

Struggling to be heard:

Workers, media and Marikana massacre

The televised images of armed miners rushing towards the police on 16 August 2012, and the police opening fire on the miners, were, for most people, the images that brought the news of the Marikana massacre. In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, these images were beamed out by television news networks locally and globally, and they went viral on social networks, writes **Jane Duncan**.



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They showed a version of events that appeared to corroborate the police account that they shot in self-defence as the miners rushed towards them. These images were shot by journalists from the relative safety behind the police lines, and as a result, inevitably captured a version of reality from the perspective of the police. Granted, reporting conditions were extremely dangerous at the time, but the risk that journalists ran

in using this as the main vantage point for telling their story was that they would land up with only a partial account of the terrible events, which is precisely what happened.

Subsequent academic, journalistic and eyewitness accounts called the initial narrative into question, with evidence having emerged of a second site a few metres away from the initial clash between miners and the police, where miners were allegedly killed in a far more premeditated fashion by the police. Miners claimed that their comrades were hunted down by the police and killed even as they attempted to surrender, and some were crushed by *nyalas* (police armoured vehicles) while running away from the police. Journalists were not present when these events took place. This alternative narrative emerged after miners were interviewed by academics from the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and subsequently by the online news site *Daily Maverick*. Up to that point, journalists had completely missed this alternative account.

There has subsequently been some excellent reporting on the massacre and its aftermath. Exposés by the *City Press* and, more recently, the *Mail & Guardian*, have given a human face to these tragic events by providing reportage on those killed, and the effects on their families. Such reporting has brought home the human cost of the massacre, and also reminded people that 10 people were killed in the run up to the massacre, including police members and security guards. But this reporting has not really focused on the most critical aspect of the story, which is to establish what happened and who was responsible for the killings. In this regard, there was clearly an editorial failure in how the story was initially reported. Understanding how and why this editorial failure happened is important, as the media have an important role to play in exposing cases of police violence, and newsrooms need to ensure that they are up to the task of reporting on this growing problem.

With the exception of one police cell phone video, no videographic evidence of what happened behind the police lines has emerged. Furthermore, the Commission of Enquiry, set up to enquire into the events surrounding the massacre and chaired by Justice Ian Farlam, has been moving slowly, and at the time of writing, much of the evidence that is central to assigning culpability to those responsible for the killings still has to be presented.

The police on the frontline of the clash were not wearing helmets, so several of these police could well be identified. But it is in relation to this aspect of the massacre where the police argument of having acted in self-defence is strongest, as there is documented evidence of at least one miner having used live ammunition on the police. The prospects of being able to identify the police responsible for the allegedly more premeditated killings at the second site, are looking less certain.

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Police violence is a growing problem in South Africa, and one of the main reasons is because of a lack of accountability. The Independent Police Investigations

Directorate (IPID), tasked with investigating cases of police violence, was established from the ashes of the Independent Complaints Directorate (IPD), in an attempt to deal with this growing scourge, as it was widely acknowledged that the ICD was relatively ineffective. IPID was given a broader mandate and a larger budget, which was implemented in 2012.

But already there are indications that the IPID is not necessarily more effective as an institution. When IPID presented their 2011/12 annual report to parliament in October last year; parliamentarians lambasted them for achieving such a low conviction rate. Of the 2,912 cases and 608 criminal cases recommended to the police for investigation, only 23 were in fact investigated and prosecuted successfully. This means that the media have an important role to play in holding the police to account for cases of police violence, as it cannot be assumed that the institutions tasked with addressing this problem, will, in fact, address it effectively. But are South African newsrooms up to the task?

In order to answer this question, it is instructive to use the early reporting of Marikana as a case study. Why did this editorial failure happen? There are several reasons. The first and most important reason was that journalists failed to speak to the miners themselves sufficiently. This became apparent from a source analysis of the early coverage of the events leading up to the massacre, the massacre

itself and the events that took place in its immediate aftermath.

In this regard, a representative sample of printed newspaper articles provided by News Monitor via Media Tenor, for the dates 13 - 22 August were analysed for their sources of information: 153 articles in total. The source analysis included people and organisations who were quoted directly, or who clearly provided information that formed part of the basis of the article (such as Lonmin annual reports or a report released shortly before the massacre by the Benchmarks Foundation). Many articles had several sources. The newspapers sampled included *Business Day*, *The Star* (including *Business Report*), *The New Age*, *Citizen*, *Mail & Guardian*, *City Press*, *The Sunday Times* and *Times*, *Sowetan*, *Beeld*, *Die Burger*, *Sunday Independent*, and *Financial Mail*.

The source analysis revealed that the most quoted sources were business sources, at 27% of the total number of sources, followed by mine management/owners at 14%, other sources (such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions and former ANC Youth League leaders Julius Malema and Floyd Shivambu), parliament/political parties at 10% and the government at 9%. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) accounted for 6% of the coverage, the police accounted for 5%, the Association of Mineworkers' and Construction Union (Amcu) 5% and the miners, independently of NUM and Amcu a mere 3%.

Of the 3% of miners who were interviewed, only one worker was quoted speaking about what actually happened during the massacre, and he said the police shot first, but there was no evidence of this allegation having been followed up. Most miners were interviewed in relation to the stories alleging that the miners had used *muti* to defend themselves against the police's bullets, as well as the miners' working and living conditions. So in other words, of all 153 articles, only one showed any attempt by a journalist to obtain an account from a worker about their version of events. There is scant evidence of journalists having asked the miners the simplest and most basic of questions, namely 'what happened'?

It was only after the *Daily Maverick* coverage that many journalists realised that the miners actually had a story to tell, independently of the unions or any other organised formation. Journalists seemed to assume that by having interviewed the unions, they had somehow 'covered' the miners' story; an incorrect assumption, as it has subsequently become clear that many miners who initiated and sustained the strike action did not feel sufficiently represented by either union.

The second reason was that journalists clearly did not do their own survey of the scene of the killings. Had they done so, they would have quickly realised that a second site had been marked as a crime scene, and not just the scene where the initial shootings took place. Journalists have complained that many miners were arrested in the immediate aftermath of the massacre, making it difficult to find eyewitnesses to speak to, but even if this was the case (and the fact that the *UJ* and *Maverick* teams both found miners to speak to, showed that it was not impossible), then journalists should have realised that they did not have the full story from having surveyed the site.



Voices of police officials like National Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega got more publicity than workers.

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The third reason was that few journalists have conflict reporting skills. The *Daily Maverick* reporter who broke the story, Greg Marinovich, has a long history of conflict reporting and as a result was able to decode the crime scene markings at the second site, and turn it into a narrative of what probably happened. In the past few years, South Africa has been experiencing unprecedented levels of social conflict in the post-apartheid period, and newsrooms have lost the skills they developed under apartheid to report such conflict. Unless conflict reporting is taken seriously as a journalistic beat once again, and newsrooms invest more heavily in reskilling journalists in this form of reporting, then they will continue to miss important stories.

The fourth reason is that investigative journalists are focussing largely on the (mis)doings of the elites, and this applies particularly to those journalists who have the forensic skills needed to detect abuses of power. Much of the reporting on conflict at the level of the working class and unemployed, including labour matters, is being undertaken by journalists with more general skills or who have an understanding of social currents. This means that journalists who do have the forensic skills necessary to undertake investigative work on cases of police violence, are not really focussing on those cases as their attentions are on the political elites, not on manifestations of abuse of power at grassroots level.

Linked to this is the fifth reason, which is the decline in labour reporting and the growth of business reporting. When compared to newsrooms of two decades ago, contemporary newsrooms have very few

labour reporters, which mean that the deep understanding of labour issues has been lost from these newsrooms. The commercialisation of many contemporary newsrooms means that reporting tends to 'follow the money', leading to large numbers of business journalists and publications and few labour-orientated journalists. This makes it even more likely that workers' perspectives will be sidelined.

Had there been more journalists with their fingers on the pulse of labour issues, they would have realised quickly that there were major ruptures within the ranks of the trade union movement at Marikana, and that it was not sufficient to rely on the unions only as sources of information and analysis. In fact, much of the early reporting tended to portray the conflict as inter-union rivalry, whereas the situation was much more complex than that, as partly, the conflict was between NUM and its own members.

The sixth reason is that the global recession has had major negative impacts on newsrooms. The recession has led to major cost-cutting in newsrooms, forcing journalists to do more with less. In fast-paced newsrooms, where journalists are required to meet more and more deadlines, it is tempting to rely on sources of information that are more readily obtainable and have been validated by other media, while avoiding sources that are less 'trusted' and require more validation. Known as 'pack journalism', these tendencies can give journalism a sameness that reduces diversity of voices.

The most easily validated sources are likely to be organisations with the resources to maintain a constant flow of information to the media, such as government agencies, big business and 'think tanks'. Organisations or individuals

representing working-class or unemployed interests are likely to be less well resourced and lack the capacity to communicate proactively, which can lead to them dropping under the journalist's radar.

The bureaucratic and social organisation of news in contemporary media organisations often leads to journalists prioritising the dominant groups in society. It is not coincidental that, apart from being a representation of journalistic sources, the source analysis also mirrors quite accurately where the power lies in society. Those with the most power and money have the biggest voice.

Journalists pride themselves on their independence. Yet if the first week of reporting on the Marikana conflict was anything to go by, many journalists allowed themselves to become mouthpieces of the rich and powerful, reproducing the official versions of events, and silencing the voices of the workers as rational, thinking beings with their own stories to tell.

When Greg Marinovich was interviewed about his stories on the massacre, he was asked what advice he would give to journalists to improve their reporting, and his response was simply to '... go take peoples' stories'. If journalists are to rise to the task of reflecting accurately this most troubled period in South Africa's post-apartheid history, then journalists should take this advice seriously. If they do not, then they will fail South Africa. ■

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