

THE TRC AND THE MEDIA

the next agenda



BY HUGH LEWIN

The photos you can't see, yet

THE TRC HOLDS copyright on hundreds of photographs taken by international photographer George Hallett during the life of the commission.

The images tell a story about life behind the walls of TRC offices. There are photographs of staff at work. There are scenes of bizarre encounters, such as a meeting between perpetrator Eugene de Kock and an affectionate TRC tea lady, and another of De Kock with an uncomfortable Jann Turner, daughter of murdered activist Rick Turner. There are photographs of the TRC's documentation centre where part of the country's history is being held. There are even photographs taken at Pretoria Central Prison of the files of apartheid spies.

The TRC has allowed some of these photographs to be published overseas and they have also been used in its official newsletter Truth Talk.

Yet when *Siyaya!* – Idasa's publication – approached the TRC requesting permission to publish a few of these photographs and so assist in bringing the work of the TRC to the broader South African public, the request was denied.

A letter from the TRC's media department, referring to the decision taken on the matter by chief executive officer Biki Minyuku, said "We do not see our way clear to authorising the use of these photographs at present. We have been engaged in discussions of copyright issues and the commission has not been able to formulate policy on this."

After repeated requests Minyuku granted permission for *Siyaya!* to use one photograph. But when they selected a photograph of the documentation centre he declined permission. The second choice, a photograph of two TRC interpreters in their glass booth, was allowed. This appears in Volume 3 of *Siyaya!*

But questions remain: when will ordinary South Africans, whose taxes funded the TRC, be able to see these photographs? Why was this valuable resource commissioned if the photographs were never intended to be widely published in South Africa?

HAVING HAD an amazing two-year experience as a member of the TRC's Human Rights Violations Committee in Gauteng, I would like to say something about the significance of the TRC hearings and, especially, about the way they have been covered by the South African media.

It has been the best and longest-running story of the decade. It has produced some of the most dramatic human interest stories imaginable (for example, would any news editor ever have accepted an account from any reporter of how a group of policemen discover how long it takes to burn a body on a fire, particularly the buttocks, while their colleagues stand by, braaiing their own steaks and downing their inevitable cans of Castle? We now know, chillingly, that that was for real – and I think it'll remain one of the most devastating images to come out of the TRC process).

The TRC coverage has been important for what has been reported – and for what has not been reported; and covering the TRC has produced some of the most consistent and sustained reporting we've ever seen, in all of the media, most particularly on TV.

It's been a good time for the SA media. For me: I've felt schizophrenic for these last two years, being on the one hand a member of the Human Rights Violations panel, organising and participating in some 15 public hearings and at the same time trying to ignore the fact that I'm a journalist. I've had to respond to the revelations and testimony as a compassionate and listening panelist, allowing the witnesses scope and space to tell their stories on an international platform which they have never had before (and will never again), then offer solace and consolation for their pain, sympathy for their suffering – never being the insensitive digger, the pushy reporter.

It's often been awkward, like finding ourselves having to choose which witnesses would best reflect the turbulent history of a community through several difficult and different years. Would it, for instance, be better to take witness A, who talks of four deaths at a night vigil, as opposed to the mother who talks only of one death at a funeral? How do you quantify personal loss? How do you measure the intense intimacy of torture and pain? It's like the braaiing of buttocks, and suddenly realising how horrendous it all is. And then finding that it's not you and your reactions which matter: it's the community's. It's their story, and they want it told, and you are just the medium, the messenger, so make absolutely sure you have it right. Clear and simple.

That, I think, is what the TRC hearings have done for SA and the media. It's changed the nature of story-telling. By giving this open, front-of-the-lights platform to the people (not the leaders, not the preachers, not the politicians), the real people with their own stories, in their own time and place and language – by giving them that opportunity, we have changed the nature of story-telling, and how we report it.

When you listen, for instance, as happened at the Alexandra township hearings, to a mother telling how she returned home one day and saw her child shot, then saw the people who shot him batter his head against a rock to make sure he was dead, then you can have no pre-determined for-

mula for reporting, no easy intro, no trite pyramids. Now you have to listen and record in a way that wipes you out as "the messenger".

You cannot dare to interpret, you cannot presume to explain. You can only record, very precisely, what you have heard and how you have heard it. It makes nonsense of our rules and guidelines and so-called objectivity. It's not about sound-bites or the selection of "main points". It is a process that takes a long time to tell and is very humbling.

But it's also a very important process and will take a long time to absorb, analyse and learn how to report it – and, only then, see how it can become part of a healing process. There can be no "micro-wave reconciliation" – and certainly no easy summaries of the impact this has had on all our lives.

What it has also done, in a way that has been totally unexpected, is to put human rights on the agenda in a way that's not been imaginable before. Nobody – whoever and wherever they are – can again ignore the importance of human rights as a legitimate, urgent, necessary component of social behaviour, and therefore as a legitimate and necessary focus of any newsroom diary. This is a part of the future agenda that we as journalists must all accept, then start digging, and reporting.

That's the other major feature of the TRC for the media. Whatever has not been revealed in the past nearly three years (and that's saying some!), there has nevertheless been a huge volume of material that has emerged from the hearings process, and another huge mountain of material that has been deposited with the commission and that, now the report has been handed over, becomes available for researchers.

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At the front of the queue, I submit, must be journalists. To mention just two examples. What you saw on Special Report every Sunday night (and I think Max du Preez's team produced some 84 programmes, which they're now reducing to six tapes), was a selection of, at most, some 10% of the testimonies heard at each public hearing; and those testimonies were, again, a selection of some 10% of the testimonies made by communities. There remains the bulk of the testimonies made to the Human Rights Violations Committee – the final figure is 20 300: each has its own story, and each needs telling; plus there are the thousands of stories of those who didn't testify, and why didn't they? And then the 7 500/8 000 amnesty cases, with applications from the perpetrators – there's already a big disparity between the "victim" testimonies and those of the perpetrators. What of the other perpetrators? Many others.

That's our challenge as journalists: to begin delving through these stories and unravelling, firstly, the mass of information the TRC has collected and not yet analysed; and secondly, the mass of tantalising leads which now need to be chased.

It'll take years, of course, and a great deal of commitment from journalists (and from their bosses, to drag them into realising the importance of investigative journalism), but it must be done. It'll be both a challenge and exciting.

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