Guest **Editorial**

Jane Taylor

> **"For real respect is earned by improving one's reputation by one's own merits, not by climbing upon the distresses and disasters of someone else."** CICERO, *In Defence of Sextus Roscius of Ameria.*

Truth or Reconciliation?

JOURNALISTIC autonomy and interrogative aggression have become defining articles of faith in South African journalism. However, the uneasy and ill-defined relationship between the media and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has prompted a set of propositions which confront these liberal premises. It has become quite evident that the success of the TRC as a nation-building enterprise depends in no small measure on its capacity to mobilise the media for its purposes: the way in which the vast majority of South Africans will have access to our violent histories is through media representations via print, radio, and television.

Who we become will inevitably be inflected by what we know ourselves to have been. This latter category is to be distinguished from what we were. It is the Commission's premise that such knowledges will begin the work of reconciliation. Thus the acts of telling are integral to the Commission's purpose. But the act of telling in South Africa has historically been the burden of the independent media.

There is thus, I suspect, an anxiety about who is whose hand-servant in the ongoing project of historical retrieval. In other words, there is something of a conflict of interests at work. The media are required to convey the message of the TRC at the same time that they are to remain independent of any expressed government agendas.

It is not, after all, the role of the media to undertake the state's task of nation-building. To do so would be to jeopardise their substantial legacies of oppositional enquiry. But such ostensible disinterest carries its own risks. How, after all, does a responsible journalist separate the obligation to tell what she knows, from her obligation to withhold what she senses can fracture the national project and lead to civil conflict?

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Oppositional discourse and journalistic independence were pivotal instruments in destabilising the apartheid state. This created a particularly seductive mythology which capitalised on the figure of the independent journalist who is outside of all constraint, is beyond ethics, and is driven by the notion of an attainable objective truth. Such a romantic conception of the role of the journalist is perhaps not sustainable.

What, after all, is the objective truth which the TRC itself is seeking to identify? The Commission is engaged in a highly selective process, identifying as appropriate for public dissemination only a fragment of the stories which come before it. These are the stories which the Commission has determined are appropriate to the task of nation-building. Only a very finite sample of the applications made can become stories told; the Commissioners exercise their judgement in negotiating what it is we, as a nation, need to know about ourselves, lest we be swamped by the detail.

The question to be asked is: to what extent our press representatives should collaborate in this task. The project is one of telling but is also one of editing.

A different issue for journalists concerns how victims and perpetrators have been represented in the media. Max du Preez's Sunday night TV audience for the *TRC Special Report* is predominantly a black one, while Jacques Paauw's audience for *Prime Evil* was almost exclusively white. These statistics, for what they are worth, suggest disturbing patterns of identification.

For many journalists, there is the difficulty of distinguishing one story of abuse from another: that one mother's loss is another father's grief is another sister's memory. All victims tell a story with one structure, it seems.

What makes the stories of the perpetrators so compelling is, in part, that they are agents: they act upon others. All of the psychological structures of desire, power, greed, fear, identification are invoked in these accounts. Milton's classic dilemma in *Paradise Lost* was that Satan became the hero of the narrative, because of the inherent interest in his character. A similar effect was evident in the coverage of the stories of De Kock, Coetzee and Mamasela.

Several coincidental factors contributed to this. In the first instance, the Commission was selecting stories of exemplary loss: thus over and over we heard the accounts of hapless victims. Further, the Commission was hearing such stories: it was indeed these people with these histories who were making up the bulk of the applicants to the Commission. In many instances, politically active and astute victims of apartheid did not seek to be heard (although of course there are notable and singular exceptions). Perhaps they had accepted a violent history as part of the cost of political engagement; or they had other mechanisms of recourse; or, like the Biko family, they spurned the TRC process. Perhaps, too, the Commission, as part of its unconscious brief, felt a burden to present to the international community an image of the apartheid victim as an innocent bystander rather than a political activist. For a variety of such reasons, the stories which came to represent the first year of hearings were dominated by those of longsuffering and shocking loss. What fell out of these representations was South Africa as it was figured in the previous decade: a place of violent defiance, dispute, contest, activism.

When the TRC process draws to a close, it will once again be the journalists who have to pick up where the Commission leaves off. The media provide one (although not the only) context through which to interrogate, publish, and document who we have been and what we have done. Thus inevitably the media will be called upon to play a pivotal role in the processes of national self-definition. Such a demand might well increasingly be tested against our need for a free press, and the TRC story thus gives us a valuable opportunity to anticipate and pre-empt some of these debates, and to set working principles in place.

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