

Reporters and the police

— too close?

Criticism about the “homophobic slant” of coverage of the John Scott double murder in Fiji extends to both how Police Commissioner Isikia Savua’s statements were reported and how the media used leaked information to “paint a picture which could not be corroborated”.

By ‘ANA TAPUELU

POLICE and the media in Fiji have faced severe criticism over their handling of the John Scott double murder case. Overseas news programmes such as ABC’s AsiaPacific and independent commentators have challenged the ethics of both the media and the police —and raised legal issues such as sub judice and contempt of court.

“The coverage has some media observers fearing the relationship between police and reporters has become too close for comfort,” wrote *Pacific Beat*’s James Panichi on August 2. “Crime reporters may pride themselves on establishing close relationships with police in an effort to obtain exclusive inside information for their stories, but where should the line be drawn?”

Even Fiji’s most influential newspaper has questioned some of the reporting, saying the national code of ethics had been breached.

“The family of the murdered Red Cross director John Scott has called for the media to exercise some restraint and sensitivity in its reporting of this gruesome crime,” said *The Fiji Times* on July 28.

The family’s desire is understandable and justified. Parts of the media have been insensitive and less than balanced in their desire to beat their rivals in this most competitive of industries. There is little doubt that the Fiji Media Council’s code of ethics — drawn up in consultation with the industry — has been breached. Unverified reports, facts sensationalised

'ANA TAPUELUELU

beyond recognition and pure hearsay have all been seen in the light of day in Fiji's media. We as an industry can and should do better.

Criticism about the coverage extends to both how Police Commissioner Isikia Savua's statements were reported and how the media used leaked information to "paint a picture which could not be corroborated", says Panichi.

Commentators such as Swasti Chand, coordinator of Fiji Media Watch, a non-government organisation lobbying for higher media literacy, is highly critical. She accuses the Fiji media of a "close relationship with authorities" leading to an unfair and homophobic slant in news coverage.

Another critic has been politics professor Scott MacWilliam at the University of the South Pacific, a former journalist. Other critics have suggested some Fiji journalists are gullible. Many critics consider some statements of the Police Commissioner and the media reporting would have "fallen foul of contempt of court" laws in many Commonwealth countries.

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But media spokespeople have defended the role of Fiji news organisations, and the police have also defended their actions. Pacific Islands News Association president William Parkinson says: “Obviously it’s been a very difficult story to cover. It isn’t only that John Scott was very well known in the community. I might add a person well known in the media. And the murder being very dramatic and rather aggressive added to the story. I believe the media had the right to cover the murder. They had an issue to cover and it certainly wasn’t something that they could ignore or push aside.”

Fiji Media Council chairman Daryl Tarte says the murders were the most sensational and high profile case in Fiji for a long time. “It was to be expected that the killings would be given prominence in all the media and that is their right and their responsibility. Each media organisation reported it in different ways and I would imagine members of the public could be offended at some of the reporting.”

So far, the Media Council has not received any formal complaint from the public on the issue.

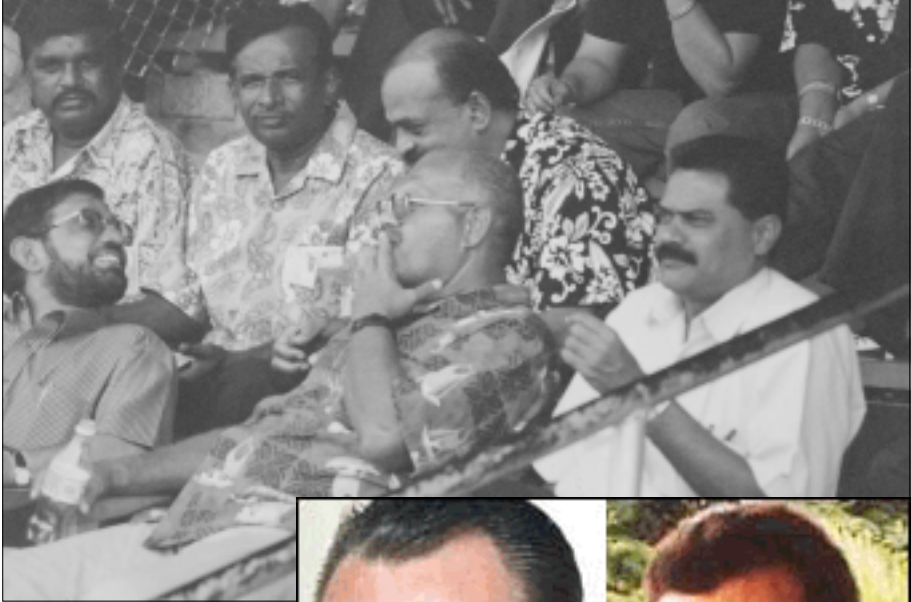
Sergeant Unaisi Vuniwaqa, a police media spokesperson, has defended the role of the police. “We made every attempt to keep the public informed of every update in this case as it was a case of public interest,” she says, pointing out that the lifestyle of the pair was common knowledge.

Fiji Red Cross director John Morris Scott gained international attention for his humanitarian role in supporting the hostages during last year’s seizure of Parliament. He and his long-time partner, Gregory Scrivener, were found hacked to death at their Princess Rd home in Suva on July 1.

Comments from police sources began appearing just days after the killings. When members of Scrivener’s family in New Zealand suggested the events may have been linked to Scott’s humanitarian role during the crisis, police were remarkably quick to reject political factors.

When allegations were made that the men had been tortured, Commissioner Savua suggested the violence was linked to the victims’ lifestyle choices, saying “you must not forget that John Scott was a known homosexual”.

Condemning the newspaper and television coverage of the killings as “sensationalist and homophobic”, Fiji Media Watch’s Chand says: “We’re not happy with the media handling of the double murder of John Scott and his partner. The stories were speculative, investigative journalists techniques were not used, accurate and balanced reports were not published, and the media’s reporting created fear in the gay community.”



Fiji's Police Commissioner Isikia Savua (above centre) and (inset) the murdered pair, John Scott (left) and Greg Scrivener.

Credits: *The Sun* (top),
New Zealand Herald
(right)



QUOTE:

“Crime and anti-social behaviour, especially involving violence, should not be glamorised or reported, portrayed or detailed in a manner, which on reasonable judgement would be likely to encourage or incite imitation or experiment. Editors, journalists and broadcasters should pay particular regard to the context, time of transmission and probably effect and the likely audience or readership of such items. Special attention should be paid to the likelihood of such material being read, seen or listened to by children.”

— **Fiji Media Council code of ethics**

REPORTERS AND POLICE

Associate Professor Scott MacWilliam, of the University of the South Pacific's history/politics department, says two quite different issues were at stake.

“One is, does the media encourage, for instance, Police Commissioner Savua to issue statements that really shouldn't be issued, or is it the media's duty to report what the commissioner says without actually assessing the words thoroughly?”

“If the police commissioner issues a statement, is that automatically newsworthy or should the media make some kind of assessment? The other one, of course, is whether journalists encourage the police commissioner and other people to issue irresponsible statements. Simply by asking leading questions or by pestering them for statements, or something like that.”

Professor MacWilliam is also surprised about the kind of official police statements issued. “I would have thought many of the statements are sub judice and the case is yet to be tested at law. He says it is a possibility that the police commissioner could manipulate the media, as “leading figures always manipulate journalists”.

Daily Post reporter Mithleshni Gurdayal defended her newspaper's reporting of the murders. “Media has a full right to publish things about their personal life that would lead to the discovery of the killer”.

□ *Ana Tapueluelu is a Pacific Media Initiative-sponsored Diploma in Pacific Journalism student at the University of the South Pacific. This article was originally published in the September issue of Wansolwara.*