Colouring the news

Tapu Misa

At a rap session at Te Reo Aotearoa's base in Papatoetoe, Radio New Zealand's Tino Pereira is exploring myths.

The reality of being a pacific island journalist in a pakeha news organisation is, for Tino, coming close to being fired because of an accent which is too samoan sounding, while his competence as a journalist is never questioned.

It's not the most encouraging story to tell a group of pacific islanders. Especially ones you're trying to entice into journalism, but as Tino reasoned, they may as well know the bad news.

Anyway, we'd already given them the good news.

For the first few days of this introductory course into journalism, we'd fed our 17 budding (we hoped) young journalists on the basics of the profession.

Gary Wilson, of the NZ Journalists Training Board, Mike Field, news editor of Sunday News, and Fraser Folster of Radio NZ, gave them a brief, tantalising taste of writing, of the thrill of chasing a story, of hearing their own voices on tape recorders, of being given an excuse to be nosey in interview sessions.

This was the first such course for pacific islanders since the journalists training board and Maori Affairs first started running them late in 1980.

They've aimed ambitiously at starting to redress the imbalance built in to a news media which in this country is overwhelmingly mono-cultural. They have aimed first to woo bi-cultural people to the media, and secondly to try to sell the idea of the bicultural (multicultural even) journalist to the people who run the country's papers and radio stations.

Success (and the justification for the board and the department's investment in time and money) is in the 20 or so maori and pacific island journalists now working in the media.

The first course in 1980 boasts graduates in major news organisations around the country, not to mention the only maori reporter in the South Island, Lois Turei at the Press.

Up to now the courses have been decidedly maori oriented, and rightly so, but lately the growing interest shown by the samoans, the tongans, the cook islanders and niueans have highlighted the need for this separate course.

Tutored mainly by the handful of us pacific island journalists already working (there with the blessings of our increasingly more aware bosses), the course was this time dominated by the samoans — and women at that.

The week at the Pacific Islanders Educational Resource Centre saw "students" ranging in age from a bright, frighteningly talented 16-and-17 year olds to a rather more seasoned tongan of 73.

That they had the talent — whether writing or speaking — to make it as journalists was obvious. One of the tutors, Mike Field, was surprised to find just how "together" they were. And after a brief radio session, RNZ's only samoan news reporters, Fraser Folster and Tino Pereira, had to admit (jokingly) that these great new voices they'd discovered had suddenly put their jobs at risk.

Triumphs during the week came with a spot for one of the students on RNZ's competitive Morning Report programme, and published stories in Sunday News, and Auckland's community newspapers.

While all this up and coming talent made us rather proud of our lot, we had to temper this by preparing them for the less glamorous, less exciting and more frustrating truths of journalism.

Without scaring The Prospects off they needed to know that they would not always be understood as journalists — not just by their employers but also by their own people. To know that the media couldn't be changed overnight. That they may end up working for a big pakeha news organisation which cares nothing for its maori and pacific island readers or listeners. That on the other hand they could expect to be used by those news organisations who did realise their marketing value.

By the same token they needed to be told that it wasn't good enough for them to aim at being mono-cultural journalists either, reporting, for instance, only samoan things.

We needn't have worried. A few were so keen they could not have been put off by anything, while the others accepted it philosophically.

And a few, like our only maori student, an Auckland primary school teacher, had already had a taste of what it could be like to be a maori journalist. Or a journalist who is maori.

In a brief stint at Auckland's Inner City News during the course, she came up with a list of stories that put to shame the city's big dailies, radio and television.

But at the same time, she discovered that it's not always possible to write "nice" stories about your own people. Setting out to do a story that began as a possible case of pakeha-administration insensitivity to maori people, she was less than happy when the facts pointed instead to conflict between maori people.

The course was only a week long, but the real work to get those who want to become journalists into journalism courses in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch now begins.

Some of the students would need nurturing — whatever talents they had. This means hassling them, writing to them, calling them up if necessary — anything to keep the interest they've shown from dying for want of encouragement.

It sometimes even means coaching them on what to expect from journalism courses which really aren't geared to bi-cultural students.

There have been enough courses — where the talent just fades back into the woodwork — to know how crucial this is. As Gary Wilson has found (having done it almost singlehandedly for the past four years) it can sometimes take two to three years for some students to finally break into this media stronghold.

Of course, the cheeky ones — already expert in the pakeha/palagi ways — will sail through with very little help.

And some others, having used the week to take a long, hard look at this thing called journalism, have decided they have better things to do.