REPORTING FROM ABROAD
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South Pacific Editors Conference
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First, I'd like to talk a bit about myself.

Here I am in Fiji, as part of a whirlwind South Pacific tour. I left Honolulu on July 22. Since then I have visited American Samoa, Western Samoa, and Tonga. I arrived in Suva last Saturday night. Next Sunday I shall fly to California.

I have never been to the South Pacific before, and I may never return here. My roots are in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania -- about 8,000 miles away. That's where my newspaper is published.

I know a lot about Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. I also know more than most Americans do about India and Pakistan, because I lived and worked there for seven years. But when I go home next week, all I will know about the South Pacific is what I have learned second-hand from books and the little I can see and hear first-hand in two weeks.

What most Philadelphians think about the South Pacific -- if they think about it at all -- they conjure up visions of an exotic, idyllic, untroubled paradise, immortalized by Sadie Thompson and Dorothy Lamour. There are a few Philadelphians, of course -- most of them with graying hair, like mine -- who remember the area with great personal sadness because of the bitter fighting that took place near here in World War II.

In those days, Saipan and Tarawa and Guadalcanal were in American headlines day after day after day. But today, Micronesia and Fiji and Tonga and Samoa and Tahiti are rarely heard from in Philadelphia. So, since I am here, I shall probably feel obliged to write about the South Pacific for my newspaper -- if for no other reason than to prove that The Philadelphia Bulletin actually had a staff member in Nuku'alofa!
I shall strive to be honest and truthful. Hopefully, my basic statistics and historical data will be accurate. But deep down in my heart, I know that at best my writing will be superficial and will say little if anything that hasn't been published many times before.

It will be superficial because it will be based, largely, not on what I have learned and experienced for myself, but on what people such as you tell me as I hurriedly pick your brains. I consider myself a good reporter, with well-developed instincts, so I will probably know if something is blatantly untrue. But how valid is it for me to report what only one or two of you tell me, no matter how sincere and knowledgeable you may seem? How do I know that your version of life and problems and hopes and achievements and frustrations in your country does not differ sharply from the versions of other, equally sincere persons whom I have not had time to meet?

An American correspondent whom I know used to joke that to be an expert about a foreign country, you have to live there less than one week or more than three years. If you stay less than a week, he reasoned, you have time for only the flimsiest of first impressions. First impressions tend to support and strengthen the prejudices and biases that you brought to the country with you, so when you leave, you think you know all the answers.

But if you stay more than a week, my correspondent friend says, you begin to talk with enough people and see enough things to doubt strongly that your prejudices and biases -- and first impressions and conclusions -- are correct. The longer you stay, the more doubtful you become and the more elusive the truth seems. It can take years of intimate study -- and a working knowledge of at least the principal local language -- to understand what a country and its people are really like.
Unfortunately, however, we have to consider the economics of the news business. It would be very nice if The Philadelphia Bulletin or at least United Press International, which serves hundreds of clients throughout the world, could afford to station a full-time staff man in Nuku'alofa. I think all of us understand why neither can. There is only so much space in one day's newspaper and so much time on a news agency's wire. This means that the newspaper and agency must establish priorities, each according to its own needs.

Essentially, The Philadelphia Bulletin is locally oriented in its news coverage. That's the way it ought to be. Ninety-five percent of our 600,000 readers are in the Philadelphia area. If the Philadelphia news media don't keep the people in our own area informed of what's happening within the area, no one will.

The Fiji Times, I'm sure, is in the same situation. If it doesn't tell its readers the details of what's happening in Fiji, no newspaper will.

This means that only a minor proportion of the news space in The Philadelphia Bulletin -- indeed in most American newspapers -- goes to foreign news. I suspect that our proportion may even be smaller than the proportion in The Fiji Times or even The Tonga Chronicle. The reason is that we Americans tend to be insular people. Despite the fact that most of us trace our heritage to other countries -- especially those in Europe -- we are much more self-sufficient than most other peoples. The average American rarely feels a need to concern himself with events abroad, unless they directly and personally affect masses of our own people, such as the war in Vietnam does.

Let's face it. Whether we like it or not, what happens in the United States, a large country and the biggest Pacific power, is usually more newsworthy in Fiji than vice versa.
Another reason that a paper like The Philadelphia Bulletin need not devote proportionately as much space as The Fiji Times to foreign news is that there are alternative ways in which our readers can get it. If a Philadelphian craves more extensive and more detailed foreign coverage, he can easily and economically buy a second newspaper, say The New York Times or Christian Science Monitor. The reader or radio listener in Fiji or Samoa or Tonga can't.

Of course, in absolute terms -- that is, in terms of column inches, rather than proportions -- we in Philadelphia publish much, much more foreign news than most newspapers in other countries. Most of you know how bulky American newspapers tend to be, especially on Sundays. But publication costs are soaring for American newspapers, especially in terms of newsprint and labor. Meanwhile, advertising revenues have dipped. This has hampered the flow of foreign news.

First, newspapers have become slightly smaller, and the proportion of advertising space -- which brings in the money -- is increasing in relation to news. Reduced total news space naturally means less space for foreign news.

Second, as the economy has tightened, less money has been available to station reporters abroad or even to send them on superficial trips to the South Pacific. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for the support of The East-West Center.

Except for Vietnam, there are fewer American reporters abroad today than at any time since before World War II. Yet in this nuclear age, in which the slightest human error could destroy us all, I think the need for good foreign reporting is probably the greatest it has ever been.

Fiji may not rate as much space in Philadelphia as Moscow or Peking do and it may never be economically sound for us to station a staff reporter here. Yet it is very important for us in Philadelphia to know and understand at least something about Fiji and its people and problems.
I'm repelled by a common American practice that I shall call "crisis reporting." This means to ignore a country almost completely most of the time, then to flood it with droves of know-nothing reporters when a crisis develops in such proportions that it cannot be ignored.

An example was the situation in Panama about ten years ago. Very little news came to the United States from there. A few free-lance reporters in Panama tried to warn U.S. editors that trouble was brewing there because of dissatisfaction with the Panama Canal treaty and the North American presence. But warnings from free-lance reporters rarely make news, especially if they come from small countries and have no physical evidence of trouble. So most people in the United States believed at the time that the Panamanians loved us.

Suddenly violence erupted between Panamanian students and U.S. troops. Suddenly there were riots and a full-blown crisis. Within two days, hundreds of U.S. reporters and television cameramen flooded the small country. Most of the reporters knew no more about Panama than they could hastily read on the airplane. Later, as they typed their first dispatches in the Panama Intercontinental Hotel, one reporter would shout to another: "Hey, what's the president of this country's name?"

Almost as suddenly as it erupted, the crisis subsided. The United States agreed to renegotiate the canal treaty and presumably make it more favorable to Panama. The violence ended and the reporters went home. Since then, Panama has again been virtually ignored. Few people in the United States are aware that the treaty never has been renegotiated and that just beneath the surface, there is still a lot of explosive discontent.

I'm not predicting a similar crisis in the South Pacific. But I do think that we Americans would be a lot better off if we understood some of the popular aspirations and frustrations in the newly independent islands and those under
foreign trusteeship. I'm not suggesting criticism of Washington-appointed leaders -- I don't know enough about them. But I do know that governance tends to be best if it is responsible to and responsive to a well-informed public.

Yet in today's United States, many people don't even know where the Marshalls are, if they have heard of them at all. However, I suspect that every schoolboy in the Marshalls knows quite a lot about the United States.

The basic problem, then, is to determine how, given the realities of the news business, we can best keep the public informed about distant places, especially relatively small ones. It's a problem faced by all of us, but I'd better look at it primarily from an American viewpoint, since that's the one I know best.

Although The Washington Post, for example, has many more resources than, say, The Fiji Times, it can't station staff correspondents in Suva any more than The Times can in Washington. I've already discussed that point. As I've also discussed, there isn't much news value in sending reporters or editors like myself on whirlwind trips -- unless there is a specific realistic purpose, such as to take part in an editors conference like this one. And there isn't much hope of getting much more space in the newspaper for foreign news.

So the solution lies in making better use of news resources readily at hand and the space that is readily available.

I would continue to cover the earthquakes and typhoons and plane crashes and riots and revolutions because whether we like it or not, massive violence is news. But I would eliminate a lot of the "mysterious East" trivia that we publish now. And I would stop trying to cover some events -- such as slow-moving international conferences or lingering disputes in Italian politics -- on a day-to-day basis when very little happens and much of what is said is gibberish.

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Besides covering spot foreign news that cannot be ignored, I would develop a series of "newsletters" from different countries and areas. Each would attempt to recapitulate and interpret major developments and the mood in its respective country or area since the last newsletter from there appeared.

A regular schedule could be worked out. For a Philadelphia audience, a newsletter from Western Europe might be advisable once a week. So might a letter from some part of Latin America. A letter from China could alternate weekly with a letter from Japan. And so on.

Micronesia would not rate a weekly newsletter and maybe not a monthly one, either. But even if a 750-word "letter from Micronesia" were published only once every two months, a well-written and well-edited one would tell Philadelphians a lot more about Micronesia and its people than they know now. It could have a major indirect impact on Washington's policies.

In my opinion, the newsletter approach is the only realistic way to provide a general audience with what it needs to know and understand from most foreign countries. I might add, also, that much of what we need to know we don't have to know instantly. I am highly in favor of electronic progress. The peace satellite age, which is just dawning, promises the ability to tell the people of New Britain of an event in Philadelphia as rapidly and as fully as Philadelphians learn about it.

What we must constantly ask ourselves, however, is how electronic progress may best be utilized. Just because we have the capability of instant reporting doesn't mean that all news is worth reporting instantly. Much news that reaches newspapers and broadcasting stations today would be much better balanced, much more meaningful -- and often more accurate -- if the reporter had taken an extra hour or two to recheck his facts and ponder what he was reporting. Much news that we learn today would be just as newsworthy -- and perhaps be in much
better perspective -- if we didn't learn it until tomorrow or even until next month.

We simply don't have to know everything immediately. Even if it could be served up to us well, we couldn't digest it.

The newsletters that I propose could be put together in one of several ways. Perhaps one letter could be done one way and another letter another way, depending on conditions in the area.

In some countries, the reporting and writing could best be done by a local national. But only in some countries. Sometimes local nationals are far too busy and preoccupied as staff members of local newspapers or as freelancers who must spread themselves very thinly to earn a living. They can't afford the time to report in depth. Sometimes a local national -- even though he knows his own country much better than a resident foreigner -- is inhibited by political pressures that the foreigner can avoid.

In some countries, a resident American scholar would be a good newsletter reporter. He may need help in writing in lay terms, but a good editor in Philadelphia could provide that. In some areas there may be no one suitable. But an editor in Philadelphia, by following newspapers and magazines from the area and talking with visitors from there, might be able to prepare a passable newsletter himself. It would undoubtedly be far from ideal, because he would be far from the scene, but much better than the information published about that area now.

I'm not suggesting, incidentally, that every daily newspaper in the United States develop newsletters exclusively for its own use. That would be very costly and superfluous. Instead, letters could be syndicated, since many dailies have similar problems, audiences, and needs. Perhaps the major news agencies could prepare them -- although I doubt it. Their resources seem to
spread too thinly now. But the project might provide a challenging opportunity for young journalists with a keen interest in international affairs.

Perhaps my proposal isn't perfect, but I think we must move in that direction. If nothing else, electronics and jet propulsion and space exploration show us how small our world -- even our universe -- has become. At the same time, we have developed far too many means of mutual and self-destruction.

If we are going to survive at all, we must understand each other, whether we are from mid-Manhattan or a remote jungle village in New Guinea. To understand each other, we must know each other. Since we can't constantly keep traveling to each other's country, we need help.

To provide such help is the role of the news media. We, as editors, must do everything in our power to make the media fulfill it.