

Small stories are a big issue

ONE HAS TO STRIVE to be unbiased, objective, and furthermore psychologically and emotionally strong, to cover the news of the past and the present events, which are very traumatic in content and emotion. The task of verifying facts is extremely difficult in a loaded, emotional climate such as that of the TRC hearings. Truth is the essential essence of reconciliation. But truth is not easy to come by, nor is it painless to reveal.

Ninety-nine percent of the victims who are interviewed are black, and ninety-five percent of the perpetrators are white. So to balance the two, it's very difficult. These facts make the task of reconciliation extremely

difficult for the majority in South Africa. In many instances, people find it difficult enough to forgive their own brothers and sisters for turning against one another. But at the end of the day, for the sake of progress in the country, they have to. For example, you have Joe Mamasela, who turned against his own people, and today he wants the very same community to forgive him. How is he going to get forgiveness? Only by telling the truth.

However, how do we as journalists communicate what Mamasela is saying to the people? Are we creating a climate for people to forgive Mamasela? Is Mamasela actually telling the truth? We have to verify facts.

The limelight and the public focus for covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is on events that are already well known — like Boipatong, the Pebco Three, the Cradock Four, Steve Biko. But we tend to forget little incidents, which are very important — the other hidden stories of thousands of people, whose lives were also affected. We as journalists have a responsibility to cover these stories too.

If I may make an example — Dirk Coetzee went to the amnesty committee and spoke about a Lesotho incident, where they killed a diamond dealer. I did an interview with Mamasela to verify the story, and I got totally different facts from him. It was broadcast. After five days, an organisation called Lesotho Political Victims called me to say thank you. For years and years they had been looking for the guy Coetzee had spoken about. I referred them to the Truth Commission. The same organisation disclosed that person's name. And for the family, it was a relief. They called me six days later to say thanks. "At least now there is a light; we can actually know where to look for our own member of the family."

These are stories we sometimes ignore and tend to look for the big stories. Bringing the uncovered story of the faceless, unknown people on the street, is essential to the process of truth and reconciliation. And not only looking at the black society — also looking at the white communities. They too were affected, and there are these little stories that we overlook.

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SOPHIE MOKOENA of *Lesedi Radio* recounts the issues raised by interviewing Joe Mamasela and Dirk Coetzee, killers of human rights lawyer Griffiths Mxenge.

Radio & reconciliation

Therapy on air

I invited Joe Mamasela onto my current affairs programme for an interview and for listeners to ask him questions.

After about 20 minutes of speaking to him and listeners asking him questions, there was a dramatic change. People became willing to forgive him when he actually answered their questions correctly. Then I called Mhleli Mxenge, Griffiths Mxenge's brother, to speak to Joe Mamasela. It was live. The first thing that he said was, "Sorry Sophie, I have made a mistake to agree to take part in your programme. I don't want to speak to Mamasela." Mamasela responded, saying: "I want to talk to you. I want to hear your voice". Then I said to Mhleli, "Okay, are you prepared to speak to Mamasela?". He said yes, and went on to describe Mamasela as a dog. Mamasela responded with a political

approach and slowly the whole conversation started to change. Finally, Mhleli thanked Mamasela for revealing what happened, and said he would like to meet him.

Some people criticise me, saying that I was forcing reconciliation because I had not told Mamasela that I was going to call Mxenge. But Mamasela kept on calling me afterwards because he wanted me to facilitate a process where he could respond to people who wanted to ask him questions. One person who phoned during the programme, poured abuse on him. He replied, "You know what? When you keep on insulting, calling me by names, it is a healing to me."

It was an hour and 30 minutes programme, and since then I tell myself, yes, it is so easy, people can really forgive and reconcile. But it depends on how the process is facilitated.

Special reports

RADIO had Special Reports in 11 languages. They were so good that people were really cross when they were stopped, as this was where black people heard the stories from two different worlds, in their own language. Learned people knew about Dirk Coetzee and his revelations. But to ordinary people it was the first time. I had a special interview with him. I had a special interview with Mamasela. So now people are really able to understand what happened in the past. But we don't have the Special Reports anymore. In other words, the majority is now disadvantaged. People don't know what is happening with the TRC. You can't use one or two minute pieces in current affairs and make people understand. But when you had a TRC special report, you would speak to Dirk Coetzee, you would speak to Mamasela, giving them 10 minutes. After 30 minutes, listeners really got the essence of the whole activity or event.

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Articles excerpted from presentations to the Media, Truth and Reconciliation workshop in Cape Town, February 1997.