Cultural Blunders and Different

The Big Igloo

by
Doug Mitchell

IT'S EARLY MORNING in Igloolik. I flip on the TV in my motel room and turn to the weather channel. The temperature is minus forty-seven degrees Celsius. It's also a blustery day and, with the wind-chill, it'll feel like sixty-five degrees below zero. I have a sudden urge to go back to bed. But today I must shoot a TV news story about a giant igloo that is being built in town.

The story promises to be a good one. The people of Igloolik have a community festival each year called 'The welcoming of the return of the sun'. It happens when the sun at last peeks above the horizon after the depths of winter. From the end of November to the middle of January, the people of Igloolik don't see the sun at all.

This year they are making a huge igloo out of blocks of ice to use as a venue for drum dancing and other stuff. Now you might think, unless you live in Canada, that igloos are always made out of ice. Well, no. In the town of Igloolik, which is known for its igloos. (the word itself means 'place of igloos'), most igloos are made of snow. This is the first time the big festival igloo is to be built out of ice.

I look down at my boots, which are rated to only minus forty-five, and decide to check with the member of my crew who will know best if they'll be okay out there – the Inuk (singular for Inuit) reporter, Paul Irngaut. Paul is staying with his mother (Igloolik is his home town) and he comes over in the truck we've rented. He says I'll be fine – I just have to walk around inside the igloo (where it'll be a toasty minus twenty) as soon as my toes start feeling numb.

Paul and I had agreed on doing the igloo story as an extra to the elections we were in town to cover. But we were thinking very differently about it as we started the shoot. These differences in approach, perhaps because of our two very different cultures, would surface again.

Paul knew his people would marvel at the igloo, an outsized variation on a tradition. I remember him being impressed with its structure. Paul was himself an igloo builder of note – still making a snow home on occasion when he was out hunting caribou on the weekends. I, on the other hand, was thinking about how CBC viewers in Toronto or Vancouver would view it.

We get to the site of the igloo just outside town. It is really cold. We shoot an elder cutting snow blocks to use as benches inside the igloo. The bricks for the actual structure have been cut out of a nearby lake, loaded onto a qamotik (Inuit sled) and then towed by snowmobile to the site.

The elder is good camera material: he has on traditional clothes – a homemade parka, kammiks (caribou skin boots) and a colourful nasik (knitted hat). But Paul spends too much time chatting with the elder off camera. When we do the interview, it seems to go on and on.

We try for a shot of a 10-year-old kid who is lifting blocks of ice off a qamotik. I think: Get the kid big in the frame; you can't go wrong with a shot of a cute kid. But Paul wants shots of the kid being directed by his elders in the art of working with snow.

The cameraman and I scramble to get back to the warmth of the hotel to eat a hot meal. I have a club sandwich, Paul has fresh caribou at his brother's place.

When we get back home to Iqaluit, the soon-to-be capital of the new territory of Nunavut to work on our stories, there are more surprises. Paul transcribes the more interesting soundbites. The elder has said some interesting things. When Paul asked about what challenges they'd overcome during the building of the igloo, the elder said that a bunch of ice blocks had been stolen by some townsfolk who melted them down for drinking water so they had to go back to the lake to cut more. But his answer seems repetitive. I cut his answer in half and plug it into my script. Paul doesn't like the cut. He says elders especially tend to talk in circles – finishing off sections by coming back to their original point. Transcribed into English it looks repetitive but in the original it feels completely natural, he says. Further, elders are respected figures in Inuit culture. My cut would seem rude. We compromise on length.

The script, I think, has a strong opening. I've written 'Igloolik means place of igloos' off the top. The opening visual is to be a beautiful dawn sun rising over the town.

But Paul, who is translating it into spoken Inuktitut on the fly, freezes at the very first line: 'Igloolik means place of igloos'. Fair enough. In Inuktitut, Igloolik certainly does mean place of igloos. But Paul is voicing this in Inuktitut. It would be the equivalent of saying: 'Igloolik, igloolik.'

There's a moment of realisation and we start laughing. 'Igloolik, igloolik.'

Okay, I decide, instead of 'Igloolik, igloolik' he'll say 'Igloolik has long been known for its igloos.'

'Sorry about that,' I say to Paul. 'That was a pretty stupid thing to write.'

'Yeah, it was,' he says with a smile.

Doug Mitchell is a TV lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University. He is a graduate of Carleton University, Toronto and worked for CBC in Nunavut for two years.

Paul Irngaut was a television reporter and video journalist with Canadian Broadcasting for 11 years. He helped launch Canada's first Inuktitut-language daily news and current affairs show, *Igalaaq*. Paul left CBC last year to become executive liaison with Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the land claims organisation of the Inuit of the eastern arctic.

HOW did you get your start in television journalism?

I was in Ottawa upgrading my academic skills and I was going to school with this young chap who was hosting this show for CBC. At the time the Inuktitut portion of the show was done out of Ottawa. The guy that was doing it had to leave so they asked me to take over. So I hosted about 10 episodes and that's how I was introduced to television.

And then I moved back up north to Igloolik to work at the Science Institute. The CBC show was moved to Iqaluit and called Aqsarniit (Northern Lights) and in the format that they had they used to have different regular topics and one of them was science and since I was working at the Science Institute and I spoke the language they asked me to do some segments for them. So I did and then this writer/broadcaster position opened and I got the job.

What was it that attracted you to the job of a TV journalist?

Basically it was a way to communicate with the Inuit. And the Inukitut language was in trouble a bit and in a way I wanted to serve the Inuktitut language by doing it well on TV.

Was it important to tell your people's stories?

Yes. I think as an aboriginal journalist you want to tell the aboriginal story. And lots of important stories wouldn't get done if we didn't do them.

Conventions

Working on Igalaaq

In 1999, Canada divided the Northwest Territories to create the new territory of Nunavut. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) saw a need to strengthen its bureau there and in 1998 they sent **Doug Mitchell** from Toronto to run the bureau in Iqaluit, expecting that the creation of the new territory would create lots of interesting news.

At the time, I was the bureau producer for Canadian Broadcasting Television in the eastern arctic. I led a team of two Inuit reporters and one southern Canadian cameraman (bizarrely, all three were named Paul). Our job? To cover Nunavut – an area almost two million square kilometres in size populated by fewer than 30 000 people. My crew produced daily news and current affairs in two languages – English and Inuktitut (the Inuit language), some of it directed from Yellowknife, lying two time zones to the west.

We were broadcasting countrywide, including to Anglophone cities, but the key audiences were scatterings of people in Nunavut: those of the north, transplanted southerners and bilingual Inuit.

Working in Nunavut in a cultural milieu I didn't understand meant I couldn't take as given that I knew what was going on and therefore couldn't make decisions – producer-style – alone. The strict hierarchy of the TV newsroom had to change because I had to trust the Inuit reporters' knowledge and instincts for stories.

Our broadcasts went out countrywide but our key audience was in the north with its transplanted southerners and bilingual Inuit. Our executive producers, two time zones to the west, focused on the English-speaking audience and its familiarity with the conventions of broadcast news.

I came to realize that helping a people tell their own stories was to become my priority. It was impossible to do both.

For example the giant igloo story. The Inuit reporters approached this reverentially as a very important story about the reclamation of their heritage. It was both something special and new but about a tradition thousands of years old.

For a southern audience – and the way I was approaching the story at the time – it was the exoticism of the whole thing, the quirky story that you get at the end of the bulletin.

So working from Iqaluit I started to operate differently by:

- getting Inuit reporters to drive the story meetings with their ideas, with me helping shape the stories and not dictate what they should be,
- reorganising the vetting process. Instead of just making cutting decisions I began to work with reporters to agree on translations that made the best sense in Inuktitut.

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I realised I had to be open to doing things differently and shake off the conviction that things have to be the way they were taught and done in the south. I learnt that journalism needs to adapt to the culture and audience it serves rather than trying to adapt them to itself.

Instead of me pushing Paul to make his stories fit my southern hard-nosed journalistic values, I learnt to let him take the lead and adapt to his superior sense of the local situation.

My relationship with my seniors became fraught. We ended up doing a lot of 'soft' stories: interesting cultural events and new seal skin fashions. The people in Yellowknife always wanted 'hard' news. We did do that, sometimes really big stories but we were criticised for being soft.

However, our Inuit audience loved the broadcasts and greeted us warmly wherever we travelled.

Eventually I realised that the bureau ideally needed an Inuk producer. The problem is that there are very few university-educated Inuit and those trained by CBC would get snapped up by government.

What did you enjoy most about the day-to-day job?

Story meetings because you find out so much about what's going on in your community.

What frustrated you about your job?

Dealing with Yellowknife, dealing with people there that didn't really grasp what was going on here and what was important to people here.

Do you think Inuit and non-Inuit audiences want different things from television news and current affairs?

Well, I think the qallunaaq (non-Inuit) audience wants hard news and news from the south. The Inuit audience wants hard news too but also more about their communities. Also I think they're more into good news stories. They don't like it when a whole newscast is full of negative stories. And they want stories about culture.

Did your cultural values as an Inuk conflict with the conventions of journalism?

Definitely. For example, in Inuit society you don't really every criticize your elders – certainly not publicly. But in journalism, you have to ask the tough questions and your story may put down an elder and I found that very, very hard to do.

Why did you leave CBC after 11 years as a reporter/video journalist?

After so many years of doing reports, I just got frustrated with all the politics and working with Yellowknife. Even though they were so far away from us they had so much effect on what we did in our bureau. I'm doing more for my people now because I'm informing them about very practical things they need to know.

Inuit girl in Iqaluit in the new Canadian territory Nunavut.

REUTERS