From hero to zero

By Janine Lazarus

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It must be onerous to be clothed in the mantle befitting a public figure with your every move held under question, your every word sliced, diced and bisected, and your every appearance thrown into the harsh glare of the public spotlight.

But that is the price you pay for not living a life of obscurity. Whether you are an Olympic athlete, someone in public office, or the survivor of a school bus accident in which 42 children perished when it plunged into a dam nearly three decades ago, your life becomes the fodder of a public seemingly bored with the sameness of their lives.

The tedious treadmill that is life, the nine to five monotony, the another-day-another-dollar humdrum, is probably a little easier to stomach if we live it vicariously through a celebrity's meteoric rise and crashing downfall, a politician's messy divorce, or a sneak peak into a Royal couple's holiday moment.

Everyone has an opinion

As I write this, Paralympic star Oscar Pistorius is being tried in the media for shooting his model girlfriend to death long before he is pronounced guilty or innocent by a court of law. And how deeply harsh, reprehensibly biting and mind-numbingly cruel are the public damnations. How gleeful are the gossipers.

Everyone and anyone has an opinion - whether asked for it or not, their public posturing and two cents' worth suddenly validating their very existence. At last - SOMEONE is actually listening to them! And vent these people do - across talk radio stations, in emotional letters to newspaper editors, and on various social media platforms.

Only last weekend, Human Settlements Minister Tokyo Sexwale's impending divorce from his estranged wife, Judy, dominated the front page of the Sunday press with all the dubious fanfare befitting a marriage that once was made in post-apartheid heaven.

Take this newspaper to task, if you will, for their sheer audacity of devoting their front page to a messy divorce while underplaying more important news, but there is nothing quite like what should be one of the biggest and most sensational divorce trials in the history of the Rainbow Nation to whet the public's insatiable appetite.

Divorce trumps democracy

Think back to 1996 when an icon of a leader, forever adored by the international public, was not spared from a veritable flood of media coverage on the occasion of his divorce. The two-day court spectacle that transfixed South Africans as they

listened to hourly radio accounts of events unfolding, laid bare the most intimate details of former President Nelson Mandela's rocky relationship with his wife, Winnie.

That the breakup of this marriage marked the end of one of the great partnerships in the history of liberation politics, made for international headlines, despite the more important reality of a country taking its first shaky steps on the new road to democracy. Sensational divorce trumps democracy every time.

But, as a former self-confessed 'yellow press' reporter, as uncomfortable as I may be with all the character assassinations, the objectionable and thoughtless gossip, such reporting and all its inevitable speculation means accountability.

If you are a politician who serves the people, then respect for the privacy and dignity of individuals must be weighed up against the importance of informing the public. Yes, bad news sells and the media want to sell their newspapers. But just as we have a moral duty to keep an open mind, so do we have the undisputed right to be kept informed.

ABOUT JANINE LAZARUS

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