

Mandela has given everyone a voice

 By [John French](#)

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'Who shot JR?' pales in comparison to the current epic media maelstrom on whether Nelson Mandela is alive or not. Is he alive? Will he survive this near death experience? No one really knows, but just about everybody is debating it.

The demise of the beloved Madiba is causing more heated debate and a bigger communication frenzy than any other media event in South Africa's history. Not since the untimely death of Diana, the Peoples' Princess, has global media fever and public expression been so profound and powerful.

Since he was hospitalised on 8 June 2013, the whole world seems to have got in on the Madiba communication bandwagon. From the Queen of England to President Obama, from the world media to the ANC, to the Mandelas, ex-Mandelas and anyone connected to the Mandelas, everyone has felt the urge to speak out.

I guess the reason for this tremendous self-expression is that revered icons resonate at such a deep level with us, and the heightened drama of their demise unsettles all kinds of human emotion. We have a tendency to put our unique chosen ones on such incredibly high pedestals, and we give them an almost immortal godlike quality that we hope for our own sakes will endure forever. Quite understandably, we have attached our dreams and hopes to Madiba; we acknowledge him as our collective South African saviour, and we revere him with a childlike wonder.

Bringing South Africans together

Nelson Mandela is unique in that he is the common thread that ties South Africans together. Regardless of what your heritage or political affiliations may be, we all love and acknowledge Tata Madiba for all he has done for us in different ways. For black people he is the deepest symbol and catalyst of freedom, and for white people, he preached the ultimate saving grace of forgiveness and reconciliation. We can all generally thank him for allowing our Rainbow nation to shine and survive today.

It is for these very deep and powerful reasons that everyone seems to deeply connect with and emotionally attach themselves to the magic of Madiba. This very powerful emotional stirring has caused a momentous outpouring of care, concern and commentary. The emotional build-up of his demise has unleashed a cataclysmic emotional outpouring that certainly needs to be expressed.

Nearly a month later, the hospital where he lies lingering has been turned into a shrine of flowers, gifts and get-well supporters who have staged a stalwart round-the-clock vigil to pay respects and offer prayers and praise to this wonderful man.

The most newsworthy of global stories

From a media perspective, the death of Madiba has long been considered the most important strategic news item and the media moguls and media machines have swarmed in to monitor and report on this most newsworthy of global stories. Mandela obituaries have already been written up and secretly stored at media houses for years so that they may be ready when this ultimate of media stories breaks. Media offices have been on 24-hour staff alert for the last few years so that they at least have one person on duty ready to report when the story broke. The media industry knows that the time is now close and their media rollout strategies are now being carried out.

In The Information Age where the greedy global village demands in-depth live stream updates, the global media has swarmed in to report on the story of the decade.

Under the spotlight of this powerful media lens marches the Mandela clan and the South African Presidency who share a co-responsibility for keeping us up to date with Madiba health updates. Now, here's where the communication goes totally awry. Quite understandably, the Mandela family must be going through an incredibly stressful time with their patriarch so ill.

From a media strategy point of view, it would have been very sensible to have just one media spokesperson who could represent family interests at this pivotal time and speak on behalf of the entire family with one uniform message.

A fragmented media strategy

Instead what has happened is that the Mandela family media strategy has fragmented and splintered into several camps and voices with each Mandela family member venting forth and confusing and splintering the central message. Grandson Mandla has bravely tried to represent the family but has then been totally side-tracked by the very embarrassing family grave scandal that tarnishes the whole family at this exceptionally fragile time.

Nelson Mandela's eldest daughter, Makaziwe Mandela, then gave an exclusive interview to the SABC where she accused the international media of being racist with their insensitive and invasive covering of the story. She then went on to use the interview as a political media opportunity to punt the ANC which seems a less than appropriate thing to do at such a sensitive time. A revered eldest daughter? Yes. A skilled media spokesperson? No.

Then performing a media showstopper appearance and wielding a political axe to grind we had doyenne of politics and media stardom, Mama Winnie Mandela, who has entered the media fray and shot off some more of her legendary commentary cannonballs. After recently falling from grace within the ANC at the party Mangaung conference, where she literally scraped into staying on the ANC National Executive Committee, she then made the epic mistake of backing Julius Malema in his wrangling against the Numero Uno, President Jacob Zuma. It was a choice that would prove to marginalise Winnie in the embroiled Zuma-led ANC regime.

Mama Winnie must have still been licking her wounds when the last dramatic month started to unfold. Suddenly the ex-husband who had catapulted her to international fame and glory was now once again at the centre of world media attention, and being the ex-wife she could quite easily return to the world media stage rather like the other ex-wife, Alexis Carrington, in the soap opera, *Dynasty!* This is perhaps Winnie's last major media opportunity and she has chosen to play it to the full and exploit it.

And who should Winnie turn her media cannon towards? None other than President Jacob Zuma himself, the man who she feels has marginalised and humiliated her within the ANC ranks. In one short strategic interview she lashed out at President Zuma and discredited Jacob Zuma's photocall with Nelson Mandela in April as "one of the most insensitive things for anyone to have done. I honestly cannot put into words how hurt the family was," she lamented. Winnie has definitely drawn her media sword and taken a stab at the President who also has also damaged his own credibility and reputation through his implausible press updates on Madiba's health.

Update after update...

Ironically, the Mandela clan had in theory handed over the updates on Mandela's health to the Presidency, and then have quite enthusiastically started giving their own random and regular updates and insights.

President Zuma has perhaps clumsily given update after update stating that the Presidency and ANC is hoping for the very ill 94-year-old leader's return to health and has eagerly announced his possibly improved condition which has often been at odds with other health reports. Are we surprised? No. We more likely expected it.

Due to a non-cohesive and a non-centralised media strategy, the Mandela clan has spiralled down into an African version of the American Jackson family after the death of legendary superstar singer Michael. In both cases, the family squabbling and ineptitude have badly tarnished the family name. Mandela always rose to the occasion.

It looks like the family have not been able to follow in the giant footsteps of their leader.

Perhaps the most admirable local voice in all of this has been Anglican Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu who on Sunday hailed Nelson Mandela as an "incredible, incredible person" who was still uniting South Africans from the hospital bed where he is fighting for his life.

"Now after a lifetime of service, of giving, even stricken as he is in hospital, Madiba is uniting the nation again, this time in prayer," reflected Tutu.

Well-respected communicators

Just when the Madiba drama and suspense seemed it could not be raised any higher, the most powerful president on the planet landed on our shores to give commentary, praise and support for our leader. In noble and admirable spirit, the President, who is a well-respected communicator, remained sensitive and unobtrusive during his state visit and met with members of Mandela's family and spoke by phone with Madiba's impeccable wife, Graca. Obama sensitively did not visit Mandela in the Pretoria hospital where he is lying so ill, but rather expressed support and admiration on behalf of billions of people worldwide. The way Obama conducted and communicated himself is worthy of respect and attention.

The one solitary figure at the centre of this all is Graca, the loyal, discreet and impressive wife and consort of the great man himself. Graceful Graca has distanced herself from all the drama, media frenzy and political grandstanding of the various family members. She perhaps is the one we should admire and feel for the most. Her behaviour has been exemplary and she has proved her calibre and class to us and the man she is married to.

At the time of writing this, yet another week of drama and suspense has passed, and in all likelihood Nelson Mandela is lying critically ill in hospital and we are still bracing ourselves for tragic news. Our collective self-expression on this epic matter has perhaps helped us to prepare for the enormity of our imminent loss.

What I do predict is that the media frenzy and family soap opera has just begun.

ABOUT JOHN FRENCH

John French is a communication strategist and communication skills coach with 20 years extensive experience in the communication training industry. John heads up Communication Guru, a communication skills training company operating both nationally and internationally. E-mail John at john@johnfrench.co.za or visit www.communicationguru.co.za

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