

The language of listening

Unless you're, say, the National Press Club of South Africa, who decided that the South African rhino was the newsmaker of the year for 2012, there should be no doubt that the Marikana massacre was the biggest news event of last year. Some observers, like the University of Johannesburg sociologist, Professor Peter Alexander, even consider the massacre one of the turning points in South African history. How did the South African media respond to what was evidently a historic moment?

By Herman Wasserman

The footage that the world first saw of the shooting of the striking miners at Marikana was filmed literally from behind the backs of firing policemen'. This alignment of journalists with positions of authority when covering conflict is not unusual, but it has implications for how the media's role in society will be evaluated.

Alexander, whose book *Marikana: A View From The Mountain And A Case To Answer* draws on interviews with mineworkers who survived the attack by security forces, said at a Rhodes Humanities seminar earlier this year the media "let us down" in their reporting of the event. "The media's first response to the massacre was financial: 'What does this mean for the rand?'" Alexander said. In his research in the immediate aftermath of the massacre, Alexander and his team found that there were in all likelihood more than one site where the killing had taken place, and that the killing was more extensive in geographical terms than had been reported in the media up until that point. From the interviews, Alexander surmised that there was a second site where most of the miners were killed, the so-called "killing koppie". His research suggests that most of the miners ran away from the firing police shown in the initial television footage, towards the "killing koppie", where police were allegedly lying in wait for them.

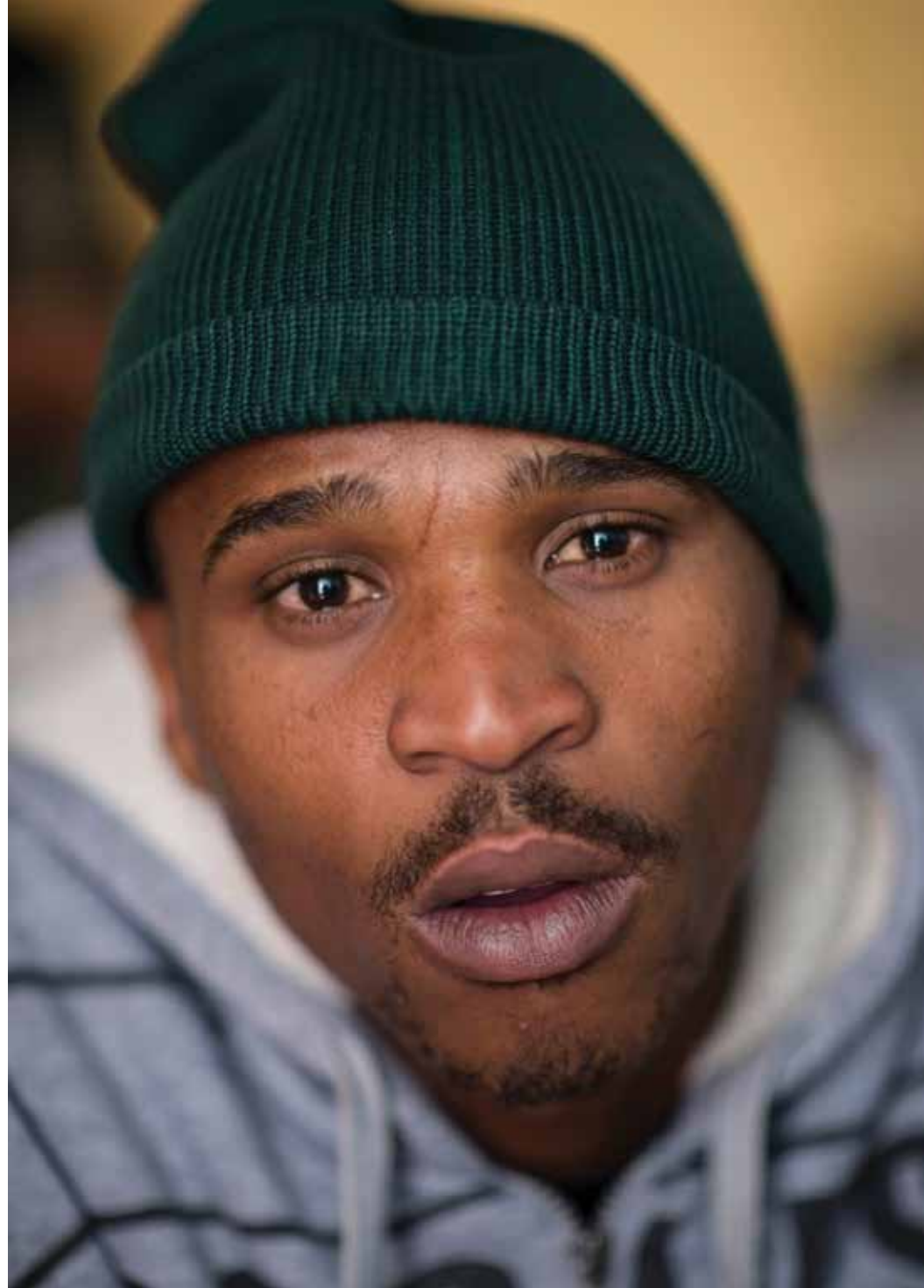
The veteran photojournalist, Greg Marinovich, writing for the web publication *Daily Maverick*, also did follow-up investigative work after the initial massacre and confirmed the findings of Alexander. Marinovich reported that "the majority of those who died were killed beyond the view of cameras", some shot at close range or driven over by police vehicles. Initially, these revelations were either scoffed at or ignored by mainstream journalists. Alexander has commented on this in an interview with Mandy de Waal in the *Daily Maverick*: "What was apparent to me on both Saturday and Monday, when the ministerial group was there, was that journalists just stand around but don't really investigate or speak to any of the workers. The journalists interacted with the politicians, the police and sometimes with AMCU (the Association for Mineworkers and Construction Union) or NUM (the National Union of Mineworkers). But there are hardly any accounts of events from people who were on the mountain when the massacre occurred."

In his talk at Rhodes, Alexander criticised the media's reporting of the massacre, as well as the currently ongoing Farlam Commission of Inquiry, for coverage that tended to be episodic rather than analytical. "This leaves a space that should be filled by social scientists," Alexander said. Indeed, a group of social scientists did respond to the way the massacre was reported on in the media. In September last year, social scientists from institutions around the country and abroad brought out a statement² that pointed to social science's practice of critically examining social structures, social processes and social context, and the aim of social science research "to reveal phenomena that are hidden, rather than rely on reports of what is

immediately visible". The statement went further to implicate media coverage in providing a view of the events that was biased towards official accounts: "Popular perceptions of the Lonmin Marikana mine massacre were initially shaped by TV footage of a single part of the massacre, viewed from the standpoint of the police. This account was reinforced by media briefings, prejudiced reporting, and opinions that blamed the violence on inter-union rivalries. Social scientific research giving weight to accounts by workers has emphasised the culpability of the police, flawed and biased official versions of events, sympathetic treatment of popular culture, and the unity of workers around a demand for a living wage."

Content analysis of coverage by Rhodes University's Highway Africa Chair, Jane Duncan, found that workers were used as sources for information in only 3% of the stories about the massacre. The majority of sources were business (27%), mine management/owners (14%), political parties (10%), government (9%) and the police (5%). A further study by the media analysis company Media Tenor over a longer period, from 24 August to 19 September, found that only 15% of the reports had mineworkers as their sources. Politicians and trade union officials made up the bulk of the sources, with mining management and mine workers given the same proportion of coverage (15%).

Journalists often tend to speak the language of authority. That is because the alignment of journalism with power mostly takes place unintentionally as a result of established journalistic routines and practices associated with the notion of "professionalism", rather than through conscious choice. Journalism operates as a "system of meanings and common-sense understandings", according to American media sociologist Stephen Reese, which appears natural but is subject to various levels of influence, internally in news organisations and externally in the media's relationship



to society. Individual journalists work according to deeply ingrained professional routines that shape their coverage. Reese shows that while journalists may rigorously adhere to the objectivity principle and avoid clear conflicts of interest by refusing "freebies" or payments, the alignment of journalism with elite interests may be inherent in the routines that privilege authoritative sources in positions of power, or come about as a result of connections between owners and managers of news organisations and other social, economic or political elites.

There were some examples in the coverage of Marikana where journalists did manage to break free from the pack and tried to let other voices be heard. Apart from Greg Marinovich's seminal work mentioned above, *City Press'* online feature "Faces of Marikana"³, which won a Sikuville award for SA Story of the Year, was one of the few mainstream stories that went beyond mere reporting of the conflict. In "Faces of Marikana" family members of the victims get to speak, telling their stories about loved ones who died and recalling them with pride and dignity as human beings and

Anele Zonke was tortured by police while in custody. Wonderkop, Marikana, North West, 1 November 2012. Photo: Greg Marinovich

not just as statistics of the dead. Often they do so in their own language. This feature is an example not only of how journalists can listen to the voices of those who are routinely excluded from the mainstream media, and use their resources to reach out to people who might not immediately offer comment or issue statements in the way that police or business are resourced to do, but also an excellent example of how print publications can use the converged media space to tell stories in a different way.

Ultimately the challenge that the Marikana massacre poses to journalism in South Africa is not primarily one of technology, contacts or resources. Marikana demands of journalists to rethink where they are located in relation to post-apartheid society, who they listen to, and whose stories they want to tell. It demands of journalists to respect the dignity of the dead, the dignity of the poor and the dignity of those that remain hidden in the shadows after almost 20 years of democracy.

The respect for human dignity is not only a cornerstone of the South African constitution; it is also a value that can be found in ethical frameworks around the world. To view human life as sacred and human beings as having an inherent dignity means to look for the ways that our narratives are connected, interrelated and interdependent. In his work on voice, the British academic Nick Couldry emphasises that people's voices are socially grounded and therefore not the practice of isolated individuals. But for people to narrate their lived experiences, they depend on being heard: "Voice as a social process involves, from the start, both speaking *and* listening, that is, an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative," says Couldry. The resonance of this interdependent view of speaking and listening with the underlying African ethical principle of ubuntu is obvious: "I am because you are", or, to rephrase, "you can tell your story because I am listening to it".

For the South African media to enable a variety of voices to be heard, especially those that are routinely silenced or drowned

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out by the noise emanating from political stages, boardrooms and news conferences, they would need to exercise their powers of imagination. Ethics, the philosopher Alain de Botton has it, means "the command that one try to imagine what it might be like to be someone else". To cultivate an ethics of listening would require of journalists to develop their moral imagination. This is a task best performed by the humanities and the social sciences, which is why a humanities education should be seen as vital for the deepening of South African democracy. Martha Nussbaum, in her book *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, emphasises the importance of this moral imagination for the well-being of democratic societies: "(T)he ability to imagine the experience of another – a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form – needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains."

The failures of the media at Marikana should be a clarion call to journalists to develop a better imagination about what it might be like to live on the margins of a highly unequal society like South Africa. It should prompt them to reconsider whether their role in South African society should be seen in more dimensions than that of the fierce watchdog – at least to widen their professional identity to becoming "imaginative listeners". The feminist scholar Carol Gilligan's "ethics of care" can be instructive in such a reconceptualisation of journalistic identities. An ethics of care is rooted in an understanding of human dignity as based not on "abstract speculations" but in relationships that are "grounded in listening". "The most basic questions about human living – how to live and what to do," Gilligan says,

"are fundamentally questions about human relations, because people's lives are deeply connected, psychologically, economically, and politically".

"To have a voice," she says, "is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act."

This ethics of care and imagination is one of commitment, of compassion, of immersion – values that are frowned upon in the liberal-individualist journalistic mantra of professionalism and detachment. The aim of such an alternative journalism would not be merely to record the events of the day, or to write down quotes like stenographers where the powerful of the land hold court. It would require a much more pro-active commitment to the restoration of the dignity of the marginalised, an effort to discover interconnections between people and, let's face it, the financial sacrifice to engage citizens across the entrenched segmentations of race and market.

An ethics of listening is something different from the bleeding heart sympathy for poverty that so often results in what Lilie Chouliraki called the "spectatorship of suffering", a voyeuristic perspective on the poor or marginalised that deprives them of their own agency in order to forge the togetherness of privileged audiences. The ethics of listening is everything but a safe and cosy position devoid of politics. Listening is difficult. It can be uncomfortable. And it might require learning a whole new language.

This article draws on the author's inaugural lecture, published as "Journalism in a New Democracy: The Ethics of Listening" in Communicatio 39(1). Downloadable: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02500167.2013.772217#.UbHbqjw7W7s>

Herman Wasserman is a professor in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University where he is deputy head of school. He edits the journal Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies. h.wasserman@ru.ac.za



Endnotes

1. See eNCA footage captured and discussed here: <http://www.citypress.co.za/news/watch-marikana-who-shot-first-20120821/>
2. See <http://marikanastatement.blogspot.com/>
3. <http://www.m24i.co.za/facesofmarikana/>