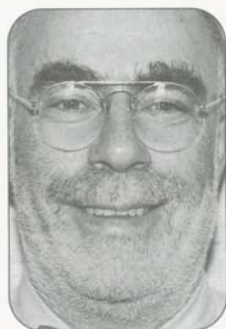


from carousel to tightrope

It is a risky run-around to get the truth,
says **STEPHEN LAUFER**.



ON ONE OCCASION, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had a press conference at five o'clock, which is for many people quite close to deadline time. One of the commissioners at the press conference, in trying to show that increasing pressure was to be brought on the military, mentioned the fact that there had been an arrest in Gauteng the day before. He was not saying who had been arrested or why, but this person should know that at some point his number was going to be up. What this meant to those who were at the press conference was a mad scramble in the ensuing hours to find out who the person was.

One of us managed after the press conference, off the record, to get the initials of this person — WB. Right? Dr WB. Okay. So take Dr WB and find out who he is, and why, having been arrested on charges of dealing in drugs, he might be of interest to the Truth Commission. What then happens is that you get onto this strange carousel. You phone some defence lawyers who know, you phone some prosecutors who know, who refuse to talk, but sort of indicate that WB might be this person or that person.

You then phone your political editor, who goes into the library and comes back and says we have got two Walter Bassons in the library. One of them is involved in the Anton Lubowsky assassination story and the other one is involved in chemical weapons. Who is it? So you get back on the carousel. And you are into this sort of poker game, where you phone all the people again that you have already phoned once, and you sort of show them you have another card in the hand — and try and get them to then confirm what you are holding in your hand.

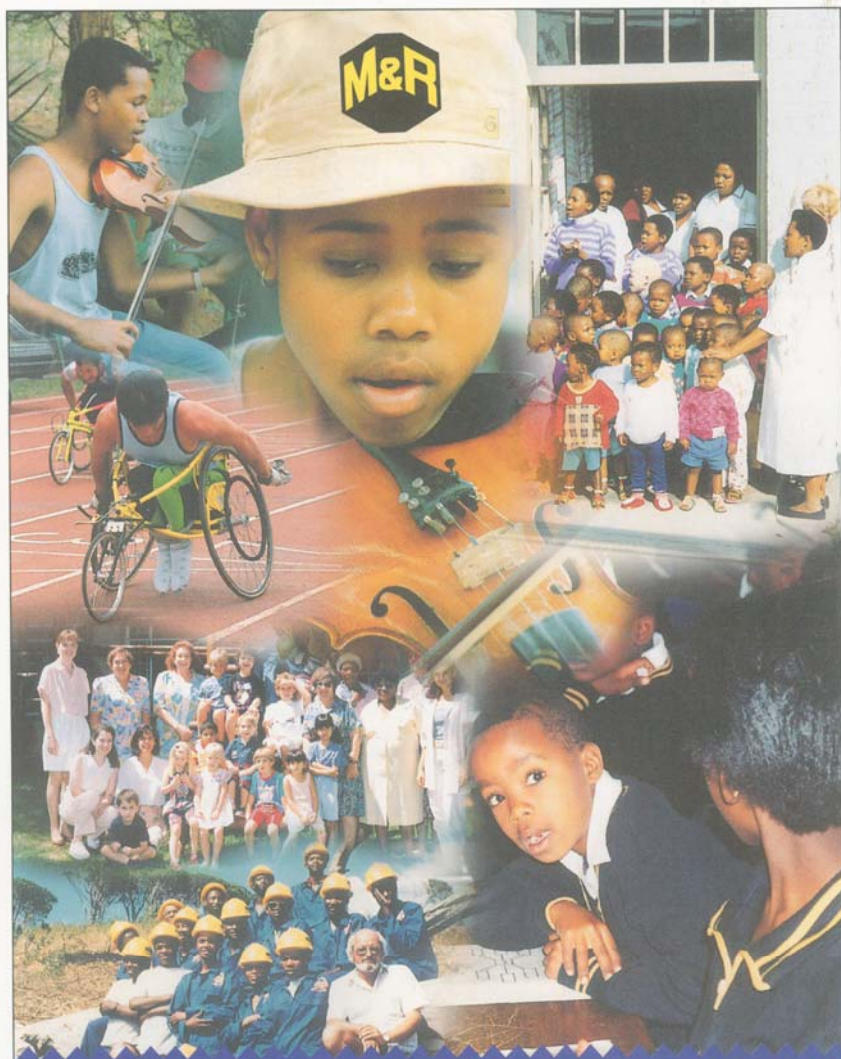
The net result is that radio, SAPA and most of the newspapers had the story. But none of us knows whether it is true, and none of us knows whether we have the right Basson, and even though we think we have the right Basson, who is the chemical weapons one, and not the Lubowsky one, we are not actually sure whether the Truth Commission is interested in him because of chemical weapons or because he might be a cardiologist.

And if he is a cardiologist and has been in the Seventh Medical Battalion, has he been involved in individual poisoning cases, for example? The commissioner who of let the cat out of the bag has done what he wanted to do. He has publicised the case. He has shown that the Truth Commission is on the ball. He has put this person under pressure. Right? And we are the ones who have taken all the risks.

There is going to be no come-back for the Commission if Jan D'Oliviera, the Transvaal Attorney General, feels that a case that he was preparing against this guy has been bugged up — no, the media are going to be blamed for it.

And if we got the wrong Basson, of course we are in for the high jump. We are going to be sued and all the rest of it. I think that the Truth Commission is being irresponsible in its media policy in this kind of situation. It is not the first situation of this kind that we have faced. Everybody in the Truth Commission knows who the person is and knows why the Commission is interested in this person, and they either want to keep it quiet, or they want it out. They must make up their minds. And even if they want it out, and they don't want to be quoted, there are many well tried and well-worn paths between journalists and others, concerning background information, where journalists know that this information is solid and therefore is usable, rather than doing this sort of high tightrope act.

Stephen Laufer works for Business Day. These remarks were excerpted from the Media, Truth and Reconciliation workshop in Cape Town earlier this year.



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The South African Award for Courageous Journalism

“WE, Ruth's three daughters, were brought up to the sound of her banging hard down on her portable typewriter as she worked at her copy. Writing as she did in the pre-computer age she evolved her own unique method of organising her text: she used scraps of paper rather than whole pieces, pins rather than paper clips to stick the scraps together and her own inimitable scrawl to perfect the finished item. Her interests were wide ranging but in each thing she wrote, her dedication to proper research and her fearlessness shone through. She was a passionate believer in the power of the truth and the need to know it: every time one of the newspapers on which she worked was banned, she helped start up another. We, Ruth's family and the trust set up in her name, have established the South African Courageous Journalism Award to honour Ruth's memory by encouraging other journalists to follow in her footsteps.”

Gillian Slovo, author.

The 1997 award coincides with the 15th anniversary of Ruth First's assassination in Maputo.

The prize of R7000 is given for journalism that is:

- bold, independent, investigative, politically courageous, and personally engaged;
- characterised as much by the social questions it raises as the answers it gives.

Entry is open to any print journalist for work published since August 1996.

Previous winners: Phillip van Niekerk, Louise Flanagan, Enoch Sithole.

Closing date for entries (or nominations): July 15 1997

For more information, contact Doug Mitchell 0461 - 26797; fax 0461 - 28447; email: award@thoth.ru.ac.za.

The award is administered by the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University.