

AFTER the second week of Truth Commission hearings 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 practised 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 then going through it again when we transcribed the video tapes, 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.

The *Special Report* is a very successful programme. On average over the last year it has had the biggest audience of any television current affairs programme ever broadcast in South Africa — with AR figures of between 9 and 13 it is bigger than *America's Funniest Home Videos*.

Competing against all print and electronic media, the *Special Report* won the Foreign Correspondent Association of South Africa's 1996 Award for Outstanding Journalism.

Conventional wisdom says viewer figures should have dropped steeply after a few weeks or months, because tears, suffering and evil are not popular viewing week after week.

I think the *Special Report* remains popular viewing because there have always been so many restrictions on telling the real story of our nation. It is a basic need of any nation to know its past.

There is, I think, another reason. The TV and radio news and even the newspapers give a quick overview of what happened at the TRC with snippets of the tears and the saddest or most brutal pieces of evidence. The *Special Report* always tries to contextualise the evidence and tell the whole human drama. More often than not we go outside the hearings and do interviews with victims and relatives and members of the community.

We find it really helpful to play in the old SABC's TV news bulletins on the event in question at the beginning of report. It gives some of the visual elements to the story as it happened, but more importantly, we give viewers a good idea of how racist, propagandist and untruthful the old SABC — and

thus the regime and the public they served — were. That is part of the story of our past.

But many important events were, for ideological reason, never covered, or covered in such a way that the archive footage is unusable. We often come upon "sensitive" archive footage with little notes scribbled on it like: "Don't use without permission" and signed by the old bosses — one or two of them still in top positions at the SABC.

We often do stories outside the Truth Commission hearings: like the stories of District Six and Sophiatown; the Pass Laws which turned more than 17 million South African into criminals; the black people in the Karoo who took "coloured" names to escape the worst parts of apartheid and now want their real names back. And of course we have done several hard investigations, some of which have even led to the solving of cases of murder and disappearance.

We make very sure we are fair and balanced, but we are up-front that we are not "objective". Still, we clearly differentiate between opinion and factual reporting. I think our honesty and frankness are appreciated by viewers who are not used to those qualities in the media.

And we sail very close to the wind. So close that we have had two criminal charges laid against us (Gaye Derby-Lewis and Magnus Malan), two defamation charges by Vlakplaas operatives, and a complaint to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission from the Flame Lily Association of old Rhodesians. If one is serious about telling the real story of South Africa's murky past, this is almost inevitable. I am confident we will survive all these charges with a clean record.

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.

My job as executive producer and presenter of the *Special Report* is deeply satisfying, especially since I had spent a lot of my energy the last 10 years — especially at *Vrye Weekblad* — on trying to help tell my country's story. And I get a warm feeling of vindication as the stories we wrote about death squads and the Third Force seven, eight years ago, are proved to be completely correct.

But the real stars of the *Special Report* are the team of young producers, recently reduced to only four full-time staffers. When we started off in April last year, none had any television experience to speak of. Today they make some of the best documentaries the SABC has ever broadcast. Week after week, working six days a week, often well past midnight.

Perhaps it helps to know that we have the privilege to document the remarkable story of our own nation.

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MAX DU PREEZ, hardened hack par excellence, tells the story about the team doing *TRC Special Report* on SABC television.

when
cowboys cry