

SOUTH AFRICA: HOW LONG WITHOUT TV?

By Peter B. Orlik

Journal of Broadcasting

14:2 (Spring 1970)

pp. 245-258

TELEVISION AND SOUTH AFRICA --- WILL TOMORROW

BRING "THE BOX"?

by Peter B. Orlik

To an initial query dealing with the absence of television in his country, a South African radio officer replied cryptically:

There is no TV in South Africa at present for technical, financial, and other reasons. There are programs of greater need and urgency to be carried out for the time being.¹

This brief statement, however, gives scant indication of the deep-rooted fears and antagonisms which permeate the television question in South Africa and constitute a unique set of dilemmas for the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation and the Afrikaners who operate it.

Television was made known to South Africans as early as 1936 when the Baird-system apparatus was demonstrated at the Empire Exhibition held in Johannesburg. But, other than amateur experimental work in closed-circuit utilization, nothing further was done for the next two decades.² The Broadcasting Amendment Act of 1949 did give the SABC the ultimate authority over television in the Union and South West Africa³ yet, no actual move in this direction was made. Indeed, as late as 1954, SABC Director-General Gideon Roos was hard put to describe a single action

which the Corporation had taken to implement introduction of the medium:

There is not yet a strong demand for television in South Africa, and in that sphere no practical steps have been taken. The Corporation has, however, devoted considerable study to the subject, and it is evident that formidable difficulties may be encountered when we try to bring T.V. to so large a country with so small a population speaking so many languages.⁴

By the beginning of 1956, a demand had begun to be felt and speculation as to the possible initiation of the medium was rife throughout the Union. Unfortunately for television and its prospective viewers, however, the ruling Nationalist Party and its Afrikaner supporters could find no reason to honor the demand or give credence to the rumors. The Nationalists, in fact, saw only disadvantages accruing from a television system. Since most programming would have to be obtained from abroad (and would therefore be in English) they felt their cultural independence threatened.⁵ An official of the Broederbond (a supra-political secret society devoted to the promotion of Afrikaner values) pointed out that, although the struggle against anglicization from without had been won, the struggle against the enemy within had just started and must succeed in stopping the non-Afrikaner influences based on English and American ways of life which were infiltrating the Union through the radio, cinema, and popular press.⁶ Clearly, video presentations from Britain and the United States would only increase this infiltration and must therefore be kept out.

Further, the entire Nationalist Party was highly uneasy

about the potential political impact of television on the White voters and about the psychological affect of the medium on the urbanized Black.⁷ Rather than risk the dismemberment of Afrikanerdom, the Nationalists decided that the introduction of TV would have to be indefinitely postponed.

In 1959, Minister of Posts and Telegraphs Albert Hertzog reaffirmed the Government's opposition in stressing the disruptive affect that TV would have on the Union's family life. Hertzog argued that parents had no control over which video programs would enter their homes and that it was practically impossible for the State to effectively police the medium. Television, he said, could thereby be a detriment to the moral health of the nation and must be prohibited.⁸ Johannesburg's pugnacious Rand Daily Mail promptly christened Dr. Hertzog "the Number One flat-earthist" and The Star, another Johannesburg paper, attacked the Minister's fear of what he called "the little bioscope" by declaring editorially:

The Nation deeply appreciates the Minister's stern guard over its moral welfare. Nevertheless it is prepared to take the risk. It wants this "little bioscope" and it wants it soon. It is even prepared to swop Albert Hertzog for it.⁹

The Nationalists were not about to abandon their position, however, and in a 1960 speech before Parliament, Prime Minister Verwoerd sought to prop up Hertzog's flimsy argument with two more practical ones:

- 1) Keep TV out until enough study has been done to show up and cope with possible evil affects of the medium on the individual viewer physically and mentally and the nation culturally.

- 2) Why introduce a non-essential "service" before other countries have carried the full costs of experiment and development? Aspects such as color, the various "line systems," the radius (South Africa is large and sparsely populated) of a transmitting station may well be determined elsewhere and save South Africa large sums of money.
- 3) Programming/production costs are prohibitively high. A tax on set sales and annual licence fees would have to be supplemented (for some 75% on the figures available in 1960) by advertising and government subsidy. An independent commercial station could not be considered because of the dangers of low-quality, low-cost programming (such as certain cheap canned programs from overseas) and exclusion of populations in inaccessible areas from the service. Further, the interests of the language groups and standards of production must be protected.¹⁰

The Prime Minister's statement was immediately assailed by the Opposition, the business community, and the domestic and foreign press. Representative of many of these attacks was a comment by the special correspondent for The Times of London who editorialized that "sound programmes are kept obediently to heel and, for the time being at least, there is to be no television for fear that it might open unwanted windows on the world."¹¹

The Nationalists, nevertheless, had the power and the resolve to ignore all such protests. They also ignored the offers of a number of European electronics firms, including the large Philips organization, to foot much or all of the bill for the construction of a core television system within South Africa.¹² Thus denied the right to invest in their own country, the Union's entrepreneurs, who had solicited the European offers, turned their attention elsewhere. As a result, commercial TV soon came to Rhodesia through the good offices of Rhodesian

Television Limited, a private concern largely controlled by South African capital.¹³

Having driven TV across the borders, Minister Hertzog took further steps to fortify the land against any possible re-invasion. In June, 1962, he again informed Parliament that it was the Government's policy not to introduce television "in the immediate future" and hinted darkly that it might never be allowed.

Hertzog cited a British study which attributed a measure of juvenile crime to the influence of TV and re-emphasized Verwoerd's contention that the cost of a television system was prohibitive for a sparsely populated and partially mountainous country like South Africa.¹⁴ Hertzog then banned even closed-circuit displays at trade fairs in order to prevent too many people from becoming attached to what they were not allowed to possess.¹⁵

Hertzog's monomania eventually got the better of South African mirth-makers. One joke resulting from the closed-circuit display ban tells of a bored worker charged with the monitoring of an industrial production line via one of the comparatively few CCTV systems which the Government had licensed. Having watched the unchanging picture for hours, the man suddenly sees a beautifully proportioned blonde appear on the screen. The startled but pleased male calls to his associates that the tube has finally provided some interesting programing but is brought up short when the blonde snaps: "That's enough! I'm from the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs and the next man who looks at me that way will be charged with sabotage!"¹⁶

The Nationalists retaliated with their own anecdotes; scare stories such as the following:

It is afternoon, and the Bantu houseboy is in the living room cleaning the carpet. Someone has left the TV on. The boy looks up at the screen, sees a chorus line of white girls in scanty costumes. Suddenly seized by lust, he runs upstairs and rapes the lady of the house.¹⁷

Terror tales of this sort failed to dissuade the Republic's hard-headed businessmen, however. By 1964, a number of firms were laying concrete plans for the establishment of television and the marketing of sets under the leadership of Harry F. Oppenheimer, the head of the huge Anglo-American Corporation.¹⁸ Dr. Hertzog warned them that the Government's policy was not about to change and took advantage of the occasion to blast Oppenheimer and his associated mining interests. In a statement to the Afrikaans-language press, Hertzog sounded an alarm to all loyal Afrikaners:

The overseas money power has used television as such a deadly weapon to undermine the morale of the white man and even to destroy great empires within 15 years that Mr. Oppenheimer and his friends will do anything to use it here. They are certain that with this mighty weapon and with South African television largely dependent on British and American films, they will also succeed in a short time in encompassing the destruction of white South Africa.¹⁹

This continued enunciation of the "no tube" policy was decried by John Cope, author and former M.P. for the opposition United Party, who called it a "self-imposed sentence of educational and cultural banishment from the rest of the world." Mr. Cope noted TV's enormous educational value as exhibited by the BBC's Second Network and charged that the Nationalist-drawn "picture of thousands of families glued to 'the box' to

the neglect of social, cultural, spiritual and educational activities is utterly unreal."²⁰ Backing Cope's stand, the tiny Progressive Party Congress adopted a November resolution which scored the Government for "persistently ignoring the public demand in this respect and failing to keep up with civilized countries throughout the world." Helen Suzman, the Progressives' sole M.P., caustically observed that Nationalist opposition was nevertheless understandable "because if the leading members of the Government front bench had to appear on television three-quarters of them would lose their seats."²¹

Smoldering through 1965, the television controversy caught fire again in 1966 when the United Party adopted video introduction as an election issue. With the slogan "WANT TV? VOTE U.P." the Party sputtered to an ignominious defeat at the polls²² which some observers felt would end both the issue and the United Party once and for all. Neither of the predicted demises occurred, however, though the Party emerged from the fray much weaker than did the issue for which it had fought.

Undaunted by TV's failure to galvanize the electorate, the concerned business interests then released an informal opinion survey which purported to show that two-thirds of all White South Africans wanted television.²³ The companies continued their preparations for the eventual marketing of hardware within the Republic and actually signed licensing pacts with certain European electronics firms.²⁴ Then, in June of 1966, the American-based Ampex Corporation concluded an open-ended agreement with Gallo of Johannesburg to sell and partially manufacture Ampex

products in South Africa. Gallo would produce a whole range of products for Ampex International (one of the world's largest suppliers of video equipment) but the initial emphasis, cautioned the officials, was to be on instrument recording equipment and computer components.²⁵

Most sources within the Government thought it best to accept this explanation of Ampex's motives until there was adequate evidence to the contrary. Radio Officer J. A. Grant wrote:

I presume that the main object is in the field of general electronics --- a growing field in South Africa; if in connection with SABC expansion plans, I am in the dark about them.²⁶

The Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, on the other hand, was more unequivocal in his statements. "No, not and never," Hertzog snapped, and labelled television "the greatest destroyer of family life in the Western world."²⁷ He reiterated his opposition to "that evil black box; sickly, mawkish, sentimentalistic, and leading to dangerous liberalistic tendencies" and reaffirmed his resolve that it would never be allowed to undermine the Afrikaner's traditionally pastoral and introverted values.²⁸

Battling television in public, Hertzog was also drawn into a private political conflict which had begun to crack the Nationalists' much-prized solidarity. As head of the Party's extreme right or verkrampte wing, Hertzog had used his influence to infiltrate Afrikaans student groups, several other youth organizations, and the SABC itself. Awakening to this threat to their leadership, the Prime Minister and his more moderate supporters began the struggle to force the verkrampte or "Narrow

Nats" to submit to Party discipline. This bitter intra-party warfare finally burst into the open in February, 1968, when the House of Assembly buzzed with the news that Prime Minister Vorster had relieved Albert Hertzog of his portfolio as Minister of Posts and Telegraphs and replaced him with Deputy Minister Basie Van Rensburg.²⁹

While the basic cause of Hertzog's removal was Vorster's anger at the overt verkrampste challenges to his authority, it had also been increasingly difficult for the Government to maneuver on the television question as its rational arguments were continually deflected and scattered when filtered through Hertzog's telephobia.³⁰

Taking advantage of the unstable situation, long-time television advocate and "shadow" Minister of Posts and Telegraphs Etienne Malan scarcely allowed Van Rensburg to assume his new role before introducing a private member's motion that asked the Government to consider the immediate initiation of television. Mr. Malan pointed out that under an international agreement, South Africa had already been granted the frequency space for 119 television channels and that the medium would create tremendous opportunities for South African writers and artists as well as for her electronics industry. Malan concluded that everyone in South Africa now agreed that television was inevitable and that it was only a question of how to go about getting it.³¹

Van Rensburg attempted to depreciate his opponent's motion as merely an attempt at "vote-catching" but did seem willing to

honor Malan's request that "misconceptions" about television, which had been created by Dr. Hertzog, be cleared up. In the debate that followed, Nationalist members were content to limit themselves to a discussion of the practical drawbacks to television rather than the sinister psychological ones and nobody failed to note that Hertzog, like his ideas, remained absent from the debate. Thus, the former Minister did not hear Nationalist colleague C. D. Mulder state that "no Government supporter" had ever claimed that television would never come.³² Since Hertzog was on innumerable public records as having claimed just that, his status as a "Government supporter" seemed somewhat in doubt.

Continuing the debate, United Party member L. E. D. Winchester advanced the theory that the Nationalists were worried most about a predicted sharp decline in the advertising revenues of Afrikaans newspapers which would result from competition with television.³³ Since a number of key Government figures have seats on the corporate boards of these papers, their concern seems as understandable as that of the English-language Financial Mail which warned, as early as 1966: "That great leveler, television, is looming up and threatening to chop advertising revenue by 20 per-cent or more in the first couple of years."³⁴

Even Albert Hertzog's fanaticism may have been little more than financial self-interest. Before his sacking, a number of SABC staffers had learned (and confided the fact in private)

that the former Minister has extensive holdings in the Republic's bioscope (movie house) chains --- chains which would suffer significant financial losses should television ever be admitted.³⁵

Yet, though Hertzog ~~is gone~~ ^{has been ousted}, it appears as though South African television advancement ^{for the ~~present~~ immediate future} can be carried out only within the fabric of Van Rensburg's ~~recent~~ ^{Subsequent} loosening of restrictions on closed-circuit systems. This did at least make possible the erection of a large number of CCTV exhibits at the 1968 Rand Easter Show where equipment displayed included gear by Gallo, Philips, General Electric, and Decca. Sporting a glittering facade of snow-white polystyrene chips, the Gallo exhibit was described as a "television grotto" containing more than twenty viewing screens. The emphasis was still on education rather than entertainment, however, and a complete classroom mock-up showed in working detail what South African schools will be doing with CCTV "in the near future." Closed-circuit utilization in the fields of traffic control, bank security, and medical technology was also demonstrated.³⁶

As a result of extensive contractual arrangements with foreign companies, there seems to be little doubt that the South African electronics industry will soon have the capacity to manufacture much of the equipment needed in these closed-circuit systems, if it does not possess that capacity already. Indeed, the continuing expansion of electronics plants seems to be far too comprehensive to merely service a handful of CCTV operations and the radio market.

Still, in spite of what must be regarded as the large-scale mobilization of the Republic's electronics industry, few of the local companies are as yet capable of building video transmitting equipment. Those that could, either hold franchises to systems impractical for South Africa (like SECAM), or find radio too profitable to consider any diverting of resources into the necessarily limited manufacture of TV transmitting gear. Thus, it appears that the major transmitting components for any "open" television system in the Republic probably will have to be obtained from abroad.

Television receivers, conversely, seem likely to be of about 80% South African manufacture with only the tube, deflection coils, and line-time-base transformer needed from overseas.

Domestic companies such as Philips, Hammerstein, I. Abramson, and Gallo can apparently be counted on to provide this 80% due to their extensive experience in the production of FM components.³⁷ Indeed, it is commonly speculated that the Government's recent haste at constructing a nation-wide FM network was a well-thought-out scheme to diminish the cost of television's arrival by stimulating the development of a local electronics industry.

In April, 1968, The Star helped whip this speculation to a new peak by reporting that the SABC had drawn up architectural plans for television studios as the second stage in the construction of its vast Auckland Park complex near Johannesburg. According to The Star, a site at the northern end of the 32-acre project had been marked "future television studios" by Corporation architects on order from the SABC Board of Governors. In

addition, the second stage of the Auckland Park facility is understood to provide for workshop space "far above the normal requirements for radio."³⁸

This news item, and the events which had preceded it, caused many South Africans to leap to the conclusion that television, in both its "open" and closed-circuit varieties, would soon blossom forth throughout the Republic. Yet, despite The Star's articles, the Easter Show Exhibits, and the departure of Hertzog, the official view still maintained ^{would} that there ~~will~~ be no significant expansion of any phase of South African television in the near future. As the SABC's Head of Public Relations ~~recently~~ described it:

There is no change in our policy regarding television. The SABC keeps itself informed about the latest developments in this field, but there are no plans for the introduction of television in this country at present. . . . There are numerous factories particularly in and around Johannesburg, making electronic components. If they hope to make money from T.V. sets in the Republic of South Africa, they will have to wait quite some time.³⁹

It does not therefore appear that the television blackout, or the controversy arising from it, ^{can quickly} ~~will soon~~ be ^{abolished} ~~ended~~. Even if TV has been provided for in the second stage of Auckland Park (a stage which also includes a concert hall likely to be built with television in mind), this part of the construction will not be started until the first stage is completed in an estimated three and a half years.⁴⁰

The cost of television also remains a major stumbling block and most people admit that the Government's long-standing objections in this area have some basis in fact. It is privately

calculated that a "limited" service (one bilingual Afrikaans/English channel and one Native channel each operated for four hours a day) would cost the equivalent of \$33 million per year to operate. Individual South Africans, in addition, would spend \$210 million on television receivers in the first year alone and such substantial consumer activity would certainly sharpen the still-present dangers of inflation.⁴¹

More important to the ruling Afrikaners is the absence of a source for Afrikaans-language programs. Although South Africa does have a small Afrikaans film industry which might produce some television shows, it will take years of expansion and the inflow of a great deal more capital for this industry to be capable of meeting the needs of a national network.⁴² When and if this comes to pass, the Government must then face the fact that the Afrikaner population is simply too small to provide a sufficient number of skilled writers and actors. The Coloured (mixed-blood) population, which is predominately Afrikaans-speaking, would be able to render significant service in this area, but they are "precluded automatically by race" from taking part in any White program service.⁴³

Without a sufficient number of Afrikaans programs, the Nationalists fear that television would upset the cultural balance, return their language to the "non-status" it had with the old African Broadcasting Company of the early Thirties, and provide a forum for "dangerously liberalistic ideas" to be set loose upon the Republic via British and American "canned" pro-

grams.⁴⁴ For, despite the official stress on the practical economic drawbacks to television, the fact remains that,

much publicity is given to the idea that most T.V. programmes overseas are rubbish which will destroy decent --- Calvinistic --- family life and that the Government is wise in its paternal protection of our children from contamination with Western decadence or Eastern ideologies. This propaganda, which certainly has the ring of truth, has kept the public demands at bay and has created a certain complacency of thought, even in the most radical minds.⁴⁵

Underlying such "complacency" is the ever-present concern of Boers and Britons alike, as to what affect television would have on the Blacks. There is little doubt that the Republic's booming economy would enable a great many Natives to obtain a television set through installment buying and their subsequent viewing, it is feared, might well raise their aspiration level and lead to a dangerous disruption of the delicate status quo. This has caused many White South Africans to conclude that "the devil you know [no TV] is better than the one you don't."⁴⁶ As the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand put it:

Social researchers can't tell us yet what the influences of television have been. Mediocre and objectionable fare; passive audiences translated into a world of fantasy in which they tend to absorb nothing: these are opinions of television.⁴⁷

But in spite of the medium's political, economic, and psychological "mysteries," many other thoughtful South Africans argue that television is needed in the Republic for selected educational and cultural goals which cannot be fully realized through the use of closed-circuit operations alone. These citizens don't desire "Madison-Avenue-style chaff" since "we already have that

on Springbok" (the SABC's commercial radio service). They do, however, seek the news, sports, and documentary programming that television can do so much to vivify. Currently, for example, South Africans in England and the United States are seeing vital events in Rhodesia unfold while those back home, only a few hundred miles away, cannot.⁴⁸ As early as 1960, a semi-official South African publication predicted:

At some time or other, television will have to come to the Union and when that happens, it will also be in the hands of the SABC. When this new medium is introduced, it will have its supporters and its detractors, just as was the case with the first motor-car, aircraft, bioscope and the radio of today. Television itself has no inherent character of a moral nature and the influence it exerts depends upon the manner in which it is used.⁴⁹

Clearly, it is the Nationalists who will determine this "manner" and, since the "Nats" so thoroughly control the SABC, one wonders why the United Party, in 1966, was so anxious to give them a new whip. Two years later and two years humbler, even staunch anti-Afrikaners have begun to drag their feet on the television question for, in their already precarious position, they surely "would be sorry to see yet another instrument of propaganda put into the Government's hands."⁵⁰

Today, ~~even~~ closed-circuit operations remain very strictly controlled and "never allowed for entertainment purposes."⁵¹ New Minister notwithstanding, the Nationalists have given no hint that their attitude toward open circuit operations would be any more liberal. It may be that television is planned for Auckland Park and, if it is, video sets might well enter South African sitting rooms sometime in the Seventies. In the interim,

however, it is only the screens on closed-circuit monitors that will glow and, with program input carefully policed by the Government and pre-packaged by the SABC, it is a glow that will hardly be spontaneous.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Letter from J. A. Grant, Radio Officer, Information Service of South Africa (New York office), April 19, 1966.
- ²Eric Rosenthal (ed.), Encyclopedia of Southern Africa (New York: Frederick Warne and Company, Ltd., 1961), p. 522.
- ³"Broadcasting Amendment Act," Journal of the Parliaments of the Commonwealth, XXX (April, 1949), 330-31.
- ⁴Gideon Roos, "Broadcasting in South Africa," Finance and Trade Review, I (July, 1954), 48.
- ⁵The Times (New York), February 13, 1956, p. 47.
- ⁶Sheila Patterson, The Last Trek (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1957), p. 283.
- ⁷The Times (New York), February 13, 1956, p. 47.
- ⁸The Times (London), October 30, 1959, p. 9.
- ⁹The Times (London), October 31, 1959, p. 5.
- ¹⁰Statement by Hendrik F. Verwoerd as reported in a letter from J. A. Grant, April 25, 1966.
- ¹¹The Times (London), March 7, 1960, p. 11.
- ¹²Interview with Father Robert Barrett, former South African citizen, June 13, 1968.
- ¹³Rosenthal, p. 522.
- ¹⁴The Times (London), June 9, 1962, p. 7.
- ¹⁵Brian Bunting, The Rise of the South African Reich (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 247.
- ¹⁶J. Anthony Lukas, "The Afrikaners' Africa," The Times (New York), November 15, 1964, p. 4e.
- ¹⁷"The Other Vast Wasteland," Time, November 20, 1964, p. 40.
- ¹⁸Wilson P. Dizard, Television: A World View (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), p. 69.

- 19 The Times (New York), November 10, 1964, p. 1.
- 20 "Cope Hits TV Ban as 'Cultural Banishment'," Advertising Age, June 1, 1964, p. 68.
- 21 The Times (New York), November 10, 1964, p. 8.
- 22 Interview with a South African Law Lecturer (name withheld by request), April 25, 1966.
- 23 "The Great White Laager," Time, August 26, 1966, p. 22.
- 24 Dizard, p. 69.
- 25 "Ampex Subsidiary Plans Entry into South Africa," Broadcasting, June 6, 1966, p. 82.
- 26 Letter from J. A. Grant, October 4, 1966.
- 27 "The Great White Laager," Time, August 26, 1966, p. 22.
- 28 Interview with a South African Law Lecturer, April 25, 1966.
- 29 "Sorted Out," News/Check (Johannesburg), February 16, 1968, p. 3.
- 30 "The Cabinet Shuffled," News/Check (Johannesburg), February 16, 1968, p. 4.
- 31 The Star (Johannesburg), March 6, 1968.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Louis C. Harris, "In South Africa It's 'A State of Affairs'," Editor and Publisher, April 23, 1966, p. 108.
- 35 Interview with a South African Ship's Purser (name withheld by request), July 10, 1968.
- 36 The South African Financial Gazette, April 5, 1968, p. 9.
- 37 Ibid., p. 16.
- 38 The Star (Johannesburg), April 4, 1968.
- 39 Letter from N. J. Naudé, Head: SABC Public Relations Section, May 8, 1968.
- 40 The Star (Johannesburg), April 4, 1968.

- 41 "Van Rensburg on Television," News/Check (Johannesburg),
March 8, 1968, p. 3.
- 42 The Times (New York), November 10, 1964, p. 8.
- 43 Letter from a South African Radio Actress (name withheld by
request), June 30, 1968.
- 44 Interview with Father Robert Barrett, May 1, 1968.
- 45 Letter from a South African Radio Actor (name withheld by
request), June 25, 1968.
- 46 Interview with a South African Law Lecturer, April 25, 1966.
- 47 S. P. Jackson, "Radio, Education and the Spread of Ideas,"
SAUK/SABC Bulletin, July 17, 1967, p. 2.
- 48 Interview with a South African Law Lecturer, April 25, 1966.
- 49 Our First Half Century (Johannesburg: Da Gama Publications
Ltd., 1960), p. 199.
- 50 Letter from a South African Radio Actor, June 25, 1968.
- 51 ~~ibid.~~