

The Structured Absence of Television within  
the South African Mediascape Prior to 1976

Ron Krabill

Abstract

The following paper is the second chapter of my dissertation, titled “Starring Nelson Mandela and Bill Cosby: Television, Identity, and the End of Apartheid.” The claim of the dissertation is that television made possible a transformation of the identities of White South Africans. White South Africans’ experiences of television heightened their awareness of the international community and their exclusion from that community. Likewise, images of White and Black were viewed in a shared communicative space (formed by the medium of television), altering South Africans’ understandings of the “other” as well as themselves. These images made a wider range of identities available to White South Africans, thereby undermining the salience of the widespread identity of White South Africa as an isolated outpost of civilization on the tip of the continent and the world, dependent on White supremacy for survival. Although this identity was by no means completely abandoned, its subversion by new identities opened through the communicative space of television diminished White South Africans’ willingness to support the more extreme elements of the apartheid regime. This shift in turn altered the nature of political mobilization in late-apartheid South Africa, and continues to reverberate throughout the periods of democratic transition and consolidation to the present day. This chapter intends to provide the historical background to the controversies and politics surrounding television prior to its introduction in 1976.

***THE STRUCTURED ABSENCE OF TELEVISION WITHIN  
THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIASCAPE PRIOR TO 1976***<sup>1</sup>

*Ron Krabill*<sup>2</sup>

More than 130 nations preceded South Africa in establishing a television service. Unlike nearly every other country without television at the time, South Africa resisted television as a concept long after it had attained both the financial and technological resources to make either commercial or state-owned television broadcasting a reality. South Africa's lack of television prior to 1976 was neither a quirky oversight nor evidence of an unsophisticated Ludditism. Rather, the absence of television was the result of the ruling National Party's ideology of cultural purity combined with the appropriation of cultural imperialism discourses from leftist critiques in the West.

The absence of the actual medium of television within the country does not, however, mean that television played no role in the social or political life of South Africa before its introduction. On the contrary, television became a structured absence in relation to which political identities were reflected. In other words, television's absence was a constitutive, rather than a pure, absence. Debates around television became a forum in which the growing isolation of the South African nation could be safely discussed by White<sup>3</sup> South Africans without delving into the more important issues of apartheid policies. The structured absence of the medium was constituted by a conceptual understanding of television which bore only loose resemblance to the medium itself, and

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was supported by a New Social Science Training Fellowship from the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies (TCDS) during the Fall of 2001 at the New School University. I would like to thank Elzbieta Matynia, Timo Lyyra and the entire TCDS staff for their work in putting together this fellowship program, and each of my colleagues in the program for their invaluable contributions to this chapter. Particular thanks go to Sean Jacobs for his assistance, along with Kalina Kamenova and Tuija Parikka of our working group on mass media and the public sphere. I also want to give special thanks to Jeff Goldfarb for his insightful comments on the chapter during two public presentations and Robert Kostrzewa for encouraging my involvement with the fellowship.

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. candidate in Sociology and Historical Studies in the Graduate Faculty of the New School University.

<sup>3</sup> I adapt the use of upper case first letters of words denoting ethnic and/or racial groups from the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988) "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," *101 Harvard Law Review*, 1331, 1332 n.2, and W.E.B. DuBois (1971) "That Capital 'N,'" in Julius Lester, *The Seventh Son*, 12, 13. Unlike Crenshaw and DuBois, however, I choose to capitalize both White and other-than-White categories. The use of upper case letters is used to avoid the naturalizing of these socially constructed ethnic categories, a particularly necessary distinction in apartheid South Africa, with its complex and arbitrary categorizations of people which carried such powerful consequences. The apartheid state categorized people into White (mostly European), African (indigenous), Indian (from the Indian subcontinent), and Coloured (mixed race); African peoples were further divided into "tribal" groups according to language (see footnote seven below).

came to represent much larger issues within the terrain of South African political identities.

The comparatively petty structured absence of television was mirrored by the far more consequential and complex structured absence of Black<sup>4</sup> South Africans in conventional politics in profound ways, both before and after television's introduction. Not unlike television prior to 1976, Black South Africans were prevented from active participation in conventional politics, yet their distorted presence in the form of a White-constructed understanding of them – the *swart gevaar*, or “Black peril” – dominated politics and public policy.

This chapter briefly sketches the electronic mediascape of South Africa prior to television's introduction through the debates surrounding television at the time, in order to expose the mindset behind the National Party's social engineering that perpetuated both apartheid and the banning of television. The chapter also addresses the question of what changed, allowing television to eventually be introduced in 1976. Although this study's primary concern is the impact of television following its introduction, an understanding of the context within which television was at first prevented – and later introduced – is essential if we are to comprehend the form it took and the results it created after 1976. Subsequent chapters will show the continuing parallels between television and the structured absence of Black South Africans in conventional politics, and the implications of these interactions for White political identities leading up to and continuing through South Africa's democratic transition.

### ***VERKRAMPTE*<sup>5</sup> FEAR AND THE BANNING OF TELEVISION**

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<sup>4</sup> Like many others, I adopt the approach of identifying all those denied full rights under apartheid (i.e., those of African, Indian, or so-called Coloured descent) as Black. White, then, comes to identify those South Africans of British and other descent whose primary language is English, and those known as Afrikaners, of primarily Dutch and other European descent who immigrated to South Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. If referring to any of these groups specifically, I will use the more precise term. These identities were the bedrock of South African social and political structures throughout the apartheid era, and their histories both preceded and extend beyond the apartheid era itself. Of course, these divisions are never as clean-cut as they seem, and many individuals transgressed their imposed ethnic identities; however, the exceptions were relatively few and far between in the highly antagonistic and racially charged South Africa politics.

<sup>5</sup> *Verkrampste* refers to the more conservative branch of the National Party, as opposed to the less conservative *verligte* (in Afrikaans, literally “enlightened”). The *verkrampste* are considered to have wielded control of the National Party from the time of its political ascendancy in 1948 until the assassination of Prime Minister Verwoerd in 1966.

The primary constraint on the development of television infrastructures is most often economic, since the technology itself requires a much higher amount of capital to initiate than other forms of mass media such as radio and print. However, South Africa had established itself as a highly industrialized economic power since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due largely to massive natural resources of gold, diamonds, and copper mined through the exploitation and social engineering first of segregation and then of apartheid.<sup>6</sup> The lack of television prior to 1976 was a direct result of the divisions within South African society as expressed through the state's media policy.

According to Rob Nixon,<sup>7</sup> the established political camps of South Africa positioned themselves in the debate around television into three primary categories: the ruling National Party (referred to as the Nationalists<sup>8</sup> in South Africa), the relatively<sup>9</sup> less conservative United Party (UP), and the variety of social movement organizations in opposition to apartheid. Those readers familiar with South Africa will immediately recognize these three political camps as drawing their overwhelming support from corresponding racial and ethnic categories within South Africa: Afrikaners, English-speaking White South Africans, and Black South Africans, respectively.

Nixon reconstructs an insightful glimpse into the discourse with which the Nationalists rationalized barring the medium. This discourse was based on an opposition to an unusual combination of ideological foes, with a heavy dose of what might today be called “family values” thrown in. According to Nixon, the Nationalists' opposition to TV was a part of their

struggle against national ‘dilution’ in all its varieties – through liberal individualism, racial mixing, communism, imperialism, monopoly

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<sup>6</sup> Although apartheid was not officially codified until the early 1950s under the National Party government, legal segregation and its accompanying exploitative racial state policy preceded apartheid throughout South Africa's history since the discovery of these natural resources.

<sup>7</sup> Rob Nixon (1994) *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York: Routledge).

<sup>8</sup> When the term Nationalist(s) appears with an upper case “N,” it refers to the National Party and/or its supporters; if a lower case “n” is used, it refers to the ideology of nationalism and its related terms.

<sup>9</sup> I emphasize the use of *relatively*; in spite of being slightly to the left of the Nationalists, the UP consistently supported the underpinnings of apartheid if not all of its specific elements.

capitalism, commercialism, and the cosmopolitanism of English-speaking South Africans and the Jewish and Indian diasporas.<sup>10</sup>

It's a dizzying and incongruous set of enemies unless one is familiar with the historical trajectory of the Afrikaner people represented by the Nationalists. Although this history is far too long and full of interesting turns to do it any justice here,<sup>11</sup> it should be noted that the Afrikaners struggled for many years against the British for control of South Africa, leaving the British Cape Colony along the southeastern coast to form the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (ZAR) of the interior in the mid-nineteenth century. After gold and diamonds were discovered in the ZAR, England claimed the ZAR and the Free State for its own, culminating in the South African War<sup>12</sup> at the turn of the century. Hence the Afrikaners have, almost from the beginning, resisted English control with some success and a good deal of failure. Not until the National Party won the 1948 elections did Afrikaner ethnic nationalism succeed in gaining political control over all of South Africa, although economic control still lay largely in the hands of English-speaking South Africans. As Nixon puts it, "Afrikaner alarm over TV's imagined onslaught was partly a fear of historical regression, of losing to British and American imperialists the cultural, political, and economic clout that Afrikaners had significantly extended since rising to power in 1948."<sup>13</sup>

This history, combined with the Soviet support of the armed resistance to the South African state, left the Nationalists heavily invested in a siege mentality. Hence the struggle against television became a struggle to retain a pure national identity against both capitalism and communism, the United Kingdom (and the United States by association) and the Soviet Union, individualism and internationalism. Given the power of Cold War international divisions, the Nationalists' insistence on viewing both sides as

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<sup>10</sup> Nixon, 59, 60.

<sup>11</sup> See William Beinart, (1994) *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), and Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, eds. (1971) *The Oxford History of South Africa*. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

<sup>12</sup> Until recently, this conflict was known as the Anglo-Boer War, or simply the Boer War. Boer literally means farmer in Afrikaans, but is often used to refer to the Afrikaners as a whole, at times in a derogatory way, at other times neutrally.

<sup>13</sup> Nixon, 54, 55.

an enemy – combined with their rejection by the non-aligned states because of apartheid – left South Africa a largely isolated political entity.<sup>14</sup>

The effort to maintain the “purity” of the Afrikaner was imagined to face an internal threat as well: racial miscegenation. The nearly constant fear of miscegenation was also linked to television, as given evidence by a particularly interesting fable told to parliament by Albert Hertzog, the Nationalist Minister of Post & Telecommunications and son of a former Prime Minister:

It is afternoon and the Bantu<sup>15</sup> house-boy is in the living room cleaning the carpet. Someone has left the television set on. The house-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 madam.<sup>16</sup>

This quote exposes many layers of racialized fears, from the terror of miscegenation to the myth of Black hypersexuality to an implied inability of indigenous people to view television with a critical eye. It also shows the extent to which White South Africans, in spite of the nearly ubiquitous physical presence of Black South Africans in their lives as so-called house boys, maids, and other kinds of manual workers, viewed Black South Africans as a mostly unfamiliar, “seen but not heard” entity. In other words, Black South Africans were viewed in the context of a structured absence.

The Nationalists’ discourse was heavily gendered as well as racialized. Television was portrayed as the purveyor of sex and filth, the destroyer of moral values, and the endpoint of an uncontrolled capitalism which threatened to destroy not only the racial hierarchy, but also the hierarchy of the home. One journalist combined these ideas into a scenario in which:

Just as the alcoholic says with every glass: just the one, then I’m going home, so we will say: just the one program, then I will go to sleep. And

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<sup>14</sup> The irony of this political and cultural isolation, largely self-imposed, should not be lost on students of the Cold War, since South Africa remained a powerful military force supported by the West in Southern African Cold War conflicts.

<sup>15</sup> Bantu literally means “the people” in many African languages; in South Africa, it was originally used as an indication of an individual or group being African, but the term came to be viewed as pejorative by Africans when associated with state policy. During the Black Consciousness Movement, Bantu Steven Biko attempted to reclaim the term as a positive one, although the controversy continues to this day.

<sup>16</sup> Nixon, 52.

while the servants enjoy the programs during the day, the wife will be at work so as to help pay for the new “must have.”<sup>17</sup>

The fear of miscegenation and the destruction of racial, gender, and even economic hierarchies through the power of television was transformed into a particularly powerful trope when extended to international relations. Thus television became the great racial and cultural miscegenator via capitalist-communist international imperialism, destined to destroy the White man and his moral superiority as given its purest incarnation in the Afrikaner people. At least one parliamentarian, J.C. Otto, made the argument explicit:

Liberalists, communists and leftists all use TV to influence people. In many programmes the white man is presented as a bad person, as the suppresser and exploiter of the black man. The white man is depicted as the person causing misery and frustration for the black man. . . . The overseas money magnates have used television as a deadly weapon to undermine the moral and spiritual resilience of the white man.<sup>18</sup>

For the guardians of apartheid, the coverage of the American civil rights movement via television became proof positive of the medium’s evil. Editorialists on both sides of the Atlantic claimed a significant role for television in the civil rights movement’s success, regardless of their opinion regarding the positive or negative nature of that success. For example, James Burnham wrote a 1966 editorial for the *National Review* that claimed:

The absence of a native liberation movement in South Africa is equivalent, very nearly, to the enforced absence of television. . . . What is “the civil rights movement,” what could it be, apart from the media? The Montgomery bus strike that began its history, the march on Selma that brought it top billing, would have been nothing but a local bus strike and a local marching if it were not for the media; nothing would have constituted them part of a “movement” of historical significance.<sup>19</sup>

Such claims created a good deal of anxiety for the proponents of apartheid, complicated by the already rising ideological interactions between the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa – of which Bantu Steven Biko was the best known spokesman – and the Black Power movement in the United States.

All of these discursive elements fused to become a massive specter on the Nationalist’s horizon. Television was compared to the atom bomb and found, astoundingly, less

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Nixon, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53, 60.

desirable: “While the atom bomb kills the body, television destroys the soul.”<sup>20</sup> Hertzog himself told parliament that “inside the pill [of TV] there is the bitter poison which will ultimately mean the downfall of civilizations.”<sup>21</sup> Thus the Nationalists fought the battle over television not as a side skirmish, but as central to their very understanding of Afrikaner identity. The structured absences of both television and Black South Africans made space for a phantasmagoric construction of both the medium and the people, as well as of the interactions between the two.

### ***VERLIGTE*<sup>22</sup> DEFENDING THE HOMELANDS: SEPARATE BUT EQUAL**

Not all opponents of television utilized such a basic cause-and-effect approach to the medium, however. One of the more interesting strategies was to co-opt the role of defender of non-White sovereignty. This paternalistic argument used the literal translation of apartheid – apartness – to claim an ideal of separate but equal. In this line of reasoning, television was not a threat to the universal White man or to a more specific Afrikaner identity, but rather to the supposedly fragile yet honorable cultural traditions of the indigenous African peoples themselves, portrayed here as classic noble savages.

These arguments gained strength in the 1960s as the Bantustan system (better known outside South Africa as “homelands” – pseudo-independent states within South Africa which effectively segregated indigenous peoples onto resourceless and economically depressed reservations) gained momentum with the ruling Nationalists. Concepts such as Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” reinforced these fears.<sup>23</sup> Nixon compares journalist Beaumont Schoeman’s description of television as a despised “powerful medium of integration.”

TV doesn’t respect differences and stresses uniformity. It breaks and loosens up cultures; it sweeps aside borders and eats away at the values of communities. The propagandists call it a powerful agent of democratization which is a sweet-sounding equivalent of calling it an

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>20</sup> German physicist quoted by Afrikaners in Nixon, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Nixon, 45.

<sup>22</sup> See footnote five above.

<sup>23</sup> Nixon, 63. See Marshall McLuhan (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill).

agent of homogenization. . . . Nor is there a more effective instrument for the furtherance of integration.<sup>24</sup>

with the words of McLuhan:

As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. It is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are now *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media.<sup>25</sup> (emphasis in original)

Nationalist leaders were thereby able to justify opposition to television as a threat to “the multiple sovereignties of all South Africa’s kaleidoscopic ‘ethnic nations’ . . . by parading the kind of sensitivities to difference that would scarcely seem incongruous in a contemporary American manifesto of multiculturalism.”<sup>26</sup> The inherent contradictions between the race-war scenario and the protection-of-vulnerable-native-cultures scenario ran throughout the National Party and the apartheid state, including the arguments surrounding television, and foreshadowed the shifts in both media policy and racialized identities which led to the arrival of television and, eventually, the transition from apartheid.

#### **THE INTERNATIONAL STATUS SYMBOL**

As mentioned earlier, not all White South Africans favored the ban on television. In fact, the struggle of the Nationalists to keep the technology out of the country was significant in that it was, indeed, a struggle. The supporters of television were outspoken and persistent, first requesting its introduction in 1953 and frequently afterwards until they were successful in 1976. Though television was never the primary item on the government’s agenda during these two decades, it remained a constant and contentious issue. These supporters were primarily identified with the United Party (UP), the majority of whose supporters were English-speaking White South Africans.

The role of English-speaking South Africans in apartheid-era politics has been a consistent source of controversy, and remains so today. This group has been viewed by some as consistently opposing the nationalist and isolationist rhetoric of the National

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<sup>24</sup> Nixon, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Party outlined above, while advocating for a more cosmopolitan and liberal approach to race relations. Critics claim that the UP was provided the easy escape hatch of self-righteousness by the extremism of the Nationalists, while continuing to benefit from the economic and racial policies of apartheid. Both of these claims were evident in the debate concerning television.

The English-speaking press consistently defined the absence of television in South Africa as embarrassing evidence of South Africa's isolated, backwater status. This group of South Africans had always maintained much greater ties to Europe in general and the United Kingdom in particular, often attending British universities or spending some time in the Commonwealth, resulting in both greater sensitivity to international opinion and less affinity to the Afrikaner nationalism of the ruling party. Thus the absence of television came to represent all that was isolated and internationally embarrassing; television was the international status symbol of modernization and civilization that was denied. According to Nixon:

The UP and White English Press disclosed a persistent anxiety about South Africa's possible disqualification from the inner circle of civilized modern nations. TV thus became a threshold issue: lacking this paramount marker of technological modernity South Africa risked banishment from the club of the truly civilized.<sup>27</sup>

Yet this approach was far from free of its own racialized perspective. As Nixon argues, the clamor for television allowed the UP to portray themselves as "outriders of progress and rationality" based on the equating of both Afrikaner and African cultures as "mired in irrationality."<sup>28</sup> This type of argument becomes particularly loaded in the context of African colonial history, with yet another group of White people claiming to carry the flame of civilization into the dark continent. What was not mentioned in this argument was the very real possibility that an economically powerful yet politically weakened English-speaking South African community would benefit from, perhaps even control, commercial television if it were introduced.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 69.

Perhaps most ironic, however, is the importance which the UP and its supporters placed upon television at a time of fierce state repression against the anti-apartheid movements.<sup>29</sup> The extent to which the UP continued to support the linchpins of apartheid while claiming a progressive role in the struggle for television and, by inference, race relations has been pointed out by several scholars.<sup>30</sup> Nixon goes so far as to call this “displaced shame,” citing an ironic statement by the UP that:

The United Party believes that the policies of the Nationalist Government over the years in regard to television have placed South Africa in a humiliating and indefensible position in regard to other countries, and we reject the intolerance, bias and falseness of such policies.<sup>31</sup>

Nixon also cites a 1969 editorial which said “this deprivation has been deliberately imposed on the people of this country. . . . The extent of the stultification to which South Africans have thus been subjected is practically incalculable.”<sup>32</sup> These statements are nothing short of ludicrous coming from a party that consistently rejected attempts at real reform of the apartheid system, the source of international condemnation of the South African state. Yet the extremism of the National Party and the “safe technological terrain of TV enabled a group [the UP] that benefited from and (in all important spheres) advocated apartheid, to portray itself as the standard-bearer of a progressive modernity.”<sup>33</sup>

### **A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES**

As we have seen, the major political parties of White South Africa viewed the struggle over television as essential to their understandings of the world and their position within it, as well as tying television to ideas of progressive or conservative politics. However, in spite of the raging controversy surrounding television in South Africa, 85 percent of the population – Black South Africans – remained essentially disinterested in television.

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<sup>29</sup> I pluralize movements in order to indicate that, although they shared the goal of ending apartheid, the many organizations were far from unified in either ideology or tactics.

<sup>30</sup> Nixon, 68; Ruth Tomaselli, Keyan Tomaselli and Johan Muller, eds. (1987) *Broadcasting in South Africa* (Bellville, Cape, RSA: Anthrops).

<sup>31</sup> Nixon, 70.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Only one and a half percent of Black homes even had electricity in the mid-1960s. As a result, the introduction of television would mostly have meant only another disparity between White and Black life. More importantly, the Black communities of South Africa faced minimal wages, disruption of home life due to enforced migrant labor and long commutes, abominable housing conditions, fierce police brutality, and the complete lack of formal political channels to challenge these circumstances, all due to the system of apartheid. Therefore, it can hardly be surprising that the anti-apartheid movements of South Africa never took up the cry for television as even a remotely high priority.

For Black South Africans, then, television came much closer to being a pure rather than structured absence. The lack of financial resources to engage in television production, coupled with the Nationalist government's control over broadcasting facilities, left little reason for the anti-apartheid movements to hope that the introduction of television would result in any substantial gains for their cause. Instead, the anti-apartheid movements turned their media attention toward radio, which became a site of contestation between the movements and the apartheid state.

### **CONTESTING THE AIRWAVES THROUGH SOUTH AFRICAN RADIO**

Radio began in South Africa in several places as a scattered, experimental, private medium. Not until the arrival in South Africa of Sir John Reith, the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) founding visionary, on a state-sponsored trip in 1934 were efforts made to organize radio broadcasting in a consistent manner. Reith brought with him the guiding philosophy and model of public service broadcasting on which the BBC was based, and the government followed Reith's suggestions in the founding of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in 1936.<sup>34</sup> The SABC was designed to serve the public interest and to build a national identity, although both this public and this nation excluded Black South Africans. The SABC was also expected to play a role in uplifting the culture of this public; in other words, the SABC was not intended to simply

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>34</sup> Ruth Tomaselli (1994) "The mediatization of culture: John Thomposon and the vision of public service broadcasting," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 13:3, p. 130.

entertain and inform White South Africans, but also to educate them in an effort to “improve” their tastes and preferences.

The result of this English-derived mandate, when applied to South Africa in the period between the South African War and the rise of the National Party, was a broadcasting policy which seemed innocuous and neutral to most English-speaking South Africans. Afrikaners, on the other hand, viewed much of the SABC’s programming as an elitist, external assault on their culture. The limited use of Afrikaans on the early SABC and the elevating of European cultural products over local interests exacerbated the sense that the SABC was serving the needs and interests of the English-speaking elite rather than those of the Afrikaners.

With the National Party’s rise to power in 1948, the SABC became an early target for the appropriation of the means of cultural production.<sup>35</sup> The degree to which the National Party directly controlled the SABC – as opposed to indirect control through appointments to the board, etc. – in the ensuing decades remains an issue of some contention. But regardless of the exact extent of party control, there is little dispute that the SABC became a much more unequivocal mouthpiece for the government under the Nationalists. Given that all radio originating within South Africa was affiliated with the SABC, this new role for the SABC was significant.

Prior to the 1960s, SABC radio was broadcast almost entirely in English and Afrikaans, with a small smattering of the more widely spoken African languages. Yet radio held the potential to reach by far the largest percentage of the population. In a mediascape without television, and within which a sizable portion of the population is not literate (approaching 50 percent in many areas of the country), radio was the most easily – and thus most commonly – consumed form of mass media by the vast majority of the South African population.

The anti-apartheid movements therefore did not view television as a method of engagement in the struggle, favoring instead the cheaper and more accessible medium of radio. Beginning in the 1950s, radio became the medium of choice for forces both inside and outside South Africa hoping to influence the political situation. By 1952 South Africans could receive transmissions from Radio Moscow, and within ten years the country was receiving radio broadcasts in opposition to apartheid from at least eight decolonized African countries, as well as Moscow and Beijing.<sup>36</sup> The introduction of Radio Freedom, broadcast by the ANC in exile over Tanzanian frequencies, caused even greater alarm in the ruling party.

Thus, when television was again requested by the UP in 1961, the government insisted instead that funds would be better used to initiate Radio Bantu, which became the government's largest propaganda weapon aimed at the Black population. On Radio Bantu, most of the African languages had their own stations, or at least their own programs. This structure of separate channels for each language fit nicely with apartheid's ideology of separate development, which attempted to subvert African nationalism by claiming that the divisions between various groups of Black South Africans (e.g., Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, etc.) were more significant than their similarities. There was no room in Radio Bantu for the fact that many if not most South Africans actually speak a mixture of two or more languages during the course of their day, and often during the course of a single sentence.

In a stroke of technological brilliance, the government broadcast Radio Bantu on high frequencies which could be heard on extremely inexpensive (and therefore far more accessible to the Black population) FM radios. This meant that, for a relatively affordable sum of money, the average Black South African could purchase his or her personal radio and tune in to Radio Bantu. This same person could not, however, pick up transmissions from Radio Freedom or other foreign broadcasts, which needed to use short

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<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, the ANC also identified the SABC as the first government institution requiring transformation as political power began to change hands in the first half of the 1990s, addressing this need even prior to the first democratic elections in 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Nixon, 64.

wave technology in order to travel the distances required by their locations beyond South Africa's borders. Short wave radios, unlike their transistor counterparts, were often beyond the financial means of individual Black South Africans.

The structured absence of Black South Africans on SABC radio during this period parallels, as I will later show, their structured absence on television following its introduction. First, they were excluded entirely from the conceptualization of the listening audience (and, by inference, the nation itself). Later, with the introduction of Radio Bantu, they were included in the audience (and as radio personalities as well); however, this inclusion in the listening audience was an explicit exclusion from public life and the nation as a whole through the separate channels of SABC radio. Rather than creating programming for SABC radio which would be shared by Black and White audiences alike, the SABC segregated Radio Bantu onto separate channels, according to its Bantustan ideology. The newfound presence of Black South Africans on Radio Bantu as social beings – consumers of music, soap operas, the news, etc. – was predicated on the continuation of the structured absence of Black South Africans as political beings who might take a hand in shaping the news itself. Yet this absence on SABC radio was continually challenged through Radio Freedom and its counterparts.

The dominance of radio as the medium of the masses was so firmly established in the 1950s and 1960s that two South African media experts writing as late as 1987 would still claim that “In modern urban society within a large nation-state, the radio is clearly the medium through which many people experience the world beyond the geographical limits of their daily life.”<sup>37</sup> Although this statement is debatable, the authors' claim points to the much larger influence maintained by radio in South Africa even after the introduction of television than elsewhere in the industrialized world. This should not lead us to minimize the impact of television on South Africa, but rather to recognize the importance of understanding the South African mediascape as a whole and radio's role within that mediascape.

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<sup>37</sup> Ruth Tomaselli and Graham Hayman, “Broadcasting Technology as an Ideological Terrain: Some Concepts, Assumptions and Problems,” in Tomaselli et al., p. 2.

### THE EXPLICIT STRUCTURING OF ABSENCE THROUGH “THE BAN”

More than 100 laws were passed between 1950 and 1990 restricting the operation of South African mass media,<sup>38</sup> which significantly altered the mediascape of the time. These laws went from outlawing publications to active censorship of the news to requiring journalists to reveal their sources. With regard to broadcast media, legislation also demanded that the SABC “shall broadcast nothing which may inflame public opinion or may directly or indirectly lead to any contravention of the law or may threaten the security of the state.”<sup>39</sup> Media law in apartheid South Africa was extensive and contentious, and deserves a great deal of attention. For the purposes of this study, though, I will deal only with the most infamous of these legal restraints, known as “the ban.”

When imposed on an individual, the ban made it illegal for that person’s face or words to be printed or broadcast, or for that person to be present in any gathering of more than three people. The ban made any dissident placed under it (and many were) a *persona non grata* – she or he literally disappeared from public life during the course of the ban. When imposed on a publication, it became illegal for that publication to be possessed, distributed, or reproduced. Even the structured absence of the ban was not absolutely effective; individuals often broke (or attempted to brake) banning orders,<sup>40</sup> just as underground pamphlets, posters, etc., were often produced. Perhaps most ironically, an item could not be banned until after it had been published, thus allowing special issues of periodicals, etc., to be published and distributed to their readers, even if they were sure to be banned at a later point in time. Similarly, banned individuals and organizations often found ways to fly under the radar of the apartheid state and continue to organize within Black communities.

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<sup>38</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (1998) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town: Juta): vol. 4, ch. 6, para. 9, 112.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Biko was arrested for breaking his banning order by having traveled outside the vicinity of his home. It was this arrest under which he was beaten to death.

Nonetheless, the ban became a powerful tool for enforcing the structured absence of Black South Africans in the political life of apartheid South Africa. Only through the ban could Nelson Mandela, long after achieving the highest profile of any political prisoner in the world, walk through the streets and malls of the Western Cape unrecognized in the months preceding his release.<sup>41</sup> The ban more often than not prevented Black South African political leaders not only from fully participating in conventional politics on a level playing field, but from even entering the pitch at all. Although Black political leaders may have been able to maintain a presence within their own communities, they were effectively removed from the political world of the nation as a whole, controlled as it was by the institutions and elites of White South Africa. Ironically, the banning of nearly all Black South African political leaders created a kind of vacuum in White perceptions of Black life, a vacuum which would be filled, in part, by television.

#### **PREPARING FOR TELEVISION**

The arrival of television was finally approved by a commission appointed in 1969 to explore its viability. Ironically, the commission was headed by Dr. Piet Meyer, the head of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and one of the leading ideological opponents of television throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Meyer Commission was also stacked with members of the Broederbond, a quasi-secret society of conservative Afrikaner leaders that had suffused both the state bureaucracy and legislative bodies in one of the most impressive ‘stealth’ takeovers in history.<sup>42</sup> What led Meyer and the Broederbond (Meyer was a leader of the organization) to reverse their decision regarding television?

#### **A CLASSIC ELITE DIVISION**

The answer most often given is a classic example of elite divisions as theorized by the political process model. The National Party had been experiencing increasing tensions between the *verkrampste* and the *verligte* and, in 1969, South Africa underwent a shift in elite political alignments. Prime Minister Vorster (one of the *verligte* who rose to party leadership following the assassination of Verwoerd in 1966) expelled Hertzog from the

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<sup>41</sup> See Nelson Mandela (1995) *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus), pp. 633-635.

cabinet; in response, Hertzog and other conservatives formed the *Herstige Nasionale* Party. The Broederbond itself was split, but eventually landed on the side of the *verligte*, reducing Hertzog's new party to a peripheral force. Suddenly, Meyer and the Broederbond were no longer disparaging the poison of television, but instead advocating for its use in maintaining social control. The split in the National Party allowed the increasing number of successful Afrikaner capitalists to join in the call for the international status symbol of television, thus paving the way for its introduction.

### THE THIRD TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

Although elite splits undoubtedly impacted the introduction of television and its timing, other factors were also at work – factors which problematize a simple political process model reading of the situation. As Tomaselli et al. have pointed out:

It is commonly thought that the eventual introduction of television so many years after its appearance in the rest of the world was largely because that arch-recalcitrant, Albert Hertzog, who had opposed television, was banished to the political wilderness by the National Party. In fact, many more complex processes were at work and would have overshadowed Hertzog even if he had remained in the Cabinet.<sup>43</sup>

Tomaselli et al. highlight what they term (borrowing from Ernest Mandel) the “third technological revolution,” particularly the development of satellite technology which was made operational in 1969.<sup>44</sup> With this technology, any South African who could afford to purchase a satellite dish and television set now had access to the wonders and debauchery of television, regardless of “whether or not South Africa was formally locked into the world television grid.”<sup>45</sup>

Even worse from the government's perspective, this television would be produced not by White South Africans for White South Africans, but rather by foreign sources. All the Nationalists' worst fears of television's impact now lay outside the control of the party due to a material technological development beyond their political jurisdiction. This fear

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<sup>42</sup> The Broederbond's role in 20th century South African politics is quite significant. See Dunbar Moodie (1975) *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press).

<sup>43</sup> Keyan Tomaselli, Graham Hayman, Abner Jack, Nofikile Nxumalo, Ruth Tomaselli, and Nhlangu Ngcobo, “Square Vision in Colour: How TV2/3 Negotiates Consent,” in Tomaselli et al., p. 153.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

was made explicit by the Meyer Commission in their report advising the introduction of television:

In a world rapidly approaching a stage where direct reception of television transmissions from overseas sources via satellites will become a reality, South Africa must have its own television service in order to nurture and strengthen its own spiritual roots, to foster respect and love for its own spiritual heritage and to protect and project the South African way of life as it has developed here in its historical context.<sup>46</sup>

Thus the material development of satellite technology forced the Nationalists' political hand, giving them the choice of producing their own television or having it inflicted upon them by foreigners.

### **MEDIA EVENTS AND INTERNATIONAL INCLUSION**

In addition to the third technological revolution, Nixon introduces another element which calls into question both elite splits and the third technological revolution as the impetus for introducing television: the desire on the part of South Africans to be included in simultaneously broadcast international media events.<sup>47</sup> Nixon focuses on the Apollo Moon Walk as the defining moment that left an increasingly internationally-minded South African elite – Afrikaners included – “reduced to twiddling the dials on their wirelasses” while 800 million people around the world watched Neil Armstrong:

More dramatically than any prior event, the moon landing impressed upon people TV's power to produce the sensation of simultaneous, “global” community. . . . In that act, a moment of audiovisual idealism – TV at the zenith of its powers – fused with a moment of transcendental incorporation, the “family of man” seeing itself observed from a divine angle of vision.<sup>48</sup>

Yet South Africans were left out of this global event, an exclusion which meant a great deal more in 1969 to an increasingly cosmopolitan Afrikaner as well as English-speaking community than it might have thirty years earlier. Nixon claims this exclusion had the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Tomaselli, Keyan and Ruth Tomaselli, “Between Policy and Practice in the SABC, 1970-1981,” in Tomaselli et al., p.84.

<sup>47</sup> For further exploration of the significance of media events, see Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press).

<sup>48</sup> Nixon, 73.

effect of threatening “both their technological self-assurance and their sense of racial superiority.”<sup>49</sup>

Although Nixon uses this example to highlight the importance of international exclusion, his illustration also points us toward the role of changing political identities in paving the way for television. White South Africans’ concern for inclusion in the international community of nations stemmed from a shift away from the isolationist identities of the past and toward an identity which was increasingly defined *vis a vis* the rest of the world. Thus we see, on the eve of television’s introduction, the beginning of a change in White South African identities through a process which will be shaped and accelerated by television itself. The third technological revolution and South Africa’s exclusion from media events indicate a role for material and cultural factors leading to the introduction of television, in addition to the role played by changing political alignments among the elite. More importantly, the combination of these factors – cultural, political, and technological – provide a first intimation of the changes in White South African identities to come.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the debates preceding television’s introduction into South Africa, outside observers were often surprised by the state’s reluctance to embrace the medium’s potential for propaganda. This perspective views technological advances in communication as strengthening the state’s ability to disseminate and control images of nationhood and itself, thus buttressing the state’s power.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, as the earlier quote from the Meyer Commission indicates, this was the approach finally adopted by the ruling party once it became clear that they could not completely prevent television from entering South Africa through satellite technology. Yet the claim that the Nationalists’ hands were tied, and that they had no choice but to institute television, only explains part of the story.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>50</sup> See Benedict Anderson (1985) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso), pp. 122-123. Although Anderson’s argument is based on print media, he does view radio and television as an extension of that media, rather than something entirely different.

The National Party's policy shift can only be fully explained by also taking into account the beginnings of a realignment in White South African political identities. As White South Africans became increasingly concerned with their place in the world, political identities began to modify. As a result, the structured absence of television in South Africa gave way in 1976, but the structured absence of Black South Africans in conventional politics persisted. It would take many years to chip away at the more insidious exclusion of Black South Africans from political life. In subsequent chapters, I will show the role of television in continuing the transformation of these identities and their relationships to politics in a process which was full of contradictions and contingencies, but which nevertheless cleared the way for the particular form of political transition that South Africa experienced.

South Africa's television history is unique in that opposition to the medium largely exhausted itself before television's introduction; in most of the rest of the world, arguments against television arose only after it had been established, typically at the earliest affordable moment. As a result, few scholars have paid much attention to television after it came to South Africa. Did television's introduction fulfill the fears of the Nationalists, destroying social hierarchies and mixing the races? Did the apartheid state attempt to use television to further consolidate state power and hegemony as many outsiders feared it would? These are among the questions addressed in the next chapter.

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