

Mandela in hospital: let the media do their job



By [Stephen Grootes](#)

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As the nation awaits news of Madiba, an inevitable debate has sprung up around the coverage of his stay in hospital. It's being claimed that it's ghoulish to sit outside an institution, waiting for someone to die. It was also suggested that it somehow lessens the dignity of the former president. As with most debates around the media, it's actually a debate about our society, and what is acceptable and what is not.

I'm a reporter, a journalist, a radio presenter and a current affairs addict. So I have an opinion. And if we are going to have this debate, allow me to humbly give the case of the news media. Or at least, my version of that case.

What people want

The health of Nelson Mandela **IS** a news story. It is something that people are interested in. It fits literally the definition of news, in that he is someone who is high profile, someone who quite literally created the country we live in, and therefore is an important subject to cover.

He's someone who many of us grew up with on our TV screens, whose voice we could recognise instantly, someone who is a part of our lives. And if he's feeling unwell, we want to know the latest. As we would with anyone who is close to our hearts.

Real time news

This poses certain problems. If you are an organisation with a daily edition, such as a newspaper, you only need to publish one report on his condition.

If you are, say the SABC or e.tv, then again, you can spend the day crafting the best possible television piece, with various pictures and interviews with newsmakers to be aired at 7PM. So if Mac Maharaj does release a statement, or do an interview, you can use that as the bulk of your news item.

It's much harder for those who do hourly updates, or rolling news, 24-hour coverage. Because the issue that people of South Africa, and the world, are talking about is, quite literally, Madiba's health; you cannot ignore it. And it is a continually-developing story.

If you could watch the Springboks in the World Cup Final live, or delayed by five hours, which would you pick?

Then comes the claim that this story could be covered without actually camping outside the hospital, or Madiba's home. Well, technically that could perhaps be done. Certainly for a newspaper. But for broadcast news, you actually do have to be on the scene, as close to the event as you can be. If you are not, if you look like you are far away from the action, you lose the immediacy and the viewer's trust. Because if we could, perhaps we all would go to the hospital to say goodbye to this man who is a relative to all of us. But we can't, and this is the next best thing.

You could claim that broadcasters are clearly doing this to keep their figures up, to make money. That capitalism is forcing them to behave in this manner, to injure the dignity of Nelson Mandela.

But that doesn't hold, either. If it were only a commercial issue, the SABC would not have led with this story in its main TV news bulletins last night.

The issue of privacy

Then comes the claim that somehow reporters are invading Madiba's privacy.

The only response is this: How, exactly? Is there actually a reporter in his room? No. Would anyone try that? No one that I know. Would anyone use that video if they got it? Not if they wanted to keep their audience, they wouldn't. Has anyone actually gone and even knocked on the door of Mandela's home, or tried to doorstep Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in an aggressive way?

The answer to all of this is no. What they've done is sit on a public street, and speak to passers-by. By doing this, they're getting the feel of the neighbourhood, what people who live near Madiba are thinking. That's all.

Duty of journalists

The fact is, journalists are also doing their duty by covering this story. In this case, their duty is to get the latest facts to their audiences as quickly as possible.

And there is another element to this duty. Do not ever forget that the death of a political figure is in itself a political act. The death of Margaret Thatcher in the UK sparked a debate around her legacy, a decision to give her a ceremonial funeral sparked off another debate with implications for current politicians.

There is also a duty for journalists to ensure that the political act of dying is not manipulated by anyone. What comes from official channels does need to be interrogated. As it would with any other political announcement.

One final thing. None of the journalists I know are enjoying covering this story. No one is jumping out of bed in the morning and looking forward to their day outside a hospital. But they're covering it, professionally, because they know it needs to be done. Because it's their duty.

ABOUT STEPHEN GROOTES

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