indigenous person that’s there. I think for Native reporters, we have a much, much higher level of ethics – integrity – that we need to meet, and that’s because we see each other.”

Māori journalist Tahana calls it “intercepting”. It’s the common practice of Indigenous journalists who often rush to fix a mistake made by colleagues before a story is aired, or being first port of call from irate community members when it’s too late.

“When you find out who a program may or may not be going to [for a comment] or an angle they may be missing, that’s another cultural load thing for our team. Often we wear the criticism ... because we’ve got the relations and contacts.”

Cherokee investigative reporter Brewer said it is imperative that our colleagues understand the impact on Indigenous reporters when “harmful” stories go to air.

“If I ever come calling in that community, I’m going to have to answer for that. So one of the things I often tell non-Native reporters who cover Indian Country or are new to the beat, is that you have to be just as much of a diplomat as you are a reporter in some of these situations, because you have to be willing to acknowledge that your organisation has either ignored or marginalised or stereotyped or misrepresented this community.”

¹³ Drost, P, ‘How Duncan McCue changed Indigenous reporting’, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 8 April 2023.

Sometimes ignorant or incorrect terminology, context or information is used in stories which directly relate to our own tribes, nations, histories, and families. Those missteps can feel deeply personal. Brewer recalls one such situation:

“I remember talking to a reporter who did a story about the McGirt decision, which is the Supreme Court decision that gave my tribe and four others our reservation status back here in Oklahoma. And before that case was heard, when the Supreme Court had agreed to hear it, this reporter had a piece and he described the Trail of Tears, which was the forced removal of my people and several other tribes to what is now Oklahoma, which was an act of genocide. A quarter of our tribe died along the trail, and I’m very lucky to even be here. But he described that as these tribes ‘migrated west’. And I said, ‘I understand what you’re trying to say, but that’s not migration, that’s genocide. It’s forced removal at the very least’.”

Sámi journalist Torrika said missteps can happen when Indigenous colleagues aren’t privy to an upcoming program or report that has not had oversight from Indigenous affairs specialists.

“One example is one of the biggest TV talk shows in Finland: they did this big TV clip about conflict in the Sámi community. And we didn’t even know that they were doing it. And it caused a big scandal almost. But after that they have been asking for advice. What I think they should do is include us. Because I don’t think it’s enough that [non-Indigenous journalists] just consult us about Sámi. We should be included. We should be the ones there – to be writing, directing, producing it.”

Despite many examples of reporting that marginalises our people, Indigenous reporters I spoke to felt coverage by mainstream outlets has improved in the past five years.

McCue said there had been a “marked change” in the “quantity” and the “quality” of Indigenous affairs reporting, especially in the past three years in Canada. But, he added, there are still lots of missteps. “I could spend five minutes on Google News and find you some examples of headlines that are awkward and poorly written.” It’s

why he is passionate about high-quality training for non-Indigenous reporters and why he wrote a textbook that's an in-depth guide to Indigenous affairs reporting.¹⁴

"I believe non-Indigenous people should be working on non-Indigenous stories. I think it's ridiculous to ask Indigenous journalists to do all the work, and they are training people as well. So I think it's their responsibility to learn about this."

4. Translation exhaustion: "Now I have to make sure your work is culturally competent"

For reasons explained above, First Nations reporters care deeply about ensuring our workplaces produce culturally sensitive stories that reflect our dynamic communities. We need our colleagues to get it right and to treat Indigenous sources fairly and with respect.

Native, Aboriginal and Māori journalists I spoke to were encouraged that a new generation of non-Indigenous journalists are often producing respectful reporting on Indigenous affairs. In an effort to ensure their story is accurate and sensitive, many of those colleagues will ask us to check a script or a feature story, or even give detailed advice on a complex investigation.

Requests for help can come after hours, while you're already on deadline, or while you're in the field on assignment. A First Nations reporter could be juggling numerous requests for advice, script editing, and 'pointers' over the course of a few days. Sometimes there is a request for cultural context, access to our contacts or tribes, or even a 'mini' history lesson. Typically, Indigenous reporters said this is stressful and adds to their workloads.

Here's how Brewer described it:

"Let's say I'm working on a story and someone from another department within my news organisation says: 'Hey, would you look over my script?' It's like, OK, well now I have to take time out of my day to make sure that your work is culturally competent and I'm not getting paid extra for that, I might be on deadline and I'm

¹⁴ McCue, D, '*Decolonizing Journalism: A Guide to Reporting in Indigenous Communities*', Oxford University Press, 6 January 2023.

taking time out of my important work to do that. And also, it's not my fault that your department has not prioritised hiring Native people.”

Veteran Indigenous journalist Francine Compton described it as “exhaustive labour” because Indigenous reporters are often “expected to have an answer for everything”.

“I felt, ‘this is my expertise, this is my heart, my spirit’, and I should be compensated more for doing this.”

All Indigenous reporters I spoke to explained that we *want* our colleagues to do good work, so it can be very difficult to say no when requests for help come across our desks, although some Indigenous reporters told me they are starting to knock back requests. Compton said it can be powerful to help to lift someone else’s work, but the problem is that the work is often not acknowledged or remunerated.

“It’s actually empowering to be able to [make a positive change]. It wasn’t about ‘Oh, I showed them’, it was about ‘I made a small change today’. But at the same time, they weren’t rewarding [that work] in a way that was affecting my paycheque.”

Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College president Dr. Twyla Baker describes Indigenous people’s additional work of providing explanation and historical context as [“translation exhaustion”](#).¹⁵

Sometimes, Indigenous journalists must act as *literal* translators in addition to their reporting work. In Aotearoa / New Zealand, where the use of [te reo Māori is becoming more prevalent](#), Pākehā (non-Indigenous) broadcasters are using words in the Indigenous language in their stories broadcast or published in mainstream outlets.¹⁶ Tahana welcomes this, but described the additional workload this puts on Māori journalists:

¹⁵ Johnsen, M, ‘Use of te reo Māori on radio, TV shouldn’t be threatening’, RNZ, 10 March 2021, accessed at <https://twitter.com/Indigenia/status/1087762882983538689>

¹⁶ Baker, T, @Indigenia, ‘A group of my Indigenous colleagues...’, Twitter, 22 January 2019, accessed at <https://twitter.com/Indigenia/status/1087762882983538689>

“That cultural advisory means we’re often giving tips or even context to our regional reporters, who, to give them credit, particularly the younger ones [...] are quite keen to do Māori stories. We often have some presenters or reporters wanting to just maybe scatter some words through their stories, which I encourage, but it’s also a load on us. So, we’re happy to but it’s also we’re doing extra work for these kinds of things.”

Higgins said the advisory work Indigenous journalists in Australia can be asked to do for managers was a huge pressure in addition to our jobs as reporters.

“That was enormously difficult. And it was all of that invisible labour that First Nations journalists do in white organisations that made it feel like such a grind every single day.”

Indigenous reporters said this underscores the importance of having distinct First Nations units with multiple staff, because being the only one in your newsroom with expertise on these issues can be hugely draining. Torrika, producer of the social media channel Sohkaršohkka for Sámi youth, said education work for Indigenous people is constant – both at work and in our private lives.

“Luckily we do work almost in our own newsroom, which is like Sámi media, and most of our people are Sámi. But when I’ve been working with a TV series with Finnish people, I’m the only Sámi person working with that series. So I have noticed a lot of [questions] and I have to explain ‘why’. Why is it important to include Sámi language? Or why is it important to show the culture and use Sámi music? I know that feeling, not just when I’m working, but when I’m meeting Finnish people in my personal life. And I guess every Sámi person in Finland has to do this to educate others.”

5. Racist abuse: “Start the morning trawling through racist emails”

Arguably the most dispiriting and destructive threat facing Indigenous reporters, anchors and media professionals is the racist abuse we are subjected to. All the First Nations journalists I spoke with were deeply saddened to hear what occurred in Australia, where one of our most celebrated journalists, Stan Grant, was subjected to such vile abuse – including death threats – that he left his job.

During his final appearance fronting ABC's Q&A, [Grant was given a standing ovation as he spoke about the "poison" of the media](#).¹⁷

At various points in my career, I've been the target of racist abuse, commentary and feedback via my email and direct messages on social media. So have far too many of my First Nations colleagues. Indigenous women in the media can be subject to both racist and sexist abuse.¹⁸

It's the sad reality of Indigenous journalism that many reporters anticipate abusive emails, tweets, and messages about our work, or denigrating commentary about the people featured in our stories. Researchers in Australia found "industry complacency and internal discrimination were impacting on organisations' ability to properly protect diverse media workers".¹⁹

Tahana, a Māori journalist, said Indigenous journalists are "constantly" receiving racist comments on their work.

"We Māori - particularly women - just cop the racist feedback from audience members. So that's another weight we're carrying as well as having a fight internally."

When Tahana and another Māori colleague decided to move on from their positions at RNZ, he said they both reflected that "it's kind of nice to not start the morning trawling through racist emails." He believes media organisations are ill-equipped to support journalists who are harassed.

"We always say to ourselves, it's sort of fuel for the fire, right? Just let it stoke what we're doing because we must be doing something right. But [you shouldn't] have to reframe it that way. I don't think there is enough organisational support for

¹⁷ Rawling, C, 'Stan Grant sends a message to his abusers in last Q+A before stepping away', ABC News, 22 May 2023.

¹⁸ Posetti, J, Shabbir, N, Maynard, D, Bontcheva, K, Aboulez, N, 'The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists', UNESCO, April 2021, accessed at <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf>

¹⁹ Valencia-Forrester, F, et-al, 'Online safety of diverse journalists', Media Diversity Australia, April 2021, accessed at <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf>

that stuff. There's internal fights and then there is also the lack of realisation about what we're fighting elsewhere as well."

Former RNZ Māori news director and presenter Māni Dunlop was the first Māori journalist to host the flagship Midday Report and was [regularly subjected to racist feedback and attacks](#).²⁰

Compton, associate director of the Native American Journalists Association, said news organisations urgently need to come to grips with the problem of abuse being levelled at First Nations journalists online.

"I've experienced it in my inbox, and I've seen it happen to many of my colleagues over the years. It's a problem because I've seen Indigenous journalists who are telling stories for the community – award-winning, important, life-changing stories. But when it comes to them needing to face this online abuse and racism... when I'm seeing those reporters needing to take time off, then that's really where I'd like to see more international awareness and campaigns to help stop that from happening [...] because that's such a troubling area."

Newsrooms have long been spaces where some Indigenous journalists have felt unwelcome at best, and at worst, culturally unsafe. McCue said it continues to be one of the most corrosive stress points for First Nations reporters.

"There's also the issue of cultural safety within our newsrooms. And some people are better equipped to deal with that than others. I always kind of accepted that there was a battle to be done at work and tried to take care of myself at home. So that's not my main complaint. But for some of our employees it is, and they feel that whether it's ignorance or racism in some cases... that weighs on people."

We continue to work with colleagues who hold stereotypical, outdated and, sometimes, racist views and notions about our people. Indigenous affairs journalist

²⁰ Langstone, M, Shabbir, N, Maynard, D, Bontcheva, K, Aboulez, N, 'On air and on fire: Māni Dunlop on reo, racists and taking on the old guard', The Spinoff, 6 February 2021, accessed at <https://thespinoff.co.nz/media/06-02-2021/on-air-and-on-fire-mani-dunlop-on-reo-racists-and-taking-on-the-old-guard>

Higgins reflected on how stressful and isolating this can be for young First Nations people in newsrooms.

“It was really depressing to hear people you worked with and respected basically revealing the unconscious bias or casual racism that they held inside of them and were comfortable to display because they didn’t even realise it. That was almost the most depressing part as well, was that people who you kind of respected offended you constantly and you felt like you couldn’t really call it out.”

What can newsrooms do differently?

How can we begin to accelerate change in newsrooms for Indigenous affairs journalists? I asked some of the best First Nations journalists in the world for their thoughts and advice.

1. Fund new Indigenous affairs teams

Advancement for Indigenous journalists will come from having a “critical mass” of First Nations people in newsrooms, according to Tahana. “I like to think that simply existing in those spaces as a Native person I’m changing people’s minds who I work with,” Brewer added. “But I’m also showing other Native people that there can be a place for you in these newsrooms.”

Hire Indigenous editors to run these teams

“I have only had Native editors a couple of times and it’s always been great to work with Native folks because they are focused on what we’re trying to get across,” said Ahtone. Higgins believes newsrooms need to prioritise hiring more people who understand the issues: “You need people who are commissioning to get it.”

Indigenous units need to be properly resourced

Tahana said Indigenous teams should be given the same standing as any other respected bureau – such as parliamentary and business units. That could mean Indigenous teams are given dedicated slots in national programs and autonomy over which stories are selected, he suggested. “We need editorial control, but it needs to be: ‘Here’s what you’re getting’, rather than [pitching] a story to someone who knows nothing about Māori.”

Think about commissioning

One solution to ensuring your organisation’s work is respectful and accurate could be to hire someone whose sole job is commissioning and editing Indigenous stories across a broad national network. It can mean that stories being done outside of an Indigenous affairs team are of a high quality, said Ahtone. “You have one person that stories need to run through before they’re commissioned. The issue is making sure that you’ve got real resources and real empowerment to make that happen.”

Ask Indigenous reporters if they want to opt out of giving advice

There will be different views on this since some Indigenous journalists are largely happy to give advice and tips to colleagues, while others don't have the time or inclination for this additional work. It's up to managers to inform newsrooms that your First Nations colleague is not automatically the point-of-call for checking scripts and giving detailed advice.

Empower teams to work on solutions-focussed journalism

Indigenous reporters want to see a diversity of stories; it's crucially important for social and policy change in communities. Sámi journalist Torrika said it also helps break down stereotypes. "I think Finnish people think that if you are Sámi, you always want to talk about that painful history or the problems that are happening now. But we don't always want to talk about them. We also need to be writing about fun stuff and do entertainment [content]."

Train your non-Indigenous staff to do better work

McCue is so passionate about seeing newsrooms invest in high-quality Indigenous affairs reporting training for reporters because he has seen its impact on the journalism graduates he taught at university. "I've got ten years' worth of students who are doing amazing work on Indigenous issues, and that's why I'm hopeful."

Consider a two-tier training system

McCue suggested that not all non-Indigenous reporters require in-depth training, but cultural competency training should be widespread across newsrooms, because most reporters will touch on Indigenous affairs at some point during their careers. "I see it as being two levels of training - one level it's kind of a general sensitivity and a basic awareness about Indigenous issues and how not to act like an ass. And then there's a second level: you call it advanced [...] for anybody that wants to really get into Indigenous issues."

Hold training sessions on specialist coverage areas

There are some excellent video resources online that look at covering specific communities and issues. Here are two examples from [NBCU Academy](#) and [ProPublica](#). Consider finding – and paying – Indigenous journalists,

academics, and specialists to deliver insights into particular subject matters that are topical and need further explanation to improve your coverage.

Don't bother if it's a tick-a-box exercise

For training to be meaningful, organisations have to be intent on genuine change and recruitment of Indigenous journalists, said Brewer. Ahtone believes there should be an ongoing relationship with the reporters or the organisation delivering the training. “There has to be longer-term engagement. If we want training to really work, we’ve got to more or less have a relationship with the outlet. It’s not a one-and-done: we want to be in a relationship with newsrooms that are actually dedicated to making changes. So that means maybe we check in every quarter; maybe we’re doing an audit of stories at the end of the year.”

Think about the psychological health of your Indigenous reporters

If there is any good news when reflecting on the major toll of this work, it’s that “we’re finally starting to have the conversation about trauma-informed reporting: both taking care of your subject and taking care of yourself,” said McCue.

Keep an eye on the quantity of heavy stories

Due to ongoing crises in Indigenous communities related to poor health and housing, suicide and child protection, Indigenous reporters can feel it’s necessary to jump from one upsetting investigation to another. Higgins suggested managers should be keeping an eye on how many tough or traumatic stories a First Nations reporter has done in a row. “It would have been a complete game changer, I think, if someone had just said, ‘You’ve done enough, that was good, take a breather.’ It would have completely changed the game. You work so hard on something and then it’s over. What’s the follow? What’s the next story?”

Sharing knowledge

Consider inviting First Nations journalists and Indigenous mental health professionals from across the world to speak to your teams on managing stress. One of the most useful things we can do to alleviate some of the cultural load is to hear how other Indigenous reporters across the globe are navigating traumatic stories.

Conclusion

Indigenous journalists have been in the newsrooms for decades, bearing witness and uncovering injustice that would otherwise remain hidden. But too many mainstream news organisations that pride themselves in advancing public interest journalism do not have Indigenous affairs rounds or beats. This needs to change.

Brewer believes it's no mistake that Indigenous people have been shut out of newsrooms for so long: "It's by design. The American media has typically been a venue for anti-Indigenous sentiment and a way to rationalise genocide and theft and murder and the marginalisation of Indigenous people." Brewer is referencing the United States here, but many Indigenous journalists report similar realities in other countries.

There is a growing cohort of Indigenous affairs journalists around the world seeking to shift the ways in which news is delivered to our people. At the heart of what we do is a commitment to the truth, a diversity of perspectives, and rebuilding trust with communities that have been let down by mainstream media. As you have read here, there is still a huge amount of work still to be done.

Several senior Indigenous journalists I spoke to are concerned that young talent is quitting the profession in the early stages of their careers. The loss of their skill, connections, perspectives, and knowledge will be a blow to our industry worldwide.

There is also very little academic literature that has been written from the perspective of Indigenous journalists. There are too few resources for non-Indigenous journalists to access to understand the cultural load we carry and how they might be able to help us make structural changes in newsrooms.

However, some signs of change have begun to emerge. We stand on the brink of a much-needed transformation that will guarantee newsrooms benefit from dedicated coverage provided by Indigenous journalists and editors. I hope this paper will be useful to newsrooms that are finally beginning to invest in more Indigenous-run reporter units, rounds, beats and desks to cover First Nations communities.

However, this crucial investment must be accompanied by improved structures, hiring practices and mentorship of the next generation of Indigenous journalists.

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