

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Cambridge		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 22		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Improving truth of BBC documentaries about indigenous people		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2000 to date		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Rupert Stasch	Lecturer	15.12.2014 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> February 2016-November 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)          Since the 1990s, 50 television documentaries and reality shows developed and broadcast across the Global North and East Asia have depicted Korowai people of Papua as living without clothing, in very high treehouses. In 2018, <i>My Year with the Tribe</i>, a BBC documentary series reaching 1,600,000 viewers, focused instead on how Westerners' own exoticizing stereotypes lead Korowai to stage those practices. This focus resulted from Rupert Stasch's research via his publications and engagement with filmmakers. Through the series' broadcast, it has impacted creativity, culture and society, and other existing and new television shows, such as by prompting BBC to withdraw its 2011 series <i>Human Planet</i>. U.K. and international audiences have benefited from more truthful understanding of the lives of Korowai and other indigenous people in similar circumstances.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)          Since 1995, Rupert Stasch's work has focused on Korowai people of Indonesian Papua. Based on three years of immersive fieldwork up to 2018, he has published a monograph and 30 articles about Korowai patterns of social life and language use.</p> <p>As a Lecturer at Cambridge since 2014, Stasch has researched patterns of interaction between Korowai and tourists or film crews. In 2017-2018, he carried out four months of new fieldwork in the Korowai area funded by a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award, focused specifically on tourism and television. He has also conducted primary research with tourists and filmmakers in their home countries. In [R1-3], published in 2015, Stasch gives a detailed analysis of Korowai motives for participating in tourism, and of how Korowai have reorganised their society around their relations with tourists and film crews. In [R4], first delivered as the 2016 Lewis Henry Morgan lecture at the University of Rochester, Stasch analyses the stereotypes and desires that tourists and Korowai hold about each other, and how the visitors misunderstand Korowai motives for participating in tourism. In [R5], an open-access reference work for undergraduates and non-academic audiences, Stasch uses these patterns of misunderstanding between Korowai and tourists to support a wider comparative account of interactions between cultural tourism hosts and guests worldwide. In [R6], originally the 2017 Malinowski lecture at the LSE but rewritten prior to publication 2019 to incorporate results of new fieldwork, Stasch examines the rhetorical purposes of tourists' and their Korowai hosts' exoticizing stereotypes about each other, and the ways that some tourists seek to investigate critically the assumptions of their own tourism activities.</p> <p>It was on the basis of Stasch's research outputs that the impacts described in section 4 took place. In early 2016, the director-cameraman hired to lead four expeditions to the Korowai area to film a new BBC multi-part television series searched the internet for background information about Korowai. He found Stasch's University of Cambridge web page and publication list. Prior to the first production trip, the filmmaker emailed Stasch, who then spoke with the filmmaker by phone and emailed him copies of [R1-3] and other background publications. Stasch and the</p>		

director-cameraman stayed in further telephone contact across the film production process, and then Stasch collaborated in the post-production editing process in London across 2017.

The impacts described in section 4 more specifically occurred because Stasch's research was focused on tourism and he had produced detailed analyses of the structure of interactions between Korowai and tourists or media professionals. A major finding of [R4] and other of Stasch's research outputs is that tourists acquire their mistaken stereotypes about Korowai from prior media imagery about indigenous societies generally, and Korowai in particular. Stasch's research demonstrates that mass media imagery is reproduced over time by new travellers to the Korowai area on assignment from television channels and magazines, who copy imagery they have seen in earlier shows and photo spreads. One specific focus of Stasch's research has been Western attraction to Korowai 'treehouse' architecture, and the routine portrayal of Korowai as living in houses 100 feet above ground, when they normally live in houses about 15 feet above ground, and build very tall houses only for film crews, not to live in.

Between 1986 and 2015, there were 50 previous TV shows made about Korowai that that depicted them as living in harmony with nature and untouched by history (as Stasch has documented through multilingual online and library research, and through fieldwork directly with Korowai and film crews in Papua). U.K. production companies made most of the 11 English-language shows, several of which were also broadcast in the U.S. and internationally. Other countries in which programmes were commissioned in the 2000s for broadcast on major national channels included France (four shows), Japan (three shows), Korea (three shows), Australia, Denmark, Finland, Spain, Brazil, and Indonesia. Television executives usually commission these shows based on having seen an earlier one made for a different national market, and U.K.-productions are the most influential. Virtually all programmes misleadingly depict Korowai without any clothes, and 10 misleadingly depict them as living in super-high treehouses.

As described in section 4, these patterns of tourism and TV became the main focus of the new documentary series filmed in 2016 for BBC Two, edited in 2017, and broadcast in mid-2018. The findings of Stasch's existing research influenced the filmmakers' decision to make these patterns the focus of their filming and editing, and they relied on Stasch and his research findings to guide many specific decisions about their show's content.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

All publications below are peer-reviewed.

[R1] Stasch, R. (2015). How an egalitarian polity structures tourism and restructures itself around it. *Ethnos*, 80(4), 524-547. [\[DOI\]](#)

[R2] Stasch, R. (2015). Introduction: Double signs and intrasocietal heterogeneity in primitivist tourism encounters. *Ethnos*, 80(4), 433-447. [\[DOI\]](#)

[R3] Stasch, R. (2015). From primitive other to Papuan self: Korowai engagement with ideologies of unequal human worth in encounters with tourists, state officials, and education. In M. Slama and J. Munro (Eds.), *From 'Stone-Age' to 'real-time': Exploring Papuan temporalities, mobilities, and religiosities* (pp. 59-94). ANU Press. [\[DOI\]](#)

[R4] Stasch, R. (2016). Dramas of otherness: 'First contact' tourism in New Guinea. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(3), 7-27. [\[DOI\]](#)

[R5] Stasch, R. (2017). Tourism. In F. Stein et al. *The Cambridge encyclopedia of anthropology*. [\[DOI\]](#)

[R6] Stasch, R. (2019). Primitivist tourism and anthropological research: Awkward relations. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 25(3), pp. 526-545. [\[DOI\]](#)

Funding

R. Stasch - 'Understanding and misunderstanding between tourists, guides, and visited people in Papua, Indonesia' - US Government Fulbright Senior Scholar Award - 4.5 months of research in two periods between July 2017 and January 2018 - USD20,450 plus a round trip airfare and health care coverage.

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

##### Impacts on creativity, culture and society

Stasch's research has been instrumental to the production of an innovative documentary programme that has changed U.K. and global public understandings of the Korowai people and their processes of cultural adaptation through interaction with film crews and tourists.

In 2016, television crews from Keo Films made four trips to Indonesian Papua, to shoot a documentary about an Englishman visiting Korowai people. The resulting three-part series, *My Year with the Tribe*, was broadcast on BBC Two on three Sunday evenings in April 2018 [E1]. Based on Stasch's research and presence at Cambridge, he was contacted by Keo Films before filming began, for guidance about Korowai and the series. *My Year with the Tribe* was the first documentary made in the Korowai area to focus on stereotypes of Western visitors themselves, and their clashes with visited people's hopes for change. This unusual focus was heavily influenced by Stasch's research, first via telephone conversations with the production team and his emailed publications, and then via extensive direct participation in the editing process at Keo's London office. As the Executive Producer of the series and Creative Director at Keo states:

As a result [of Stasch's involvement], our team shifted part of their focus towards documenting how the Korowai have adapted their culture to fit the expectations of film crews and tourists. [...] We relied heavily on Dr Stasch's research to give us the confidence we needed to feel sure that we were not misrepresenting their actions, or jumping to false conclusions. We knew we were at odds with other TV documentaries, and were potentially going out on a limb editorially. Dr Stasch's advice and insight was crucial in our process of developing a series around these new themes, that I believe represents the Korowai culture more accurately and truthfully than other accounts. [...] Working with Gavin [the Director-Cameraman] and our editors, Dr Stasch provided a large number of suggestions and corrections in relation to the subtitles, the ethnographic details, and the broad themes of the programmes. These suggestions and corrections directly impacted the final shows, and Dr Stasch is listed as a Consultant in the end credits of each episode. [E2]

The show's first episode reached an audience of 1,600,000 viewers [E3]. It received two Realscreen Awards for best documentary of the year in its genre [E4] and positive press reviews in mainstream media, including *BBC News*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Spectator* and *The Express* [E5]. A *Guardian* reviewer commented: 'As an anthropological study of a tribe on the very cusp of transition to western, cash values, it could hardly be bettered. Similarly, as an anthropological study of how western film crews have grown increasingly desperate to find just one tribe living deep in any jungle – living in trees, wearing penis-gourds and the rest – and to pay handsomely for the footage, no matter how staged, it was a revelation' [E5]. *My Year with the Tribe* is also being marketed internationally. It has so far been broadcast in Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, New Zealand, and the Czech Republic.

The documentary sparked great debate about the impact of Western stereotypes on Korowai, as is evident from over 2,134 comments on YouTube alone [E6]. Viewers' comments include: 'This is very raw and I appreciate this so much...I'm Indonesian living in the US and I love my country so much. This is an eye opening from every angle even though I've seen many documentaries about different tribes in Indonesia but this one so far is my favorite simply because you presented it raw, good and bad all of it to help us understand society better. Outstanding job!' (p. 9); 'This documentary acts as a mirror to each and every one of us' (p. 14); 'Great documentary

and insight into how its always been the case that when foreigners “invade” other civilizations minding their own business the unintended consequence is always a negative outcome.’ (p. 97)

A social media listening search of *My Year with the Tribe*'s reach identified 8,351 total engagements and 13,500,000 potential impressions. [E7]

#### Impact on BBC practice and on other new television shows in this genre

Stasch's research influenced filmmakers' understanding of how Korowai construct super-high treehouses especially for film crews. From [E2]:

Our film includes a brief segment about this discovery, in which we show excerpts from two previous television programmes, both of which show 30 metre high treehouses and suggest that they are actually lived in by the Korowai. Our voiceover points out this inaccuracy. One earlier programme we visually quoted in this way was the well-known BBC series *Human Planet*. Our inclusion of this element in early rough edits of our programme led to a BBC internal review of the production of the Korowai sequence in *Human Planet*.

In April 2018, two weeks before broadcast of *My Year with the Tribe*'s first episode, BBC issued this press releases about their 2011 series *Human Planet*:

The BBC has been alerted to a breach of editorial standards in an episode of *Human Planet* from 2011 which concerns the Korowai people of West Papua. During the making of BBC Two's upcoming documentary series, *My Year With The Tribe*, a member of the tribe discusses how they have built very high tree houses for the benefit of overseas programme makers.

The BBC has reviewed a sequence in *Human Planet* depicting this and found that the portrayal of the tribe moving into the treehouse as a real home is not accurate. Since this programme was broadcast in 2011, we have strengthened our mandatory training for all staff in editorial guidelines, standards and values. [E8]

Later that month, while *My Year with the Tribe* was still being broadcast, BBC issued a second press release stating that a further editorial breach in another part of *Human Planet* had come to light and that the series was being withdrawn from distribution. [E9]

The testimonial from Keo Films' Creative Director details the role of Stasch's research in shaping how *My Year with the Tribe* presented this issue of past television shows' deceptive representations: 'In our editing process, we relied on [Stasch's] statements to us based on his fieldwork research in the Korowai area, in making our decisions about how exactly to describe Korowai house construction patterns, around this controversial point.' [E2]

A social media comment by a photographer evidences further impact on professional practice. He writes that he has 'spent a lot of time questioning my impact as a travelling artist exploring remote areas of Papua New Guinea during its time of transition into the modern world...I have been left asking myself what message my photos are sending out through social media? And how to responsibly navigate my way through the online deception that has become our cultural norm. And ultimately, as an artist, how do I want to represent a culture in transition; as they were, as they are now or a combination of both?' [E7]

*My Year with the Tribe* is also unique among the 50 television shows about Korowai so far made in depicting them as dominantly wearing imported clothes, and in focusing as much on their engagement with the market economy as forest-based subsistence. Keo Films' Creative Director positions the show within wider television industry norms, in these terms:

[The series] sought to maintain popular audience interest in the anthropology of a remote community, while telling a story that did not necessarily match pre-existing expectations and desires of many viewers. It is our hope that the programme has contributed to a more permanent change in how television portrays indigenous people to popular audiences. Dr Stasch's input was instrumental to our ability to innovate in this way with confidence. [E2]

Evidence of the significance of *My Year with the Tribe* in changing the appraisal of new television content is the negative criticism of Channel 4's *The British Tribe Next Door* (2019), the next show in the same genre broadcast on a major U.K. channel, which focused on an English presenter and her family living in a Himba village (Namibia). *The Telegraph* mentions how *My Year with the Tribe* had made the new show obsolete:

Time after time, the Himba acted as foils for the Moffatts' voyage of self-discovery. Will Millard's *My Year with the Tribe*, a fascinating and frank meta-documentary from last year about the impact of this sort of anthropological filmmaking-cum-social experiment on indigenous communities, covered this ground much more fruitfully and intelligently. *The British Tribe Next Door* felt like an expensive and rather redundant throwback. [E10]

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] BBC Two documentary *My Year with the Tribe*, broadcast on 15, 22 and 29 April 2018. DVD copy available on request.

[E2] Testimonial from Creative Director of Keo Films and Executive Producer of *My Year with the Tribe*, dated 8.01.2019, corroborating all aspects of the impact that Rupert Stasch's research had on the programme *My Year with the Tribe*.

[E3] Viewership figures for *My Year with the Tribe*.

[E4] Realscreen Awards results.

[E5] Reviews of *My Year with the Tribe*: *The Guardian* (15.04.2018), *BBC News Indonesia* (6.04.2018), *The Independent* (6.04.2018), *The Spectator* (19.04.2018), *The Express* (30.04.2018).

[E6] YouTube users' comments on *My Year with the Tribe*.

[E7] Social media Listening Insights report. Photographer's comment is found at <https://www.instagram.com/p/BikJqopgepE/>.

[E8] BBC press release 'Statement regarding Human Planet' (4.04.2018). This corroborates that the new series *My Year with the Tribe* revealed that the 2011 series *Human Planet* misleadingly depicted a Korowai family moving into a very high treehouse as its real home.

[E9] BBC press release 'Further Statement concerning Human Planet natural history series' (26.04.2018). This corroborates that discovery of a second problem in the 2011 *Human Planet* series led BBC to remove this major show from circulation.

[E10] *Telegraph* television review of *The British Tribe Next Door* (22.10.2019).