

TV's Last Frontier: South Africa

by Randall Harrison and Paul Ekman

*The introduction of television
in South Africa provides an
interesting test of what the
medium can and cannot do.*

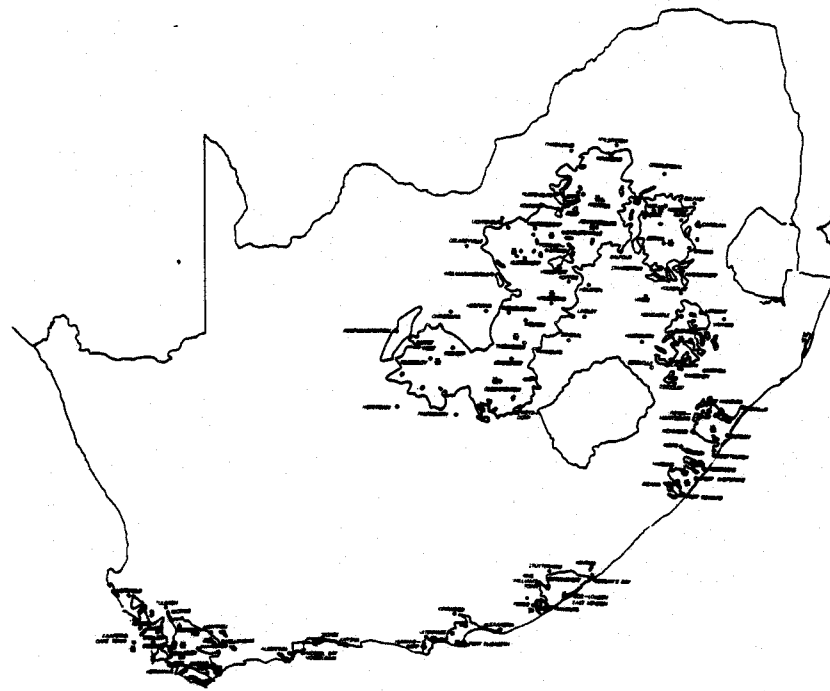
In 1976, television came to South Africa. This marks an interesting milestone in communication technology. It signals the final phase of a major innovation, the spread of television to all the literate, urban, Western, industrial nations of the world. In less than three decades, television grew into a globe-spanning giant which commands the time, attention, resources—and frequently the concern—of every advanced society.

Television comes at a crucial point in South African history. Except for Rhodesia, South Africa is the last white-ruled nation in a continent of black societies. The white South African maintains control in spite of the fact that he is outnumbered by non-whites four to one. In recent months, he has seen the once white colonial countries on his borders become independent black nations. Not only are these nations governed by blacks, but the societies are primarily socialist, with, as in the case of Angola, violent conflict between those oriented toward China and those backed by Russia.¹

Into this scene, introduce a powerful new communication medium: television. How will it be used? For the student of communication, an intriguing question. For the South African, whatever his color, the question is of more than academic interest.

¹ This summarizes, of course, only a few of the complex issues facing South Africa. It does not probe the vexing problem of apartheid, South Africa's difficulties in the United Nations, recent diplomatic overtures toward Latin America, attempts to establish "homelands," or efforts toward détente in Africa. For a journalist's summary of the current scene, see Lewis (4).

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Total theoretical coverage area of SABC transmitters

In this article, we will (a) explore some broad questions about the potential consequences of introducing television into a society such as South Africa; (b) summarize some of the main features of the new television service and how they got that way; and (c) examine some predictions about the future.

South Africa is unique among advanced economic nations in adopting television so late. The reasons for the long delay are apparently political, cultural, and economic. In South Africa, the pros and cons of television were perhaps more thoroughly debated than in any other adopted society.²

Across the political spectrum, television was approached with extreme caution. The party in power feared that the new medium would usher in an uncontrollable flood of "foreign" ideas, Western "decadent" thought as well as Eastern "communist" ideologies. Intermittently, the opposition parties were equally cautious; they feared that television would provide a powerful new medium of propaganda which would enable the party in power to consolidate and extend its rule.

The most outspoken opponent of television was a man in a key decision role, then Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Albert Hertzog. He viewed television as an "evil black box" which would undermine morals and family life. He was joined by many Afrikaners in a fear that television would mean importing many British and American programs. Whatever the content, this was likely to erode the recently achieved broadcast parity between English and Afrikaans, making

² The story of this long debate is covered more thoroughly by Orlik (5, 6, 7).

it ever more difficult to maintain the Afrikaans cultural heritage.³ To this were added economic arguments. The introduction of television would require vast foreign investment, and the nation, it was argued, had more important development goals.

In 1968, through a shuffle of ministerial responsibilities, Hertzog was moved out of his crucial role as Minister of Posts and Telegraphs. His replacement came into office with the announcement that he had no preconceived ideas regarding television; there would be a thorough review of television's alleged "damaging influence" on youth and the cost factors of introduction. Subsequently, Hertzog broke with his own party to form the ultra-conservative Reconstituted National Party, which has been notably unsuccessful at the polls. With Hertzog gone, the plans for a national television system began to emerge.

Rumors spread that the vast new SABC Auckland Park complex in Johannesburg would house television as well as FM facilities. In July, 1969, the first "moon-walk" further fanned pro-television sentiment. While the rest of the developed world watched the historic moment live on television, South Africans were forced to read news reports and see delayed newsreels.

In December, 1969, the government announced that a twelve-man commission would investigate and make recommendations about the future of television.

This body deliberated for over a year and in March, 1971, sent its report to the Cabinet. In late April, the Minister of National Education announced that the government would launch television, probably within four years' time. Subsequently, the official starting date for the full service was set for January, 1976.

The government also announced that initially there would be one bilingual channel split equally between Afrikaans and English. Television was to be in the hands of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, which controls all radio broadcasting in the country. Modeled originally after the BBC, the corporation is at present designed to be economically self-sustaining, but with a nine-man board of directors appointed by the government.⁴

Television test programming began in May, 1975, in Johannesburg. In July, Cape Town and Durban were added. Originally, the SABC indicated that test programs would be nothing more than a camera trained on "a goldfish in a bowl." Prospective buyers would be able to check reception in their area and tune their sets, but they would have little idea of the programming to come. The SABC quickly decided, however, that it was best to give at least a sample. Initially, viewers saw an hour of programming per evening; the next noon the

³ South Africa has two official languages, English and Afrikaans. The latter is derived from seventeenth century Dutch and is spoken by approximately 60 percent of the white population.

⁴ For radio, revenues come from both advertising and from licenses paid by set owners. Initially, television will only have revenue from licenses; an owner pays approximately \$50 a year for each TV set he owns. Starting in 1978, television will be allowed to sell commercials, but advertising will be limited to five percent of total air time.

same hour was repeated. In October, apparently stimulated in part by disappointing set sales, the SABC added time to its program schedule.

Finally, the full nationwide service was scheduled for inauguration on January 5, 1976. South Africans are able to see five hours an evening, with additional time on weekends devoted primarily to sports. The single SABC TV channel is bilingual; each evening, two and one-half hours in Afrikaans and the same amount in English are programmed.⁵

Given the prolonged struggle over the introduction of television, observers have wondered what would—and would not—be shown on SABC TV⁶ and to what extent would television be politically independent from the government.

A leading business weekly, the *Financial Mail*, raised the issue of TV content and its control in a special supplement devoted to the new medium. An article entitled "Your Mind in Their Hands" carried the subhead: "Just how independent can SABC TV be? After all, government holds the purse strings." Elaborating on this concern, the magazine asked:

What will we see on SABC TV? Are the newspaper critics of the Corporation correct in suggesting that the fare will be dull, leaning toward the pedagogical? Worse, will news and views become a platform for government [National Party] propaganda—a criticism often leveled at some of the SABC's radio programmes, particularly "Current Affairs?" (1, p. 17).

On TV's political stance, the *Financial Mail* quotes SABC Director-General Jan Swanepoel as saying: "We are an independent organization. We are not dictated to by the government" (1, p. 17).

This led the *Financial Mail* to ask: "Is it then purely a coincidence that, to so many people, SABC policy appears almost totally in line with government policy? Do the SABC and the government fortuitously have the same standards, beliefs and ideologies?"

Swanepoel answered: "To some extent I think that may be true. To give an example, I don't think we could incite people to overthrow the government by undemocratic methods. I don't think that we would be part and parcel of that, nor could we incite young people not to join the police force and fight on the borders. Yet there are people who do this."

This raises the question of whether SABC television would ever air the views, in a news interview or in a current affairs discussion, of someone who was against joining the police, or fighting on the border. "Yes," says Swanepoel, "I think we would do that—we have done it on the radio services."

⁵ South Africa has adopted the German PAL system and all transmissions are in color. Color sets sell for approximately \$1400 and black and white sets run \$600. The SABC estimates that by the end of 1976, 400,000 sets will be in use, but other sources are predicting a more conservative figure of 297,000.

⁶ Program content, by broad categories, is as follows: drama and dramatic series, 18 percent; sports, 12 percent; variety, 9 percent; news, 7 percent; and documentary, general and "actuality," 53 percent. The latter category includes music, children's programming, women's shows, and magazine format shows covering art, books, gardening, hobbies, and religion. South Africans are producing approximately 50 percent of the content themselves, with the other 50 percent coming from the U.S., England, and Europe.

The issue of SABC policies flared in January, 1975, when a staff directive was "leaked" to the press. It was from a TV producer of English magazine and children's programs and contained the note that "programmes should follow government policy, SABC policy and departmental policy." His superiors quickly disavowed the directive. But as the *Financial Mail* observes:

... the outcry it evoked serves to illustrate just how touchy and suspicious a large segment of the public is to the long-standing belief, mistaken or otherwise, that the SABC follows the party line. It is an issue constantly hammered by the English-language newspapers, by intellectuals of all races, the Opposition, by artists and writers, many of them Afrikaans-speaking (1, p. 17).

The publication continues:

The SABC hotly contests this. Rather, it sees itself as holding sacred ... ideals that are similar to those of the government—that this is a Christian nation, that violent change is to be abhorred, that cultural and traditional values must be maintained. The boat may be rocked, but only gently; not capsized (1, p. 17).

To the question, "Does the Board of the SABC have specific contact with the nation's policy-makers?" Director-General Swanepoel asserts: "No, none whatsoever" (1, p. 18).

The journal concludes, "Nevertheless, it cannot be easy for a public body," such as the SABC, "to keep at arm's length from a government which is not exactly renowned for its tolerance of opposition or its patience with those who see things differently" (1, p. 18).

The question of political access to the medium, while a heated issue, is, of course, only one area of concern.

The *Financial Mail* supplement carried one article entitled, "Living with the idiot's lantern." The subhead read: "Who can assess the social, political and economic impact of TV on South Africans? It will probably be more significant than most people think" (1, p. 36).

Raising fundamental questions, the journal asked:

Just what is the nature of TV? Why is it feared in some quarters as a perverter of youth and the righteous? To what extent will the medium change the face of South Africa—its politics and prejudices? Its life style? And is this country ready for such a radical new influence? (1, p. 36).

A key concern is the potential impact on race and inter-group relations. Some South African academics feel the bilingual service will foster greater accord between the two white language groups, the English and the Afrikaners. The argument goes: The TV viewer will watch programs in the other language, even if he doesn't understand very well, because it's there in the home; this, in turn, will lead to greater understanding of the other language, and perhaps the other culture. At least one observer feels, however, that it may have the opposite effect. "It'll just be another source of irritation between the two groups," he

predicts. "Some people will feel: why should I pay a full license fee when only half the programs are in my language?"

The predictions about race are even more complex. First, it is generally agreed that, given the high cost of sets, relatively few blacks will be able to purchase them. But some South Africans predict that there may be a very large black viewership in spite of this. Black domestics may see TV in white homes. Drinking places may have them. Extended family groups may share a common set. When a set does appear in a black area, there will be many more viewers per set than in white areas.⁷

The *Financial Mail* concludes: "... blacks will see TV, whatever the limitations." On potential impact, they quote Tom de Koning, Chairman of the Communication Department at Rand Afrikaans University: "The greatest effect on the blacks will be the raising of their cultural aspirations. They will see other blacks with cars, houses, and so on and ask, 'Why can't I have that?' In a real sense there will be a 'westernisation' of blacks because of television. And their political claims will escalate as a result" (1, p. 36).

Some predict that television will also have an impact on white attitudes. For example, a South African sociologist observes that "most white South Africans have never been exposed to a well-educated black." He predicts that intelligent, articulate non-whites will appear on television and when this happens, white perceptions will begin to shift.

Closely related to this is the concern about the impact on leadership—and politics in general. The *Financial Mail* quotes De Koning as saying: "Television will completely transform our political system" (1, p. 39). As in other countries, there is a concern that the politician with a good TV image will have more appeal than the candidate who is more competent but less telegenic. At least one psychologist, however, thinks this is an exaggerated concern. He observes: "The South African, particularly the Afrikaner, is not much taken in by appearances."

*A final, pervasive concern
centers on the potential impact of
television on anti-social behavior,
particularly among the young.*

The 12-man Commission of Inquiry into Television, which recommended adoption to the Cabinet, concluded that television was not, *per se*, evil. The Commission was charged with investigating the "possible harmful effects which such a service may have upon the moral life of the nation, especially its youth." The Commission concluded that television itself "cannot be blamed for the way it is applied and controlled in a specific country. It is true that there are cases overseas where television is being used to the spiritual, cultural and moral detriment of the society." But the Commission viewed this as a "result of the permissiveness into which such a society has gradually degenerated, not a cause of the permissiveness" (1, p. 36).

⁷ Present plans call for a second channel which will be devoted to black audiences; realization of these plans appears to be at least four years away.

As television was hitting the airwaves, the South African press was quoting the complete range of foreign "experts," from an American TV star, who was convinced seeing violence does not influence aggressive behavior, to an Australian researcher, who believes watching television interferes with basic brain functions. For the concerned South African, the foreign research evidence was being summarized in a new book, in Afrikaans, by psychologist Elizabeth Nel and sociologist J. M. du Toit.

Among South African researchers, it is possible to find a range of viewpoints similar to the spectrum found in Britain and the United States. A frequently expressed view, however, is the one given by De Koning: "Television shows people that aggressiveness solves problems, rather than more social approaches. Hence in questionable situations, with no clear-cut pattern of behavior called for, the unsure person opts for violence."

Researchers, such as De Koning, Nel, and investigators at South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council, are exploring the impact of television, in field experiments and in longitudinal studies.⁸ Of course, the overriding impact of television, particularly in the social realm, will be difficult to assess with any single experiment or any easy set of observations. But many observers think South Africa will provide useful lessons about television.

First, the nation has fully developed mass media systems except for television; it thus is very comparable to other advanced industrial societies. Second, it is introducing a complete, nationwide system all at once; diffusion is expected to be faster than in any previous TV adopter.

Third, the South Africans have announced their determination to prevent what they consider undesirable side-effects of television, and they are drawing on the accumulated research experience of the world for that purpose. Finally, South Africa is a relatively contained, "closed" system; it may be easier to trace out the consequences of television there than in any previous television society.

As television blinks its way into South African homes, the South Africans themselves seem to have four alternative hypotheses about the potential impact.

One obvious hypothesis, of course, is that the introduction of television will make no difference whatever. This argues that social and political events have begun to unfold inexorably and a new communication medium, no matter how powerful, will do little to influence the direction or velocity of change.

A second hypothesis is that television will have a broad "accelerating" effect. Existing trends will speed up; new trends will suddenly emerge. This argues, for example, that seeing refugees from Angola, and hearing them interviewed, has a different impact than reading about it in a newspaper. This

⁸ We have outlined the potential and the problems of research in South Africa in an earlier manuscript (2). Subsequently, in cooperation with Robert M. Liebert, we have advised on research strategies, provided research materials, and have collaborated in television studies conducted in South Africa.

impact mobilizes opinion (or creates division). And that, in turn, allows leaders (or forces them) to move more quickly and in directions that would not have been possible otherwise.

The counter argument is that television will have essentially a "braking" effect. Three rationales have been advanced. First, the forces in control of the new medium are essentially conservative and they will use the medium to preserve rather than transform. Second, the new medium will be more entertainment than enlightenment; it will be a "circus" to divert the citizenry rather than "food for thought" to immerse the viewer in the issues of the day. Third, even when the events of the day are presented via television, the effect may be more narcotizing than mobilizing. Seeing Angolan refugees may foster non-involvement, just as some have argued that nightly TV coverage of the Vietnam war led to indifference. (Each of these rationales rests on an assumption which is sharply contested by some observers.)⁹

A final alternative might be called the "complex, differential impact" hypothesis. It suggests that television's effect will be pervasive, but that in some areas the medium will stimulate change while in other areas it may inhibit and divert. Further, television's impact will differ, e.g., among whites and blacks, among Afrikaans speaking and English speaking, among the affluent and the disadvantaged, among young and old.

While the outcome is uncertain, some would agree with the *Financial Mail's* observation: "The innocent little Cyclops in the corner is really a powerful subverter. Were the Big Eye able to wink, it certainly would" (1, p. 39).

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⁹ For example, many feel that television will be used by the present government to dramatize the need for change. When, in June, 1975, an SABC film crew went to the Ivory Coast to make a TV documentary, *Africa*, the continent's newsmagazine, speculated that the TV program would help "defuse" opposition to the détente policies of Prime Minister Vorster and would encourage South African tourism and investments in the multiracial Ivory Coast (see 3, p. 60).