

The heady mix of information and spin

 By [Janine Lazarus](#)

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It's not every day that you are afforded the opportunity to debate with a government minister live on national radio - especially when the topic under discussion is what works or doesn't work in government communications.

As a cynical ex news reporter, I expected to engage with an evasive individual who would, at best, indulge in blatant government spin, or at worst, cut me off midstream. But it came as an unexpected but welcome surprise when Deputy Minister in the Presidency, Obed Bapela, allowed the inevitable disagreement from callers to media@safm, and appeared to view their varied opinions as constructive criticism.

He acknowledged shortcomings within government spokespeople, and added that government communications was not as adequate and effective as it could be.

I didn't expect him to hone in on the 'softer' skills side of communications, like the tone used to convey a message, or body language that is necessary to drive home a statement. But he did. "It is also about how messages are conveyed and how you say things," he said. "Communications is an art in and of itself."

More government spin? Actually, I think not.

It can't be easy to communicate on the part of the government, especially when tensions and emotions run high. Just look at what shooting from the hip did to former government spokesperson Jimmy Manyi. He became the news. He was the story. And his term of office was not renewed.

Now whether or not you believe that the job of a spokesperson is to spin the news, I think it's safe to assume that a communicator represents the collective view. Therefore, by definition, this spokesperson needs to have an intuitive understanding of how communications works, and an innate *savoir faire* of how to observe protocol.

If criticism - whether deserving or not - means that the critics become the arch enemy, then that mindset ought to change. Bullying tactics simply doesn't cut it, and neither does rhetoric, purposefully vague answers to pertinent questions, or passing the buck.

Voices at odds

The nation is still grappling with the pain of Marikana, made worse by the fact that we may never really know exactly what happened on the day that so many people died. However, whether we believe the official story of the police, or the

compelling narrative of cold-blooded slaughter, one thing is for sure: the citizens of this country needed to see their government moving and speaking in step.

For our president to say he was sorry, and then our National Police Commissioner to say that she was not sorry, wrecked all vestiges of credibility. Views expressed on the part of government need to be consultative as well as cohesive. Speaking at odds misses the point entirely.

Being a spokesman is a bit like being a subeditor in a newsroom. Just as it's a lot more difficult to edit your own copy than someone else's, so it's easier to spin someone else's story than your own.

ABOUT JANINE LAZARUS

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