

# a paradigm shift

8 points for a new kind of journalism,  
by MELISSA BAUMANN and HANNES SIEBERT.

"JOURNALISTS mediate conflict, whether they intend to or not." This is the premise we started with seven years ago, when we began the work which became the bedrock for the Media Peace Centre, founded in 1992 as part of the Peace Accord structures. When we launched the Mediation Project for Journalists (MPJ) in 1990, journalists in South Africa largely came from mouthpiece or adversarial traditions. The state-run and much of the liberal press operated under the guise of "objectivity" and the illusion of bearing the absolute "truth". Journalists from the alternative media had an open agenda of "giving voice to the voiceless" and offsetting the official versions. The MPJ challenged all that.

Journalists as mediators? Not exactly. But journalists have a unique opportunity to impact upon conflict — pre-emptively, in its midst, and restoratively — to "intervene" as mediators do. Since 1990 the MPJ has offered nearly 100 journalists — here and overseas — training in mediation and other conflict handling/covering skills, and posited new journalistic paradigms. At the heart of the project lies this conviction: that journalists can and should help manage conflict, rather than exacerbate it.

How to do this, however imperfectly? The MPJ imparts to journalists a set of skills borrowed from mediation, which basically underwrite sound journalism skills and practice. These include:

**1 BRINGING PARTIES TO THE TABLE:** Journalists have nearly unparalleled access to parties in a conflict, and often the power to bring them "to the table" to begin dialogue around conflictual issues, in the media and presumably "off the record". Key considerations are drawing parties in inclusively and representatively (the "right" sources). The TRC hearings are tabling a collective history — and journalists play a key role (along with the Commission) in deciding whose stories get told.

**2 ACTIVE LISTENING:** Journalists can help engage parties in better listening — through practising it themselves, and paraphrasing parties' points of view. Conflicts often persist because people aren't really heard. In covering the TRC, journalists enable people to be heard, but the question arises: has the public turned a deaf ear to the litany of atrocities? How do we represent them differently?

**3 MOVING PARTIES OFF POSITIONS, TOWARDS INTERESTS:** This basic tenet of mediation has application for journalists. Journalists needn't reiterate parties' hardened positions with the time-worn "X said, Y said" formula. Instead they can explore interests underlying those positions, possibly identifying common ground between the parties. One of the major gaps in current reporting on the TRC is "digging for context". The typical reports repeat the gruesome narratives of violence and inhumanity. What drove people to such desperate acts of destruction? We have to uncover the fear, hatred, hunger for power and illusions that apartheid trapped us in. Without unfolding and sharing these underlying interests our memories will suffocate in the stories of pain and horror — we will never enter the common human space where healing can start.

**4 AGENDA SETTING:** Agenda setting harks back to the call for more proactive journalism. What are, for instance, the critical issues emerging from the TRC which warrant the attention/action of government, those involved, the nation at large? Can we not see the forest for the trees — the hundreds of testimonies, while valid in themselves, all adding up to patterns, blocs of socio-political insight which need to be analysed and addressed?

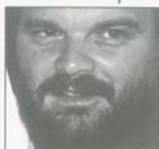
**5 DISPELLING MISPERCEPTION AND STEREOTYPE:** Antagonists generally hold rigid (mis)perceptions of each other — of the "other" — reinforced by and generating fear. Journalists can explore these misperceptions with the parties on both sides, and in uncovering them, may help dispel them. Is the media coverage of the TRC dispelling or reinforcing stereotypes?

**6 QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS:** A good journalist questions his/her own assumptions in reporting, as well as others'. Many assumptions have presented themselves in the course of the TRC hearings — for one, does "the truth set you free"?

**7 LAUNDERING LANGUAGE:** Language has enormous power; we use it intentionally and unwittingly. Words can do a lot of damage, creating and perpetuating stereotypes and division. Watch out for binary combinations — such as the TRC's "victim" and "perpetrator" — for labelling, for euphemism. They tend to lock us and our readers into narrow mindsets.

**8 JOINT PROBLEM SOLVING:** This is the best-case scenario — when through the process of reporting and creating/facilitating dialogue around a conflictual issue journalists can help move parties into action, into managing or resolving the conflict at hand. A critical prerequisite to this phase, of course, is helping to structure the conflict — through reportage — and identify key problem areas to be addressed. The media can also support joint problem solving by spotlighting instances where it works, and the process the parties took to get there. In the course of the TRC and in its spirit, a number of "victims" and "perpetrators" have met in an attempt at reconciliation. While not exactly joint problem solving, it is a joint working through of the past — in spiritual terms, of guilt and forgiveness. The danger in reporting these "reconciliations" (and in the reconciliations themselves) is that it is done facily; the evil of these deeds cannot be obliterated in a handshake.

Melissa Baumann and Hannes Siebert are the founders of the Media Peace Centre.



**THE MEDIA PEACE CENTRE** has experimented with its own truth commission, in a sense. For nearly three years it has worked on the East Rand, primarily in Thokoza, with a local partner, Simunye, on a project called Video Dialogues. In this case, two former self-defence unit commanders involved in the East Rand conflict, one ANC, the other IFP, shot the video themselves, and went through a journey of confrontation and healing. Along the way the IFP ex-commander learned that his ANC counterpart had had a hand in his brother's killing. This could have derailed the project, but didn't — presumably there's a broader commitment to the community and the cathartic process of making the video. At the core of the video, in fact, are testimonies from both sides, collected and filmed by the ex-commanders, destined for the TRC. On a small but deeply rooted scale, Video Dialogues has helped Thokoza grapple with its own "truths".