

Fear of our dark depths keeps Farlam in shadows

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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News editing is the art of deciding what is important and what is less important. Faced with a barrage of potential stories, events, people and issues to cover and huge competition for audience attention, editors ultimately have to determine which are worthy of the limited attention and resources at their command.

Some stories, such as the Oscar Pistorius trial, command so much interest that the decisions are easy. Others present dilemmas: the story may be important but boring; or it is entertaining but trite; there is nothing new to say about it; or one is short of the resources to cover a complex, running story.

The other legal drama

All editors debated how much space, time and resources to dedicate to Pistorius, and only a couple of niche publications held back. I suspect there was much less debate around the Marikana commission of inquiry under Judge Ian Farlam. At least twice a week - and sometimes twice a day - for many months I have been asked by journalists for a view on the media coverage of Pistorius. I cannot remember one question about the quality and extent of coverage of the other grand legal drama playing out in this country before Farlam.

I am not concerned whether Farlam is more or less important than Pistorius. But I don't think one can contest that the issues being canvassed are fundamental to the way this country runs and the political choices we make. Was it a tragedy - as the African National Congress (ANC) puts it - or a massacre - as its critics say? Is there blood on the hands of key ANC ministers? To what extent is Lonmin management responsible? Is this how our police intend dealing with the rising wave of protest? Why does this industry still depend on migrant labour? What does it say about black empowerment when a company like this is implicated in the shooting of striking workers?

Like Pistorius, this story is full of unexpected drama, conflict and human interest. Like Pistorius, it offers a fascinating insight into our country and society. Both stories involve important and well-known people, even if the Pistorius crowd is more glamorous than Farlam's.

Sporadic and spotty coverage

While Pistorius has had saturation coverage in all media, including live coverage and even dedicated, pop-up television and radio channels, Farlam has had sporadic and spotty coverage. There has been some excellent reporting, make no mistake, and some hard-hitting investigative work. One thinks of Greg Marinovich's early work suggesting that some strikers had been slaughtered in cold blood on the second hill; or Jacques Pauw's look at the failure in radio communication. There has been some good analysis, such as the work of Greg Nicholson on Daily Maverick and Niren Tolsi at the Mail & Guardian (M&G). A standout piece of work was the M&G's big takeout, with magnificent photos, of the families left behind.

What we have not seen is consistent, in-depth day-to-day examination of the evidence that has emerged, the people involved and what it all says about our country, our leaders, our economy and our politics. The Daily Maverick, a relatively small - though increasingly important - website without a lot of resources, has offered the most consistent reporting. For the most part, we have seen more coverage given to what some of the lawyers are charging than the crucial evidence, which suggests that this was a cold-blooded massacre at the instigation of the company and the politicians. Or that many of the victims were shot in the back, which would challenge the police claim that they acted in self-defence.

Is this, I ask myself, because the story is difficult and costly to cover? It can't be because it is boring, because it certainly isn't. It can't be because of a lack of resources, as Pistorius showed us what resources can be mobilised.

Is it because 44 migrant labourers and policemen are of less value to us than a glamorous model? I fear it runs deeper than that: it is because it is difficult for us - in particular those elements of the media that are close to the government and capital - to confront the realities presented by Marikana and Farlam.

At Farlam, we are staring into the dark depths of our social malaise and we have to look away.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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