SOMETHING FROM NOTHING: Investigative Journalism in the Solomon Islands

Good Day everyone my name is Koroi Hawkins. I work for One Television Solomon Islands as a reporter. As the name implies, we are the first and currently the only Television station in the Solomons which produces local content and a nightly news bulletin.

I would like to talk today about my experiences as a reporter/producer/visual editor in producing a weekly one hour current affairs program we have on One Television which we decided to call Footprints and is the closest thing to investigative journalism we have.

It is a two-part program with two 30 minute segments basically looking at two separate issues. I would do one issue and my colleague Fred another. The stories are often connected. Like I would do HIV aids and he would look at STIs and risk behaviour but this wasn’t always the case.

Now we called the program Footprints because we wanted the program to have some originality and also to give ourselves the leeway to be able to talk about wide range of issues as we saw fit.

Just backtracking a bit. Almost all Journalists in Solomon Islands, including myself, come from the school of hard knocks, and personally when I was first given this investigative journalism/current affairs program to produce, I felt like a man in a world with no form. My confusion was in regards to
Investigative Journalism: what exactly is it? how far is it ethical to dig into something etc. And secondly because it was decided it would feature as a 30min short doco type piece something like what Four Corners does on the ABC in Australia. There was also the technical side of things, documentary writing and producing, documentary visual editing style all added to the chaos.

**Insert: Montage of Footprints Program etc**

But as with everything we blundered on working within the weekly time frame to produce the program. We covered many issues from the lack of any form of long-term planning in the Solomon Islands government to the escalation in underage drinking in Honiara and even the silent but very active prostitution industry in the Solomon Islands.

**Insert: Pictures of camera equipment and office equipment**

While the lack of training would have been our biggest difficulty, there were other significant challenges like the lack of resources, at the time we only had a limited number of cameras and computers and had to share them with news, programs, advertising and they were all working to their own deadlines.

There were many heated discussions over time management and prioritizing, believe me, though a lot better now. I have come to accept this as our lot in life and revel in the shortcuts and crazy compromises which arise from such situations.

**Insert Picture of clock**

The time constraints were one of the other major problems. We had to produce a 30-minute piece every week which turned really nasty if the editors changed the story line or someone cancelled a crucial interview.

There were many times I asked my editor for an extension so that I could chase down an important interview or change the angle of the story because of fresh evidence. Sometimes it was granted, but other times we had to go with what was before us.

**Insert Laid back picture**

And especially with the laid back Solomon Islands mentality, punctuality and time are a blind spot for most Solomon Islanders. There were many times when we had our key interviewees cancel on us or make strange requests. That’s when things really got interesting, especially if it was a few days before our Sunday slot.

**Looking intelligent**

One particular incident comes to mind. It was an interview with the Commissioner of Lands that I did for a particularly sensitive issue on the huge proportion of foreign ownership of land in the capital, Honiara, which came about because locals were buying land at government subsidised prices and then selling their titles off illegally with exorbitant mark ups.
Well, in fear for her safety, this woman refused to be interviewed unless the camera was behind her pointing at me, I rang my executive producer Dorothy Wickham, and explained the situation, she said shoot it and get it done.

She was fine with a text bar with her full name and position in government running on the screen but didn’t want her face on the screen so we ended up with an interview with the back of her head and me trying to look as serious as possible.

**Insert numbers pictures/data**

The final issue I found in my brief venture into investigative journalism in the Solomon Islands is the lack of accurate data on anything and everything and also government’s inability or refusal to provide information about anything for instance justification for it’s spending of public funds.

And I must say here although we were struggling, our viewers were loving the stuff we were pouring out. Although that may sound conceited, you must understand we are the first and only local TV station producing local content and news in the Solomon Islands and this was their first taste of local television news stories with more depth to them than the usual 3-minute news packages. We would have people call up with tip offs and just call up to discuss an issue. We just covered most of the time to tell us what we did wrong.

So for me as a journalist, I found it very rewarding. Of course, those you criticised weren’t exactly praising your work, but that is always a good sign.

**Insert picture of RAMSI Award**

But in spite of all the difficulties we had two of the best mentors anyone could wish for in our boss Dorothy Wickham and media advisor Marie-Louise O’Callaghan and, after only six months and some ten plus episodes, we won the all round RAMSI Media Encouragement Award for 2009.

In presenting the award, RAMSI Special Coordinator Graeme Wilson said it was for taking people to places and talking about the issues other news organizations did not touch in any depth.

**Insert picture of sunset me thinking?**

On personal reflection, for me what I have discovered in this regard is investigative journalism is the most difficult, time consuming and energy draining work I have ever had to do as a journalist but it is also the most fulfilling. Which is why I am here today.

And as the second season of *Footprints* is due to start soon, I thought it fitting that I should come and learn us much as I can from you all here who have achieved so much in a field I am yet to fully appreciate so that I too can achieve the best serving my people Solomon Islands.

I will stop here. Thank you all so much for your attention. Any questions?

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