

# Fragments of the TRUTH

By ANTHEA GARMAN

**A**T the Truth and Reconciliation Commission media hearings we heard some startling truths, we heard some evasions and half-truths and we heard some lies.

When poet Don Mattera stood up to take the oath he said he "would attest to the truth as I know it".

Mattera's assertion is a good lens through which to view the process. Despite vowing to tell the whole truth, few media people appearing before the commission (and this is a terrible irony for journalists) could actually do that. It wasn't just that they were situated so that they couldn't know the whole truth, many of them believed the NP propaganda so fervently they are still unable to recognise the truth revealed by the TRC hearings.

The SABC men just weren't able to see that taking censorship orders from superiors, making documentaries about the military and membership of the Broederbond and Stratcom are the serious kinds of situations that grossly affect a journalist's ability to operate independently. They not only defended these actions at the hearings; they still believe they were simple and uncomplicated choices.

The English press protested: the government was hostile, the laws were draconian, the climate was dangerous. They valiantly did what they could. Again, they couldn't see that signing agreements with the SADF and police were forms of collusion. They thought they were making free choices to benefit their readers and shareholders. They were out of touch with black experience and opinion then – and now.

Underlying all this was the experience of black journalists. Abused by the media houses, harassed, beaten and jailed by the security forces. If anyone knew the truth, they did. They were on the receiving end of it. But few media bosses believed them or gave them space to disseminate their knowledge.

Pat Sidley, who appeared on behalf of the mainly white South African Union of Journalists, said: "Our membership was conservative, middle-class and white, the impulse was not to turn the world on its head. If our black colleagues felt that we couldn't be counted on for support, that's perfectly true." No one in management was as honest.

Raymond Louw, editor of the Rand Daily Mail from 1966 to 1977, put the editors' feelings of distrust neatly into a nutshell when he told the commission: "(White) journalists were not anti-apartheid activists. Their job was to uncover the truth and to print it. Black journalists were activists first."

So where does this leave us today? The commissioners asked over and over again: how can we prevent this kind of thing happening again?

The strongest impression I have from the hearings is just how polarised we still are. Managers see things one way, journalists on the ground another way. We're split again: Afrikaners, English and black reporters.

President of the SAUJ Sam Dole said: "There is a lack of a common intellectual framework for what we do as journalists. We are victims of our violent history and the denigration of intellectual activity."

A few very important things come out of the TRC media hearings and must be addressed:

- We need to train journalists properly with good critical skills. It is clear that the situation we are in owes quite a bit to the "sink or swim school" of journalistic training which doesn't ask rigorous enough questions.
- We need to take seriously that diversity of media is fundamental to a democracy – not just the changes in ownership we've seen, but also giving voices to those in society usually marginalised. Mattera suggested that the government set up a media diversity fund to enable people to make media for themselves. When the commissioners put this suggestion to the two biggest media houses, TML and Independent, they agreed that they have a responsibility to encourage this.
- We need legislation that protects the independence of the media, from government and from big business interests.
- And finally we need to really understand how white media got sucked into the apartheid propaganda so consummately. We won't avoid this trap in the future unless we understand how propaganda works emotionally, mentally and psychologically and what climates it grows in.

## What they said at the media hearings

☞ "The FBJ believes that the English and Afrikaans press and the SABC wittingly colluded with successive apartheid governments by actively enforcing discriminatory laws in their own institutions, using terminology and language that was ideologically congruent with National Party governments and in conflict with liberation forces. They failed to inform the public about the evil that was going on around them and victimised those in their employ who were actively opposing apartheid." – *Mondli Makhanya and Abby Makoe, Forum of Black Journalists*

☞ "I was a Broederbond member for five years until 1990. The role of the Broederbond has been over-estimated. I was part of a monthly meeting and I never felt that I was receiving directions or instructions... As chief editor of news strategy I was requested on a two-weekly basis to attend Stratcom. Limited information was available to the news media, these were opportunities to gain information." – *Louis Raubenheimer, General Manager SABC 3*

☞ "Did the SABC contribute to human rights violations? Yes. Did it keep apartheid going? Yes. We had no choice. We had to somehow survive." – *Johan Pretorius, former senior director of news, SABC*

☞ "We didn't fire the guns, but we polished them." – *Pat Rogers, former news reader*

☞ "We started Mwasa to redeem the dignity of black journalists and to protect and promote the free flow of information without distortion. In newsrooms no news of political substance was given to black journalists." – *Zakes Nene, President, and Tseliso Ralitabo, national executive council member, Media Workers Association of SA*

☞ "We worked with and around people getting several pay cheques at one. We tried to get (spy John) Horak out of the news system, management said it was not possible without proof. The spies made us worry and filled us with distaste and impotence. We couldn't make managements understand how very difficult it was to work this way." – *Pat Sidley, former SAUJ president*

☞ "It was a distasteful task, but it was important to maintain agreements to secure information for our readers because the Defence Act ban on military information was so wide and the SADF was frigid and hostile. We were alert to attempts to whitewash and brainwash us, for example on Angola. The NPU did not speak loudly enough about apartheid but half of our members supported the National Party." – *Jolyon Nuttall, NPU President from 1988 to 1990 and a co-chair of meetings in which Defence and Police briefed editors and managers*

☞ "Foreign journalists were recruited and paid to represent the SA government line. Selected editors were briefed to get them to play down the effect of the ANC/UDF. The state relationship with the media was a continuum from owners to editors to journalists to the chap who cleaned the dustbins at night and would give you documents." – *Spy Craig Williamson*

☞ "'We just want you to write for us,' I was told in detention. I agreed and then retracted. I found working for these people repulsive. They took me to the sixth floor and told me: 'Feel free to jump'." – *Mike Loewe, editor East Cape News*

☞ "We have a proud record of keeping the public informed and extending human rights. Our publications were not uniformly excellent or equally outspoken. But on balance they were a positive force for change and staunch critics of apartheid. We reject allegations of collusion." – *Lawrence Clark, Chief Operating Officer, TML*

☞ "Our staffs were generally too white, and blacks were only introduced on any major scale during the 1970s. We made insufficient attempts to generate news from disadvantaged communities and this led to a distortion of the news. The alternative press showed up our company for having lost touch with the oppressed masses." – *Rory Wilson, Cape Newspapers Managing Director*