



**JOHN VAN ZYL rates the performance of the press in covering the Commission.**

# Human Rights and wrongs

**N**EVER before in South Africa, not even during the extended Treason Trial, have the media been forced to deal so directly with the question of reporting the violation of human rights. It has required a new mindset — a shift from reporting “criminal activities” by the Nationalist government, or the breaking of specific laws inscribed in the judicial code in South Africa — to a consideration of the nature of human rights.

I doubt whether the phrase “gross violation of human rights” existed in the South African media vocabulary before the TRC first started using it in 1995. Obviously, South Africa’s exclusion from the United Nations and its deliberations were partly to blame for this. There was clear evidence at the March 1996 “Reporting the TRC” conference organised by the Applied Broadcasting Centre in Johannesburg that few of the practising journalists or editors were familiar with the scope of the International Bill of Human Rights. Certainly very few could quote the various key Declarations by the United Nations and its instruments, such as the 1963 Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, or the 1978 UNESCO Declaration on the Contribution of Mass Media to Strengthening Peace.

However, it would appear that many editors and journalists responded positively to the discussions about the relationship between media and human rights at the conference, as well as the explorations of the nature of various other truth commissions in Bosnia, East Germany and Chile.

For example, *The Star* newspaper from the beginning of 1997 has devoted its op-ed page every Friday to a discussion of issues raised by TRC sessions during the week. It employs two specialist journalists that report on this subject. *Business Day* has carried perceptive reports on the more controversial aspects of the work of the TRC. Antjie Krog and Pippa Green reported sensitively on the human face of testimony heard at the sessions until the SABC cut the budget assigned to *AM Live* which has resulted in far fewer reports.

SABC television, on the other hand, from the end of 1996, created a *Special Report* slot every Sunday evening in which journalist Max du Preez analysed the previous week’s hearings. By juxtaposing television news clips from the apartheid years (with its lies and concealments), with the truth being revealed during amnesty applications by police generals and military operatives, he has managed to contextualise the events. His journalistic contribution is by far the most effective in underwriting the aims of the TRC to publicise the history of the gross violations of human rights in South Africa.

One of the greatest problems facing journalists is the harrowing stories of the victims which contribute to the elaborate writing and rewriting of the history of struggle and repression. Added to this is the attempt to put a value, an empathetic dimension, on almost unimaginable suffering, pain and loss. Not only have these stories to be reported responsibly by journalists, but there is an equally great responsibility on editors as well as television and radio news managers to educate the public on the meaning of these stories.

“Objectivity” has become neither possible nor desirable since attempts at objectivity stifle debate and lead to silence. Arguably it is only journalism that is aware of a human rights perspective and has a knowledge of the interdependence of human rights and the media that can stimulate debate and discussion.

There are a number of specific instances where journalists have to be aware of their human rights perspectives:

- When journalists hear a victim’s story of humiliation and degradation they report it in one of two ways: in a hard-nosed, verbatim way that perpetuates the condition of the victim, or in a way that reaffirms the victim’s humanity. That turns individuals from victims into survivors.
- Journalists have to decide how to deal with the statements (“confessions” would be too kind a term) by criminal perpetrators like Eugene de Kock and his assistant Joe Mamasela who revealed some 60 or 70 murders. How to report the horror of what they did without invoking the Law of Diminishing Returns? Are 70 murders 70 times worse than one murder in the telling? How to reveal the brutality of the agents of apartheid without turning them into victims in their own turn? How to turn back attention to the survivors from the fascinated horror these perpetrators evoke?
- How do journalists deal with questions of individual responsibility for acts of brutality? What could be the status of the trigger-pullers: the assassins of high profile anti-apartheid activists like Matthew Goniwe, David Webster and Fabian Ribiero? The narrative of journalism has to assign “characters” to individuals (what Media Studies academic John Hartley refers to as “uni-accentuality” or unambiguity). Are they individual bad apples, the usual run of gangsters that can be found in any society? Are they knee-jerk ideologues, blind believers fully responsible for their deeds? Or are they the ignorant footsoldiers, the armies of the night, last in the line of command, simply obeying the orders coming from the top where politicians shelter behind the mask of “plausible deniability”?
- Finally, there is the question of the moral fatigue that will inevitably set in towards the end of the life of the TRC. The last victims giving testimony at the end of two years must be accorded the same respect as the first. As yet, this is not happening, the fresh revelations of cabinet culpability, murder, cross-border raids and cover-ups is keeping the news on the front pages and in the television headlines.

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