

IKASI LIFE IN THEIR OWN WORDS IN 15 MINUTES

BY JO MENELL

Street Talk is a 15-minute programme that airs on Cape Town TV (CTV), the only community television station in the city. CTV was started in 2008 and goes out on a terrestrial signal which means that it is accessible and free to anyone with a TV and aerial.

Its footprint runs from Atlantis across to Paarl, Stellenbosch, Gordons Bay, Bellville and reaches all the townships on the Cape Flats. Parts of the city bowl get the signal but it can't reach over the mountain to the Atlantic seaboard.

A recent audience survey showed that, on average, nearly 1 500 000 watch CTV, the vast majority of these being residents of the black and mixed race communities.

Street Talk began with the launch of CTV and has now been running for over four years. We started as a weekly show on Friday evenings and, as of April, are now on nightly at 7pm following ZAnews. We can also be viewed on our website streettalktv.com, YouTube and the new mobile platform Bozza.

Basically, *Street Talk* is a 15-minute edited film of conversations between small groups of people shot in informal surroundings. After more than half a century of making documentaries, it occurred to me that one learned much more by listening to people talk to each other than by interviewing them. People respond to questions with answers, whereas in conversation they tend to say what they feel.

Back in the 60s when I worked on *Panorama*, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme, I made a film about the great American journalist and oral historian, Studs Terkel. Studs used a mike and believed in letting people tell their story with as little prompting as possible. His radio show in Chicago was legendary and he picked up a couple of Pulitzer Prizes along the way.

In 1968 I had made a couple of one-hour documentaries on the war in Vietnam for the BBC that CBS had refused to show on the grounds that they were "tendentious and anti-American", and was invited by Studs to appear on his radio show.

The red recording light in the studio came on, Studs introduced me and asked me one question: "Jo, tell us what the hell

WHAT ORDINARY CITIZENS TALK ABOUT ON STREET TALK:

"My dream is to marry a white guy, own a big SUV, and live in a mansion in Constantia"

(Teenager in Langa)

"Aids is just another fever, and there are so many in the townships"

(Young woman in Gugulethu)

"Women have no culture"

(Somali shopkeeper in Delft)

"The President is just talking bullshit"

(Young Aids activist in Khayelitsha)

"The police? They are a joke, they are corrupt. We must punish the criminals ourselves"

(Middle-aged residents of Lavender Hill)

is going on in Vietnam!" I took a deep breath and was just starting to answer, when Studs flicked a note across the table on which was scrawled "back in a minute". Half an hour later Studs came back to wind up the show. I was only just still talking.

Another inspiration was Spike Lee,



who at a certain moment in all of his films has a group of people sitting around, be it in a barber shop, a bar or under a tree, just chewing the fat. Not scripted, totally ad lib and yet, in many ways, more revealing and compelling than the script.

In 2006, I met Richard Mills, a brilliant editor and cameraman and the co-founder and co-director of *Street Talk*.

Appalled by the conspiracy of silence and stigma that surrounded the Aids pandemic we made the documentary *SHAG – Women on Sex*, which premiered at the Sithengi Film Festival. The idea was to have women talking to each other about sex. The subtext was that as so much of the transmission of Aids had to do with the fact that South Africa was one of the most sexist and patriarchal countries in the world, it would be more than interesting to hear what women really felt and talked about to each other.

We put ads in a lot of the local newspapers asking women to participate and were overwhelmed by the response. We randomly selected about 40 and split them into groups of four or five. The women came from very diverse backgrounds and in one group you might have a 50-year-old *tammie* from Stellenbosch, a 20-something Xhosa sex worker and a mixed race computer programmer.

What amazed me was, after an initial

stage of getting to know one another, how quickly the women got into it and how soon they seemed to quite ignore the presence of the camera and recording equipment. We were like the proverbial fly on the wall.

Getting people to relax and talk to each other in front of the camera is much easier in South Africa than other places I have worked. Try shooting a *Street Talk* in England you would find people more inhibited and self-conscious. Also South Africans are quite individualistic which makes for a livelier exchange of ideas than, I suspect, a group in the US. Most importantly, I think, *Street Talk* has given our viewers a chance to listen to "the other".

In our sadly, still-divided communities it is the myths generated by ignorance that are such obstacles to transformation. We have filmed, for example, two different groups on opposite sides of a street in Bonteheuwel, one coloured Muslim and the other Xhosa. When they heard what their neighbours, with whom they had had almost no social contact, had to say about their disgust at police corruption, their fear of gang violence and their horror at the way tik was ruining people's lives, they realised that it was exactly what they were on about and how much more in common they had than they realised.



From the start, I decided that it would be better if I didn't play the role of facilitator, much less interviewer. This has led to our being criticised for putting on air points of view that are racist, xenophobic, sexist, politically-incorrect or obscene.

I think what one learns about what people really think goes some way in justifying our subjective approach and getting it out in the open is far better than pretending that it doesn't exist. We have almost never edited out something that would certainly not appear on any commercial TV channel, much less the SABC. If *Street Talk* is to have street cred, it must be just that, i.e. street talk.

The role of editing is crucial in making *Street Talk*. Some of the conversations may last over an hour, others 20 minutes and this is where Richard Mills' genius comes into play. No unstructured conversation between people, no matter how intellectual, follows a linear or logical flow. Less so when you are in a 5 x 10 metre shack in the backstreets of Delft filming eight members of two rival teenage gangs: the Vatos Locos and the Italians.

More than an hour and a half of sometimes hilarious, sometimes shocking and mostly downright terrifying conversation provided a challenge in the editing suite. (In a rare intervention I had

to stop filming and insist they sheath their drawn knives they were about to use over a perceived insult from a Vato to an Italian.)

The trick is not to try and come up with the conversation you wanted them to have, but to try and create a 15-minute précis of the essence of what was said, smoothing over the non-sequiturs and limiting any one person from hogging the limelight.

In a recent episode, a group of eight gays, lesbians, transvestites and transsexuals discussed how, although protected under the Constitution, they were constantly subjected to discrimination and violent assault. A transvestite described how, mid act, "her" male client discovered she had a penis. Shocking, hilarious, revealing, certainly, but was it titillating or obscene and therefore censorable?

I would argue that it was totally in context of who the person was and what her life was about, and therefore admissible.

From its inception, we decided that *Street Talk* should, where possible, be in English. The reasoning behind this is that our viewers speak isiXhosa, Zulu, Pedi, Afrikaans, Lingala, Swahili, Shona, Ndebele and more, but have one language in common: English. Also, studies have shown that viewers find



subtitles, especially on TV, hard to follow and tend to change channels. Our concern was whether, given that our filming was almost entirely in the townships, we would inhibit people from expressing themselves by not speaking their mother tongue. I always ask our participants to try in English and if it's too much of a stretch, to then use their own language; 90% chose English and do incredibly well.

After listening for over four years to more than 160 groups of "ordinary" people (by ordinary I mean no experts in their field, no politicians or celebrities) giving vent to their views on a host of topics, certain things stand out: Firstly, the way the "common man" or masses are depicted in the media bears little resemblance to reality. What they talk about and how they talk about it is far more sophisticated and articulate than one might think from the way they are portrayed on TV or in the press. There is far more scepticism bordering on cynicism with regard to politics and the media. The phrases most heard across the board are "the politicians are eating our money" and "they only come here in election time and make promises they never keep".

Racism, as a topic, comes up in almost every conversation. The general view is that it is as bad now as it was under apartheid and that nothing has changed. The degree of animosity between the black and mixed race communities is palpable and everyone has personal stories of some slight, insult, or confrontation.

Xenophobia: Foreigners, according to most of the people we listened to, are disliked and the thing one hears most is "they should go home". Even the older folk with moderate views on other topics are heard saying things like "they are taking our jobs, they steal the RDP houses, they are corrupting our women and dealing drugs."

Sex: A truly disturbing number of young township teenagers and those in their early 20s admit to not liking and not using condoms. The guys brag that it's

like eating a banana with the skin on and they won't do it, while the young women remonstrate with them, bring up the Aids thing and then admit they have no power to negotiate and if they don't let the guys do it without, they will just lose them. Besides, as one hears all too often, "it's only another fever, and if you get it you don't die".

Malema: A lot of support from most age groups especially for his addressing the nationalisation of mines issue and land reform; very little criticism of Malema's lifestyle or entrepreneurship.

Optimism: Some of the most articulate and passionate conversations filmed have involved high school seniors in different township schools. The degree of optimism and determination to succeed in life, get out of the township and make a better life for one's kids predominates. The importance of not relying on others to do it for you and of maintaining high self-esteem is a constant refrain. Alas, when we revisit the same groups a couple of years later we invariably find a different picture. The girls are mostly pregnant or already have a baby, the guys drinking and in all but a very few exceptions they are unemployed. The conversation is about having to know or pay someone to get a job, and how hard life is when you don't have a cent.

In the past year, *Street Talk* has been profiling people who are trying to make a difference in their communities. These range from a couple of old time jazz musicians who have started the Itonga Music School in Gugulethu to Lucinda Evans in Lavender Hill (Philiza Abafazi Wethu) and Maymouna Scholdtz in Vrygrond (Where The Rainbows Meet) who have converted their homes and back yards into safe houses for abused women and provide everything from counselling to computer literacy classes.

The more time one spends in the townships, the more one realises how woefully unreported or misreported *ikasi* life is. Giving a voice to the voiceless both empowers the participants and educates our viewers.