

CAMERAS, MICROPHONES AND PENS

Covering South Africa's TRC

By Zubeida Jaffer and Karin Cronjé



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Cover Photo: Journalists and family members of the late Black Consciousness leader, Steve Bantu Biko, at the start of the TRC hearings into his death. Photographer and picture copyright: George Hallett

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We dedicate this publication to the peace correspondents across the world working under trying circumstances to bring healing to divided communities.

Dr Charles Villa-Vicencio

Executive Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation



“Is it enough for the King to become another citizen without any privileges, or would it be more salutary to chop off his head, so that the people could watch the blood flow?”

Milan Simecka,
Czech writer

Coming to terms with the past is a challenge for all transitional societies emerging through post-war conflict.

Fortunately for South Africa, a discussion of how to deal with the past was not put on the back burner during the four years of negotiations. It was a discussion that not only wove through this period as a constant thread but also forced both perpetrator and victim, as they faced each other across the table, to find a path to deal with past pain. They did so directly in the final clause of the Constitution. This clause traded truth for amnesty and made the elections possible. It read:

“The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge.

These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu [the African philosophy of humanism] but not for victimization.

In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past. To this end, Parliament under this Constitution shall adopt a law determining a firm cut-off date which shall be a date after 8 October 1990 and before 6 December 1993 and providing for mechanisms, criteria and procedures, including tribunals, if any, through which such amnesty shall be dealt with at any time after the law has been passed.”

To give effect to this clause, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up after the 1994 elections.

The seventeen-member Commission was given the task of establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross human rights violations committed in the period between 1 March 1960 and the cut-off date, by conducting investigations and holding hearings. It also had to facilitate the granting of amnesty to persons who made full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective. In addition, the Commission was required to restore the human and civil dignity of victims and recommend reparation measures; and to compile a report of its findings and activities and recommend measures to prevent future violations of human rights.

Broadly stated, the aims of the Commission were to return to victims their civil and human rights; to restore the moral order of the society; to seek the truth, record it, and make it known to the public; to create a culture of human rights and respect for the rule of law; and to prevent the shameful events of the past from happening again.

The first hearings were held in April 1996. Over the following two years, South Africans were exposed almost daily to revelations about their traumatic past. In the cities and in many smaller towns, in improvised courtrooms fashioned out of town halls and community centres and churches, the drama of Apartheid and the struggle against it was played out. The Commission received 20 000 statements from victims, 2 000 of these in public hearings; and it received nearly 8 000

applications for amnesty for perpetrators.¹

This was the mechanism that South Africa chose to begin to deal with its past. It represented the strongest effort to create an appropriate outlet of emotion. The king's head was not chopped off so that people could watch the blood flow yet there was a symbolic bloodletting. The survivors told their stories and cried their tears and the people watched. The perpetrators disclosed awful detail of their actions and the people watched 'the blood flow'. Central to this exercise were the journalists with their cameras, microphones and pens bringing the past to life in every home across the country.

Without their work, the effect of the TRC would have been severely curtailed. This handbook provides an



overview of some of the challenges they faced in the two years that they covered an experience central to the reshaping of the soul of this injured country.

A Compromise

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission represented a compromise between the major political parties. Not only did the survivors of apartheid forego their international right to Nuremberg-type trials, they compromised further by agreeing to confine the parameters of the TRC to investigating only those instances of gross human rights violations perpetrated on all sides. The massive forced removals of people from their places of birth, the curtailment of freedom of movement through instruments such as the pass laws and the identification and punishment of collaborators were

excluded entirely from this exercise. In essence, the media's coverage of the past took place largely within the confined parameters of the TRC.

The vastness of the exercise (although within limited parameters) unearthed a body of material that provided a solid foundation for both understanding the past and beginning to deal with it.

To carry out its mandate, the TRC set up three committees.

The first of these was the *Human Rights Violations Committee*, which had to look into the accounts of victims through hearings and investigations. The second was the *Amnesty Committee*, which had to evaluate amnesty applications. This Committee had five members, two of whom were Commissioners and three independent Judges; it was totally independent and could not be overruled by the

Commission itself. Among other stipulations, the Committee had to apply the Norgard principles to determine whether an application qualified for amnesty. And the third committee was the *Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee*, which had to formulate a reparation policy to restore and rehabilitate the lives of victims and survivors of human rights violations. The Commission also had an Investigative Unit and a Research Unit, and was given the powers to subpoena people. It was supposed to finish its work in eighteen months, but took three long years to hand its final report to Nelson Mandela.

A Complicated Relationship

For the TRC to restore the human and civil dignity of victims, it had to create

the environment in which victims could remember and perpetrators be forgiven. It needed the media to convey this to the public and the media could not ignore one of the biggest post-'94 stories. But the media and the TRC had a complicated relationship. The TRC expected the media to accept its definition of what constituted 'truth' and 'reconciliation'. It further assumed that the national psyche would heal if the media simply reported the hearings. Several journalists and academics questioned the notion that healing and reconciliation will naturally follow disclosure of human rights violations.

UCT anthropologist, Pamela Reynolds, quoted critic Michael Ignatieff: "It is an open question whether justice or truth actually heals. But the truth will not necessarily be believed, and it is putting too much faith in truth, to believe that it can

“The question is no longer *whether* victims can forgive ‘evildoers’ but whether we – our symbols, language, and politics, our legal, media, and academic institutions – are creating the conditions that encourage alternatives to revenge.”

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

heal.” He quoted Desmond Tutu on national unity, reconciliation and healing, and added: “Laudable aims, but are they coherent? Look at the

assumptions he makes. That a nation has one psyche, not many; that the truth is one, not many; that the truth is certain, not contestable; and that when it is known by all, it has the capacity to heal and reconcile.”²

Reynolds outlined at least two other positions on the need to reveal the truth about the past. One came from anthropologist Mary Douglas, who stressed the value of forgetting – “knowledge lost may be well lost”³. Douglas argued that it is not wrong to forget, nor necessarily sad to forget and that we should not strive to remember everything we ever knew. Time past, Douglas said, is remembered privately, or publicly, when it can be used in time present to control the future. The other position on truth and memory came from academic Michel Serres who said there were two strands in Western thought. One was the Greek one,

about bringing things into the light. The other one was Roman or Egyptian, about burying, concealing, hiding, or placing something in the shadows to conserve it. To wrench something from the shadows was often to destroy it. Serres said: 'We never calculate the cost of our methods. We believe they are free. Everything has its price – even clarity. It is paid for in shadows, or destruction, sometimes.'⁴

While the theoretical debates have been important, these ran often as an unstated subtext as the TRC process unfolded. The dominant ethos in academic and media circles essentially supported the philosophy guiding the process.

This has best been summed up by academic and writer Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. In her award-winning book, *A Human Being Died that Night: A Story of Forgiveness*, she argued that the challenge for South Africans was to

remember the past without seeking vengeance. "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a strategy not only for breaking the cycle of politically motivated violence but also for teaching important lessons about how the human spirit can prevail even as victims remember the cruelty visited upon them in the past. If memory is kept alive in order to cultivate old hatreds and resentments, it is likely to culminate in vengeance, and in a repetition of violence. But if memory is kept alive in order to transcend hateful emotions, then remembering can be healing."⁵

The media for her had to be part of the overall political vision. "The question is no longer *whether* victims can forgive 'evildoers' but whether we – our symbols, language, and politics, our legal, media, and academic institutions – are creating the conditions that encourage alternatives

“There is thus, I suspect, an anxiety about who is whose hand-servant in the ongoing project of historical retrieval. In other words, there is something of a conflict of interest at work. The media are required to convey the message of the TRC at the same time that they are to remain independent of any expressed government agendas.”

Jane Taylor



to revenge,” she said.⁶ Against this background, journalists were immediately faced with two opposing challenges: what their contribution to nation building should be, and how this could impact on their role as objective reporters. “It is not, after all, the role of the media to undertake the state’s task of nation-building,” said academic Jane Taylor. “To do so would be to jeopardize their substantial legacies of oppositional enquiry. But such ostensible disinterest carries its own risks. How, after all, does a responsible journalist separate the obligation to tell what she knows, from her obligation to withhold what she senses can fracture the national project and lead to civil conflict?”⁷

Stephen Laufer of *Business Day* supported this: “Our job, at one and the same time, is to question, to reflect the realities of what is going on, to attempt to show that the truth is

multi-faceted. Sometimes truth is extremely unpleasant and it becomes particularly unpleasant when the victims have also been perpetrators – or the perpetrators are in some fashion victims. Nevertheless, you also have to deal with the question: what is your contribution to the new South Africa? It takes some subtlety and effort to suggest that reflecting the complexity is in fact the contribution to building a new South Africa. The fact that we all have backgrounds means that we also get more subjective in this particular story than we do in many other situations. We are not just journalists. We have all been involved.”⁸

Business Day political commentator, Xolela Mangcu argued that true independence and objectivity were unattainable. “Everything we say or write is informed by the fact that we all come from somewhere. Our editorials,

our slants, and what we decide is “news that’s fit to print”, are all a function of subjective judgment. The more useful thing is to ask how we can best guard against being blinded by our pretensions to perfect knowledge derived from age and history of struggle, (and a feigned innocence that hides stereotypes.)” he said.⁹

These ethical considerations were ever-present as journalists waded right into the fray with their cameras, microphones and pens.

The Cameras

The SABC covered the TRC in three ways. Firstly through news bulletins on radio and television, then through longer more in-depth packages for radio current affairs. The TRC Special Report was a special weekly hour-long in-depth TV programme reporting on the stories coming out of the previous

week's hearings. It became the show with the highest TV ratings across all channels because it focused on telling the human story.

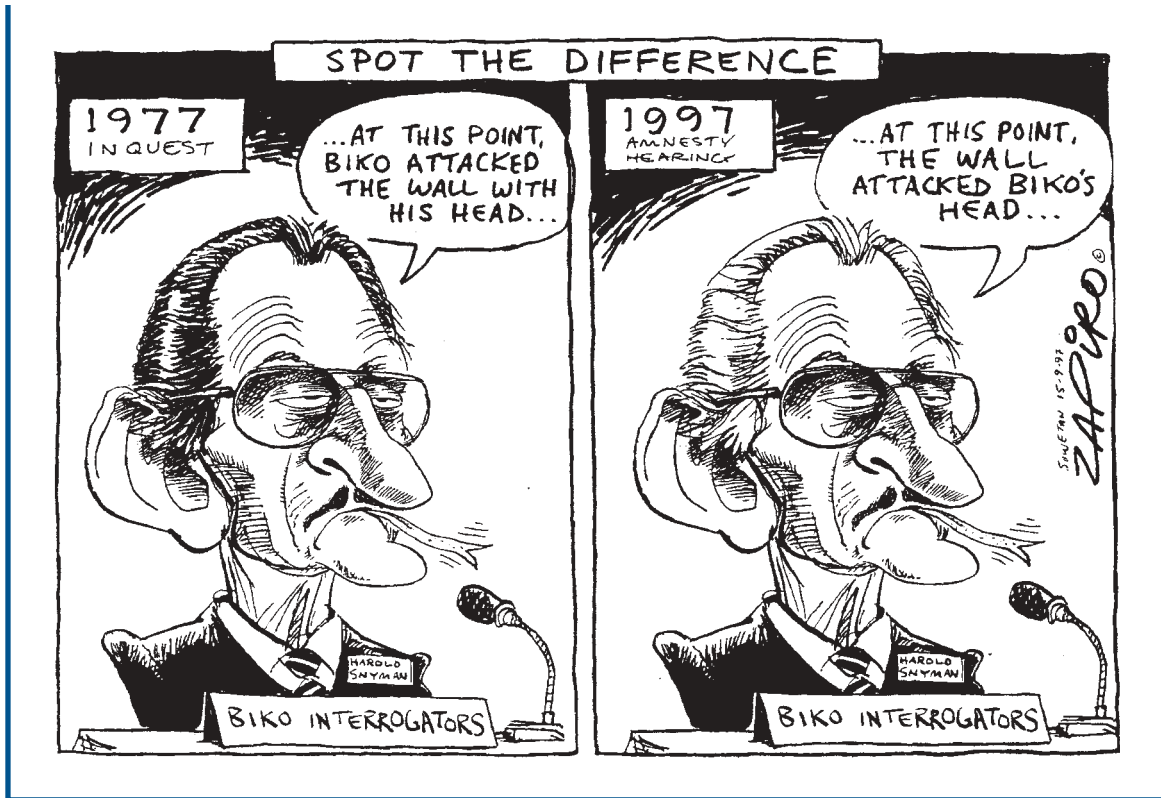
Anneliese Burgess, currently an Executive Producer for Special Assignment at SABC-TV and at the time of the TRC a Specialist Producer for the TRC Special Report said television was an excellent medium through which to convey the nuances of the hearings. The TRC Special Report did not merely report what was happening at the hearings, but took the stories further and situated these in the complexity of the South African context. As a result they were often able to find out and report stories the TRC was not even aware of.

Initially they gave as broad an impression of the hearings as possible, and as the TRC gained momentum, they gave a broad overview, but then identified a

particular story, which they reported on in more detail. This meant that they were able to tell the story of, for instance, a massacre by incorporating all the different individual testimonies

into it with the overall umbrella being the happening itself.

Burgess said there was no real guideline except they kept in mind throughout that they were to tell the





“After the second week of Truth Commission hearing in April 1996, a caring SABC boss with a mournful face came to me with the news that he had arranged a psychotherapist for me and my colleagues on the *TRC Special Report* team.

I’m from the old school of journalism. I still romanticise our craft as one practiced by hard-living, cynical and tough bastards. We eat meat and we smoke and PC is something we type stories on.

Therapy? This was our favourite joke for at least the next week. A journalist getting therapy is like a Springbok rugby prop using moisturiser. But after the fourth week of hearings – that’s when Archbishop Tutu had his now famous emotional breakdown on camera – two team members started cracking and had to leave the team.

The jokes became cruder and crueler. Mostly about torture, murder and suffering. Really tasteless stuff.

It was our way of coping with week after week of emotionally draining hearings. Not only listening to disturbing testimony every day, but also then going through it again when we transcribed the videotapes, and then watched it again when editing the programme.

The rugby prop really did need moisturiser.

But we were getting therapy from each other in the team. Nobody understands a journalist like a fellow journalist. Now, a year later, we have learnt to cry with a victim and then move on. We’ll deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after the end of the Truth Commission.”¹⁰

MAX DU PREEZ, *SABC Executive Producer for the TRC Special Report*

overarching story of the TRC and forty years of oppression. They selected stories that illustrated the broad arc of history.

In KwaZulu-Natal, for instance, many stories related to ANC/IFP violence. These stories were told by sketching the broader story of what had happened there. At one hearing, for example, cadres of Apla (the PAC military wing) applied for a whole spate of amnesties for episodes of farm murders. These they situated by telling the story of what became known as farm murders and then going into the details of one such case. Or they told the story of a person where one or more of the details stood out – the naming of a new perpetrator, or a different form of torture, or a particularly harrowing experience.

They took pains to get the other side in stories: if for instance they

were telling the story of a human rights violation case, they tried to get the perpetrator to take part. Or if it was a story of an amnesty applicant, they tried to get the victim to also tell their story. This meant that they often had to search for these victims, who did not testify at the same hearing. Or vice a versa – at a Human Rights violations hearing, they located the perpetrator. As a result, they often tried to bring perpetrator and victim together.

At a practical level, television journalists faced some constraints. The agreement with the TRC was that the hearing rooms would be rigged with two fixed cameras at a comfortable distance from the “stage” so as not to intimidate those testifying. This limited the pictures, which were soon quite predictable. They faced another problem: by the

time the TRC SPECIAL REPORT aired, the highlights of the hearings would already have been reported on in the news. Burgess said by taking the stories told in the hearings and retelling them outside the hearing room, they overcame these challenges. They re-interviewed people in a different setting, went “into their lives” – at their homes, at the grave of their loved ones, at a scene relating to the stories they told. This was done against the backdrop of the issues pertaining to that story. They accessed photographs or cuttings, or filmed places where things happened. In other words they coloured in the story they heard in the hearing room.

“My first bit of advice to anyone covering a TRC would be to use what was coming out of the hearing as the backbone of a story – but that the challenge would be to go further,” said

Burgess. “Get family members, friends and acquaintances to speak. Film the landscape where atrocities happened. Tell the story outside the hearing hall.”

Despite practical limitations of the camera work, the TRC was well geared towards helping journalists and this contributed to excellent coverage. The TRC media liaison people were the first port of call for information. They would supply transcripts of statements and additional information - be it identifying people in the audience or contact numbers of people testifying. By the time a testimony would take place, journalist would already have read the statement, enabling them to know what to look for. Most hearings also had a media area where journalists could work. In addition, the TRC Special Report team also had the feeds from their two fixed cameras coming into this media room and relayed onto a big screen. All the

other media people could watch the feeds come in and could therefore watch proceedings without being in the hall. This was a good system as it allowed the media to do their job without affecting the integrity of the hearings. The media room was a hive of activity, often quite noisy, while inside the hall the proceedings happened with the necessary silence and respect. The fact that the media room was peopled by most of the same regulars every week made it a “safe space” for those working there.

The TRC Special Report team was a small team – two to a hearing. One person would be responsible for the footage coming out of the hearing itself. The two fixed cameras fed into a central ‘switching station’ from where the reporter would select one image that was recorded. The other person, with another cameraperson, would do all the additional interviews and

filming. Once back at base in Johannesburg on a Friday afternoon *all* the hearing footage would be transcribed and logged. Every single word would be put to paper so that they knew exactly what was said. This would then form the backbone of the eventual report. It was imperative to be sure of the historical facts and this verification process was time-consuming. It helped to have the input of veteran journalist Jacques Pauw, who was familiar with apartheid history and could help with the verification. This allowed the team to focus on the human aspects of the story, leaving the historical detail to Pauw.

But it was presenting these human stories that perhaps most exacted an emotional toll. Burgess advised any journalist wanting to cover a truth commission to be aware of his/her own mental health. “We completely



I did not realise that I also needed healing until 1997, when I was covering the amnesty hearings relating to the killing of the student activist Sphiwe Mthimkhulu. The hearing took place in Port Elizabeth, Sphiwe's birthplace, and the amnesty applicant was the notorious and feared former security branch police officer Gideon Niewoudt. Prior to the beginning of the day's proceedings, community members rushed to the centre of the fully packed hall where they started singing rhythmically. Some fiercely raised their clenched fists into the air while raising their knees very high, going around in circle in the traditional toyi-toyi style. Others held their imaginary machine guns and aimed them at the amnesty applicants in front of them. When I looked at Niewoudt and others, I realised that fear was written all over their faces, yet they had nowhere to run. I felt happy inside. Suddenly, I realised that for a short while I had become an instant comrade, silently singing along while others were fiercely going around in a circle, shouting the words, "arrest Niewoudt, he knows what he is doing, he knows the law". I felt the song was appropriate. Looking at Niewoudt and others, I ask myself, what kind of people are these, who brutally kill other human beings because of their political affiliation and have guts to tell a huge crowd of community members that they were merely taking orders. As the singing in the hall progressed, silently, I joined. I was comfortable because no one could ever see that I was singing along with the "comrades". I also did not move or dance yet I was dancing deep inside. I managed to suppress any visible expression of my emotion. I went back to the media room to join other journalists, who had also been outside during the singing. I did not ask them anything. They too did not. But we seemed to be communicating something silently. I still don't know what it was. Then we started working. In their testimony, amnesty applicants including Niewoudt told the TRC panel and the entire hall that after torturing Sphiwe Mthimkhulu and Topsy Madaka following their abduction, they burnt their corpses for six hours on a pier of wood, while they themselves were having a braai. I felt myself getting sick in the pit of my stomach as I visualized their awful act. I could not believe I was looking at people who had acted so cruelly.

I tried to stick to the facts and managed to do so, all the while suppressing my true emotions. One lesson I learnt, we too, journalists, are human beings, we need healing in order to help the nation heal. The greatest challenge was to remain unbiased in my reporting.

THAPELO MOKUSHANE, *Former SABC reporter and part of the team that won the Pringle award for outstanding reporting of the TRC proceedings countrywide.*

underestimated the emotional toll it would take on us,” she said. “For most of us, we literally worked seven days a week for two and a half years. Almost all of us suffered from severe burnout. There was no official debriefing or support from our employer. When the TRC ended many of us collapsed with illness.”

Despite the emotional damage, the close-knit nature of their team helped them survive. “Covering the TRC was more than a job - it was an obsession,” she said. “Being a team was incredibly important. If there’d not been the kind of camaraderie, people would have collapsed far sooner. I don’t think a loose band of freelancers would have survived.”

The Microphones

The SABC with its 23 radio stations initiated most of the coverage of the commission. The independent stations

and community radio stations mainly carried items on their news bulletins.

Since SABC radio covered all eleven official languages – it had the biggest and most diverse team – it was the most representative of media. Regional reporters joined the team when the TRC visited the area, which allowed greater access to people and won winning goodwill. This led to greater understanding and enrichment of reporting. The print media usually had one reporter who traveled with the TRC most of the time.

The SABC team produced the following on a daily basis:

- o News: hourly news stories for SABC Radio News to be used on news bulletins and translated into all 11 languages.
- o Current Affairs Shows: regular updates in all the languages for morning, midday and noon shows of

three minute long packages via Q&A's on what was happening.

- o Slot: longer material in all the languages.
- o Radio 2000 broadcast live hearings.

Antjie Krog, author and professor at the University of the Western Cape headed the radio team, which received the Pringle Award for Excellence in Journalism – the first time this was awarded for radio. “South Africa has a high illiteracy rate, and radio was arguably the most effective medium to convey the TRC process,” said Krog.

It was firstly important to broadcast stories as news items. Listeners were less inclined to switch stations or to switch off during news, said Krog. Newsreaders initially complained that they felt uncomfortable reading some of the stories. The radio team then changed the structure of their stories so that the text of the newsreader was





Standing in front of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as I did, is worlds removed from reporting on it. As a reporter, one listens, takes notes, looks at the reaction of those attending a commission hearing, watches witnesses and commissioners, and discusses a witness' testimony with colleagues.

Each act is done with the purpose of enhancing one's copy and writing a better-balanced article than a colleague from another publication.

There's camaraderie of sorts between journalists covering these hearings. One can see it in their body language, interactions, and willingness, of some, to retire to a pub on some nights.

But what about journalist present at these sittings, not to report on proceedings for the print or electronic media, but to give evidence? In my experience, once they've decided to form part of the news by taking a witness stand, they've taken a step into a lonely world, even if it's only for the duration of them giving evidence.

In this world, they return to the past, relive moments of extreme pain, happiness, anger, despair and healing. They, too, can talk about how cathartic the experience is. But they can also talk about setting the record straight or, as was my case, giving a black perspective of journalism, attitude and selective application, by mainly white editors, of journalistic principles which are held to be sacrosanct.

This they have to do, not with any desire to get even or settle old scores on behalf of themselves or others, but with the purpose of telling it like it had been, of stating that it was hell at times in the mainstream media. But someone had to tell the story, despite the limitations imposed by management and the state.

To improve their chances of succeeding and in the interest of their own integrity and credibility, witnesses have to forget about headlines and intros and maintain a professional distance between themselves and those reporting. This is never easy. But it has to be done.

Because in my case – the evidence that was presented gave different communities an insight in how so-called liberal newspapers had reported and misreported the struggle against apartheid rule in South Africa – one became, albeit for a short while, a target of some radio talk show hosts. Seductive as it was to hear oneself on air, the realisation soon set in that one was missing the point: that it was not about oneself, but about what had really happened in some newspapers and how it had affected different people as well as damage the credibility of mainstream newspapers.

Why did I volunteer to give evidence? I did so because I thought that journalists should be more than reporters and recorders of history: it's in the public interest that they must be willing to appear before truth commissions to testify about atrocities, the sanitisation of news, the abuse of power, feelings of those who saw havoc being caused in their communities by state-sponsored terrorism and being unable to report on it accurately, and the disregard of basic reporting principles.

I also did it to apologise publicly to many brave people who had risked their own safety to give me interviews, never to see them printed by, at that time, Cape Town's biggest newspaper. I also did it to continue my own healing.

I believe that the healing and reconciliation process in the print and electronic media is far from over.

Today, more than six years, after having given evidence, one knows that newspapers in South Africa, particularly the Afrikaans ones, still have to be frank about their role in supporting apartheid and acting as the hand (or should it be print?) maiden of the National Party.

It's time that these newspapers took a stand by telling it like it was. Perhaps then young journalists will fully realise what it was all about for a different generation. They may also appreciate that changing slogans, as many newspapers have done to prove that they are part of the new South Africa, is not enough. Breaking with the past and saying why is also necessary.

DENNIS CRUYWAGEN, *Former Deputy Editor of the South African morning newspaper, Pretoria News.*



relatively mild and safe but that the horror formed part of the reporter's own voice report.

Listeners complained about the current affairs shows saying that

they found them too taxing first thing in the morning and that children should – many of whom would be present – not be subjected to the brutality of the stories. Material was

then sometimes moved to 'more appropriate' time slots.

Longer stories were broadcast once a week during an hour-long programme. The editor of the slot initiated these stories. It was, however, broadcast on Friday nights when listenership was low. The weekly review was cancelled due to a lack of funding and re-started with money the TRC raised.

Radio 2000, which broadcast the hearings live, attracted a variety of people for very different reasons. Among others were perpetrators who were not sure whether to apply for amnesty and who used this to ascertain if their name was mentioned; casual listeners who searched for a station and people who were in the area the proceedings were held in.

The Media Monitoring Project found that human rights violations committee hearings broadcast on

Radio 2000 were successful because of their narrative nature. It was also positive to hear the voices of people who had been silenced for so many years, and to acknowledge the suffering caused by apartheid. The amnesty hearings, however, were structured as court cases with many people talking and asking questions, and many cross-references. These hearings were therefore structurally unsuited to unedited broadcasts and resulted in confusion as to the proceedings.

The TRC evoked different emotions in different people, but it helped to prepare audiences through a thorough process of reporting on all the phases of the TRC: the initial debates around it, all the phases of the drafting of its legislation, possible points of friction, the interviews with prospective commissioners, the constitution of the TRC, how it was

setting up its offices etc. This gradually created an awareness and understanding of the complicated process. Thus before the hearings started, people were generally reasonably informed. This process started about 18 months before the actual hearings began.

When the hearings started, stories were placed in context and situated in an area by describing the area, its history and significance.

Radio reporters were sensitive to linguistic detail, like the phrasing victims and perpetrators used; how they formulated their testimonies and their perceptions. If someone had said: "My son's T-shirt looked like rats had eaten it," they would not translate this as: "Her son's T-shirt was riddled with bullet holes." Krog said journalistic clichés were avoided by respecting the uniqueness of expression of those who testified. They were careful to include

in their reporting as many levels of news as possible: cultural, political and psychological.

But to ensure the high standard of radio reporting, a considerable amount of organisation and technical equipment were necessary.

One line to broadcast for Radio 2000 had to be put in, as well as several telephone lines of broadcasting quality, plus some lines to connect computers to SABC headquarters. Reporters had to have recording machines, laptops and cell phones. A costly editing unit had to be put up so that reporters could send their stories whenever they were out of cities. This had to be guarded and at times posed a problem, especially in remote areas.

Running the team was a costly affair. It was very expensive to send between five and eight people all over the country,

with the right equipment, transport, hotels, tapes, extra payment for the immense overtime hours they had to work etc. Swedish funding was obtained.

No significant structures were put in place to deal with the impact reporting of this nature would have on journalists. Krog said many journalists were traumatised and acted out of character, and they lacked the psychological knowledge to understand their behaviour. It was only during a de-briefing session that the radio team understood the severity of the impact this reporting had. “The process caught up with almost everybody,” she said.

The Pens

Most South African newspapers were committed to covering the TRC process extensively and reached a wide audience.

Cape Argus, a daily newspaper, assigned one of their most senior journalists, John Yeld, the Environment Writer, to cover the TRC. Yeld became known for his insightful and thorough reporting. He covered the entire process.

“But there were one or two TRC events which I was not able to cover which I really wanted to – for example, some of the exhumations upcountry – because I was told there was no budget.”

This was partly because the TRC process went on for significantly longer than had initially been anticipated, and partly because there was significant repetition in the type of stories that were told in the Human Rights Violations hearings.

For Yeld, the major disadvantage of the daily printed media, was the restricted amount of editorial space.

This meant that their reports were generally very abbreviated and it was sometimes difficult to do justice to the complexity of some of the events and hearings. But relative to the amount of space available in the newspaper as a whole, the TRC was given comprehensive coverage.

The inherent differences in the structure and character of papers often determined the coverage. A weekly paper for example was always going to have to approach a subject very differently to a daily paper.

Yeld balanced the shorter, “harder” news pieces for the daily Argus during the week, with longer, more magazine or feature pieces for the Weekend Argus, and other newspapers in the Independent Group, which tended to have more space available.

One of the major difficulties many journalists faced, who had not covered

the political process leading up to the setting up of the TRC, was a lack of background knowledge at the start of the TRC.

Yeld said this was overcome by a couple of comprehensive briefings on the TRC Act, with access to various people who had informed the process – both local and foreign. It was imperative that journalists, at the very outset, made a thorough study of the legal and political framework of any TRC they may be assigned to cover, said Yeld. It was also important to do as much reading beforehand about TRC processes elsewhere in the world, to get a good background into the kind of issues likely to come up and what the different philosophical approaches were, for example, restorative justice versus punitive justice, etc.

Yeld said what helped significantly was establishing personal

relationships with as many of the TRC staff as possible, particularly the media relation people. What hindered, at the start of the process, was a general uncertainty and nervousness about how the TRC would unfold and whether the media in general would “inflame passions” through their reports and thereby make the work of the TRC more difficult. “Fortunately these fears never materialised, and everyone became much more relaxed as the process unfolded and it became progressively easier to cover.”

The TRC offered counseling for journalists covering its work, and some journalists did take up this offer. Yeld said that some of the hearings, and particularly some of the individual testimony, was highly emotionally charged, and there were obviously times when he reacted to this. But he didn't ever feel

overwhelmed or unable to continue with his work. Partly because, although he spent most of his time covering the TRC, he nevertheless continued to work on his “real” beat – the environment – wherever possible.

“This provided a wonderful counterpoint to the kinds of stories I was having to cover for the TRC, and I think it allowed me to ‘escape’ the emotional pressures of the TRC.” Other journalists who covered the TRC full-time without any alternative were under a lot more strain, I think – particularly radio journalists, who would have to re-listen to the actual testimony several, even many, times while editing. Where this testimony was emotionally charged, with heart-rending and/or horrible stories, it could – and did – have a profound effect on some of them.”



In an hour and 30 minutes long programme, Sophie Mokoena of Lesedi Radio, interviewed Joe Mamasela and Dirk Coetzee, killers of human rights lawyer Griffiths Mxenge and came to the conclusion that people can forgive and reconcile, but verifying facts was essential.

“One has to strive to be un-biased, objective, and furthermore psychologically and emotionally strong, to cover the news of the past and the present events, which are very traumatic in content and emotion. The task of verifying facts is extremely difficult in a loaded, emotional climate such as that of the TRC hearings. Truth is the essential essence of reconciliation. But truth is not easy to come by, nor is it painless to reveal.

Ninety-nine percent of the victims who are interviewed are black, and ninety-five percent of the perpetrators are white. So to balance the two, it's very difficult. These facts make the talk of reconciliation extremely difficult for the majority in South Africa. In many instances, people find it difficult enough to forgive their own brothers and sisters for turning against one another. But at the end of the day, for the sake of progress in the country, they have to. For example, you have Joe Mamasela, who turned against his own people, and today he wants the very same community to forgive him. How is he going to get forgiveness? Only by telling the truth.

However, how do we as journalists communicate what Mamasela is saying to the people? Are we creating a climate for people to forgive Mamasela? Is Mamasela actually telling the truth? We have to verify facts.

If I may make an example – Dirk Coetzee went to the amnesty committee and spoke about a Lesotho incident, where they killed a diamond dealer. I did an interview with Mamasela to verify the story, and I got totally different facts from him. It was broadcast. After five days, an organisation called Lesotho Political Victims called me to say thank you. For years and years they had been looking for the guy Coetzee has spoken about. I referred them to the Truth Commission. The same organisation disclosed that person's name. And for the family, it was a relief. They called me six days later to say thanks. “At least now there is a light; we can actually know where to look for our own member of the family.”¹¹

SOPHIE MOKOENA, *Former Current Affairs presenter at Lesedi FM and now political reporter at SABC TV.*

The perpetrators and victims

As the TRC process progressed it became clear that a media fascination with perpetrators was developing. Many cases were referred to as another Mamasela case or De Kock case. “The camera certainly finds Goliath a lot more sexy than David,” said filmmaker Fiona Lloyd.¹²

Academic Jane Taylor interrogated this phenomenon. She said that what makes perpetrators so compelling was, in part, that they were agents who act upon others. “All of the psychological structures of desire, power, greed, fear, identification are invoked in these accounts. Milton’s classic dilemma in *Paradise Lost* was that Satan became the hero of the narrative, because of the inherent interest in his character. A similar

effect was evident in the coverage of the stories of De Kock, Coetzee and Mamasela.”¹³

The word perpetrator comes from the word *perpetrate*, which means to accomplish, to achieve, to bring about, to effect, said Brandon Hamber of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation at the University of the Witwatersrand. In their Latin origin, the words *perpetrate* and *perpetrator* could be either good or bad, and it was only much later that the English started using these words in the criminal sense, such as to *perpetrate* a crime, the *perpetrator* of a murder.

The etymological root of the word “victim” lies in antiquity, when it meant a beast selected for sacrifice and was associated with the concept of a scapegoat and has a far more negative connotation than a perpetrator. “The sacrifice of the victim, or the exclusion of the scapegoat, would symbolically

make the rest of the community safe from harm,” said Hamber. “When the victim was a person, it had, with few exceptions, to be someone young and very pure, or someone very old or a stranger. The ideal victim was someone who did not have deep roots in the community.”¹⁴

It was interesting to consider the case of the media coverage of perpetrator Dirk Coetzee. “He was a gift to any TV programme maker,” said Lloyd. “He is slick. He is a storyteller. You get into a situation where Dirk goes off to meet the relatives of Griffiths Mxenge (one of his murder victims). We travel with him in the car, and everything is seen through his thoughts and from his perspective. And so when the Mxenge family chose not to interact with Coetzee, we are in a situation as viewers where we feel almost robbed, almost irritated with them. It has to do with power – to do

with who we allow to tell the story.”

Lloyd said it was not enough as journalists to say they have shown the perpetrator and then the victim. “Sometimes, two sides don’t make a balanced programme.”¹⁵

When perpetrator became victim the issue was even more complicated. Jacques Pauw, television journalist, produced a documentary on Eugene de Kock who presided over the police hit squad base, Vlakplaas. “Not all people at Vlakplaas killed,” said Pauw. “There were 150 men there in total. Joe Mamasela (police killer) says he was a victim, ‘forced into killing my own people’.”

Pauw has been criticized from different quarters. “There has been criticism that my documentary is too sympathetic to Vlakplaas people and to De Kock. On the other hand, some whites have complained that they were shown as drunken killers.”¹⁶

But the kind of victim portrayed was also under scrutiny. Taylor pointed out that the Commission selected stories of exemplary loss: thus over and over the accounts of hapless victims were heard, which indeed made up the bulk of the applicants to the Commission. But many active and astute victims did not apply to be heard. “Perhaps they had accepted a violent history as part of the cost of political engagement; or they had other mechanisms of recourse; or, like the Biko family, they spurned the TRC process.”

Perhaps, said Taylor, the Commission, as part of its unconscious brief, felt a burden to present to the international community an image of the apartheid victim as an innocent bystander rather than a political activist. “For a variety of such reasons, the stories which came to represent the first year of hearings were

dominated by those of long-suffering and shocking loss.

“What fell out of these representations was South Africa as it was figured in the previous decade: a place of violent defiance, dispute, contest, activism.”¹⁷

It could also be argued that victims were negatively affected by the needs of the media since they were often chosen by the TRC on the basis of their news value. “You’ve got a submission of about 150, say 200, statements which have been solicited, which have been brought in from the statement takers in the area. How do you then choose the 10 or 12 people who are going to appear on that particular day from that particular place?” said Hugh Lewin member of the TRC Human Rights Violations Committee.

“Do you choose a well-known local politician who died as an activist,



VIA TRANSLIGHT
NAIL & GARDNER

LYNNE DINE
WASHINGTON POST

DES JENKINSON
JESSE WALKER
RAPPORT

CECILE SELLS
CITY PRESS

FRED BRIDGLAND
SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

DAVID SHAPSHAK
SAPA

SUZANNE DALY
THE NEW YORK TIMES

DAVID BIRN
THE GUARDIAN

because that is going to please the community and that is going to make the community feel more involved in the process? Or do you choose someone who died who was a domestic worker who happened to be walking down the streets when the Hippos arrived? That for me has been the most difficult and the most painful process, because in fact what we are doing is managing the package in a way. And I think that is what we have all been doing in terms of reporting – is taking a package and managing it and then sending it forth.”¹⁸

Lewin said the amnesty process, instead of being legalistic, encouraged the same focus on the gravity of the offence: the worse the offence, the better the chance of the application for amnesty. With the result that media reporting concentrated again on the perpetrator.

“At the township police stations, there was always one cop in particular

who was the villain, and we, and the media, and the communities concentrated on them – and in the process, we lost sight of the system and the real perpetrators who controlled it, and who were finally responsible. You can’t blame the media for going along with that process – and of doing it still... And so Barnard – like De Kock and Coetzee and Williamson and Mamasela, all of them – become victims too, victims themselves, ‘mere foot soldiers’, of the system the law didn’t allow us to look at,” Lewin said.¹⁹

The impact of media coverage

What was the impact of media coverage on the national psyche? Brandon Hamber, a Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

“One thing we struggle with, is the: ‘Has-anyone-here-been-raped-and-speak-English?’ syndrome. It is always tempting to give preference to the story of a victim who is eloquent and speaks English rather than feature testimony of a stuttering witness who was not well translated. It is morally and ethically questionable, but we also have a duty to make technically good, popular television. Difficult decisions.”

Max du Preez

considered whether media coverage of the TRC changed the way the public saw itself, its history and its responsibility. In a paper delivered on media coverage of the TRC, he referred to the initial impact the well-known TV series 'Holocaust' had when first screened in Germany in 1979. Increased numbers of Germans felt that Germany was morally obliged to pay compensation to victims, but eight years later the number of people who rejected the need for compensation for the victims increased.

“These findings suggest that public media portrayals of human rights violations can have an impact on the attitudes of the population. However, on the more negative side, the research warns of the possibility that such impacts may only be temporary.”

He said it was indisputable that, largely through the media’s reporting



on the TRC, a large proportion of South Africans had been exposed to the atrocities of the past and that although it seemed to have sensitised white South Africans, it may not have

changed entrenched beliefs. “If the case of Germany is anything to go by then this type of change can only be expected in the next generation or two.”



Hamber said many black South Africans believed the TRC and the media coverage revealed nothing new, but has confirmed their suspicions – that it has not brought real material change and that the media failed to investigate or uncover new truths. The media reflected a reality rather than changed it and did not delve beyond the TRC itself. “At the core of this is possibly the acceptance by the media of the TRC’s assumption that truth is the road to reconciliation. This is not a wholly untrue statement in my opinion, and the media reflecting the truths revealed by the TRC should not be undermined, but it is unlikely that truth alone will be sufficient to change the ingrained apartheid mindset. The challenge, therefore, is to turn the truth revealed by the TRC into transformation, as rhetorical as this might sound. This means exploring the notions of reconciliation, truth,

forgiveness and so forth and critically challenging the institutions of both past and present to radically transform.”

According to Hamber, the central weakness of the TRC and those reporting on it was that they had not conveyed that past political violations were as morally wrong as all types of present violations even if these were more hidden, not politically motivated and less pervasive in the new society. “This is, in my opinion, the greatest challenge facing those who report on the TRC in the months and years to come,” he said. “Without forging this link a similar situation to the ‘Holocaust’ series in Germany will be witnessed, in which, the gains made in winning an increased short-term awareness about the violations of the past will not amount to the long-term building of a sustainable human rights culture in South Africa.”²⁰

An intensive assessment of the impact of the media has yet to be done. This will require an analysis of how the different media outlets covered the story. An independent organisation, The Media Monitoring Project (MMP), has however conducted a limited study over the period April 1996 to February 1997 that has provided some initial insights. During that time, the MMP monitored the following media outlets: Business Day, Citizen, Sowetan, Star, Mail & Guardian, Sunday Independent, Radio 2000 and the TRC Special Report.

Comparative analysis of the coverage afforded to the same story by different papers often revealed bias and perspectives on the TRC expressing the attitude of the papers concerned. For example, police torture became a “drastic measure” and the “growth of political activism” became the “tide of Black political activism”.

Sometimes comparison also demonstrated sensationalism placing different values on the news worthiness of a story. Certain papers placed their emphasis on different aspects of the same testimony, again revealing bias and decontextualised coverage.

Although the MMP's comparative analysis found fault with the news agency, SAPA's reports, these reports were often altered by the paper concerned to represent a certain attitude towards the TRC and its work.

There were also instances when SAPA and other news agencies used TRC statements or summaries almost in their entirety. Very little, if any, further information or interviews were added or included. This limited the possible sources made available to readers to expand interpretations of the TRC's work.

Reporting in certain papers at times tended to become sensational, emphasising extreme acts of violence and torture, rather than on the events in which they occurred. This was typified in articles that stressed the violence over other aspects of the story. Sensationalism was also evident in the over-dramatisation of events at the hearings. In these instances the drama of the situation became the subject of the story.

The MMP found that reporting on the often-horrendous acts of violence perpetrated in the past was difficult, precisely because of their frequently sensational nature. However, the sensationalism was more an attempt to capture the attention of potential readers by the headline writers, rather than shoddy journalism. An anti-TRC sentiment emerged predictably from oppositional political parties, for example the National Party and IFP,

providing politically motivated critical and oppositional viewpoints of the TRC. This sentiment was taken further to suggest the need for the TRC to close down, as it was not truly reconciliatory. These coincided with the suggestion that the TRC was a witch-hunt, a viewpoint strongly tied to the National Party. This tension provided the media with an opportunity to expose readers to a critical perspective often absent from reports.

After the TRC

After the TRC process drew to a close, very little reporting continued. According to Lewin, this was in part due to exhaustion and "information overload", and to the fact that many of the key players on the TRC had left. Lewin said the ANC's attempted blocking of publication of the Final

Report was “inexplicable, ridiculous, confusing and signaled what was to be the difference between Mandela (whose personal preserve the TRC was) and Mbeki (who wanted it done and gone as soon as possible).”

But more importantly the media, due to time constraints and a lack of energy, failed to contextualise stories. For instance, in every town, time and again, new young leaders were persecuted, but the media never tracked the combined story of what looked like a conspiracy to kill off a generation of young leaders. Nor were individual stories of those who testified, or of the 10% who testified, but did not appear in public, or those who didn't testify, explored in greater depth. “That's the mountain of potential coverage, waiting to be scaled, by someone, with time and energy, and resourceful news editors to push them,” said Lewin.

Legislation that barred the TRC from looking at the bigger picture, contributed to “the dying of the TRC story”. Stories of forced removals, pass laws, inferior education and housing lay outside the mandate of the TRC. Instead, the TRC concentrated on de-contextualised, individual stories. Because the system itself was not under the spotlight, the emphasis fell on the victim and also on the perpetrator. This led to the sensational and contributed to the emphasis on perpetrators.

With staff cutbacks in newsrooms, it was unlikely that time will be spent on the work of the TRC. “It is yesterday's story,” said Lewin. Despite this, the entire experience and coverage of it provoked consideration of two possibilities, according to Lewin. “We have to recognise what TRC did achieve as peace-maker – and, in doing so,

recognise that there's a whole new world of reporting attached to that, of conflict resolution, of the reporter becoming a part – a crucial part – of a process of reporting change and transition; where the reporter drops the mythical mask of objectivity and recognises involvement, attachment not detachment, not so much the old advocacy role as one of mediator. Though here, perhaps, a strong shot of good old advocacy wouldn't go amiss!” he said.

“There's a need to persuade someone – everyone – to start mining the data mountain, start telling the stories of the approx. 21,000 so-called victims, and all the others; unearthing the patterns, the sacrifices, the triumphs of survival, the stories of our real heroes; and finding some new champions of the cause down there below the mountain to help push the process forward.”²¹ ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Publisher's Note: *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog, Published by Random House
- ² Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ³ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ⁴ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ⁵ A Human Being Died that Night by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, published by David Philip Publishers
- ⁶ A Human Being Died that Night by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, published by David Philip Publishers
- ⁷ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ⁸ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ⁹ Business Day, 2004
- ¹⁰ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹¹ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹² Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹³ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹⁴ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹⁵ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹⁶ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹⁷ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹⁸ Rhodes Journalism Review, The Media and the TRC, no 14, May 1997
- ¹⁹ Reporting Truth and Reconciliation Politics and Promises - the Media Hugh Lewin 27/10/00 http://www.iaj.org.za/online_hub/news3_1.htm
- ²⁰ Paper presented at the TRC and Human Rights Journalism in South Africa Workshop Rosebank Hotel, Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 October 1997
- ²¹ Reporting Truth and Reconciliation Politics and Promises - the Media Hugh Lewin 27/10/00 http://www.iaj.org.za/online_hub/news3_1.htm

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