The language of listening

Unless you’re, say, the National Press Club of South Africa, who decided that the South African rhino was the newsmaker of the year for 2012, there should be no doubt that the Marikana massacre was the biggest news event of last year. Some observers, like the University of Johannesburg sociologist, Professor Peter Alexander, even consider the massacre one of the turning points in South African history. How did the South African media respond to what was evidently a historic moment?

By Herman Wasserman
immediately visible”. The statement went further to implicate media coverage in providing a view of the events that was biased towards official accounts: “Popular perceptions of the Lonmin Marikana mine massacre were initially shaped by TV footage of a single part of the massacre, viewed from the standpoint of the police. This account was reinforced by media briefings, prejudiced reporting, and opinions that blamed the violence on inter-union rivalries. Social scientific research giving weight to accounts by workers has emphasised the culpability of the police, flawed and biased official versions of events, sympathetic treatment of popular culture, and the unity of workers around a demand for a living wage.”

Content analysis of coverage by Rhodes University’s Highway Africa Chair, Jane Duncan, found that workers were used as sources for information in only 3% of the stories about the massacre. The majority of sources were business (27%), mine management/owners (14%), political parties (10%), government (9%) and the police (5%). A further study by the media analysis company Media Tenor over a longer period, from 24 August to 19 September, found that only 15% of the reports had mineworkers as their sources. Politicians and trade union officials made up the bulk of the sources, with mining management and mine workers given the same proportion of coverage (15%).

Journalists often tend to speak the language of authority. That is because the alignment of journalism with power mostly takes place unintentionally as a result of established journalistic routines and practices associated with the notion of “professionalism”, rather than through conscious choice. Journalism operates as a “system of meanings and commonsense understandings”, according to American media sociologist Stephen Reese, which appears natural but is subject to various levels of influence, internally in news organisations and externally in the media’s relationship to society. Individual journalists work according to deeply ingrained professional routines that shape their coverage. Reese shows that while journalists may rigorously adhere to the objectivity principle and avoid clear conflicts of interest by refusing “freebies” or payments, the alignment of journalism with elite interests may be inherent in the routines that privilege authoritative sources in positions of power, or come about as a result of connections between owners and managers of news organisations and other social, economic or political elites.

There were some examples in the coverage of Marikana where journalists did manage to break free from the pack and tried to let other voices be heard. Apart from Greg Marinovich’s seminal work mentioned above, City Press’ online feature “Faces of Marikana”, which won a Sikuvile award for SA Story of the Year, was one of the few mainstream stories that went beyond mere reporting of the conflict. In “Faces of Marikana” family members of the victims get to speak, telling their stories about loved ones who died and recalling them with pride and dignity as human beings and
The failures of the media at Marikana should be a clarion call to journalists to develop a better imagination about what it might be like to live on the margins of a highly unequal society like South Africa. 

“are fundamentally questions about human relations, because people’s lives are deeply connected, psychologically, economically, and politically”.

“To have a voice,” she says, “is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act.”

This ethics of care and imagination is one of commitment, of compassion, of immersion – values that are frowned upon in the liberal-individualistic journalistic mantra of professionalism and detachment. The aim of such an alternative journalism would not be merely to record the events of the day, or to write down quotes like stenographers where the powerful of the land hold court. It would require a much more pro-active commitment to the restoration of the dignity of the marginalised, an effort to discover interconnections between people and, let’s face it, the financial sacrifice to engage citizens across the entrenched segmentations of race and market.

An ethics of listening is something different from the bleeding heart sympathy for poverty that so often results in what Lilie Chouliariak called the “spectatorship of suffering”, a voyeuristic perspective on the poor or marginalised that deprives them of their own agency in order to forge the togetherness of privileged audiences. The ethics of listening is everything but a safe and cosy position devoid of politics. Listening is difficult. It can be uncomfortable. And it might require learning a whole new language. 

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Herman Wasserman is a professor in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University where he is deputy head of school. He edits the journal Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies.

h.wasserman@ru.ac.za