

TELEVISION NEWS-

THE OFFICIAL NEWS

by John van Zyl

Many of us who complain about the quality of SATV news have been brought up on either BBC or American standards of newscasting. When we go to handbooks to teach television news reporting (as is done at some English-speaking universities) the standards we encounter are those, again, of the BBC or NBC.

As it is quite obvious that SABC – TV is run neither on the independent principles of the BBC or the hard, competitive, personality-bound lines of the American stations, we should first construct an ideal formula for newscasting, and then measure what we have in South Africa. Before we do that we should note that we have little information about the news services of pre-revolutionary Portugal, or Spain, or even Communist bloc countries today, since it seems that those services would be the closest to what we experience locally.

The television reporter should be governed by the same rules of conduct as his Press colleague. He should gather his hard facts assiduously. An incident or an issue should be investigated as thoroughly as possible and the resulting story should be presented as dispassionately as possible.

What is regarded as newsworthy will always depend upon the news editor, but once it has been passed as newsworthy it must remain news, and not turn into comment.

Television news does have a problem that Press reporting does not have. It can create or transform the incident it sets out to report. The cameraman registers the moving (in both senses of the word) so that a riot in which only one person was hurt will usually be seen in terms of that one person's wounds. The press reporter with his notebook and pencil simply cannot render his report as immediately or as emotionally as his TV counterpart.

However, the Press reporter with his hyline can very easily add editorial comment within the body of his copy. But this is usually taken as the personal impressions of a named person who had actually experienced the event. The television reporter on the spot with his cameraman can also add his verbal impressions to what the viewer can see, but is constrained by the visuals. So he has to rely on the choice of visuals so that the paradoxical situation arises whereby the TV reporter is either bound more closely to the factual truth, or else is more dangerously free to create his own truths.

Charl Paauw on the deck of the *Venpet* is bound to report on the incident as he found it, but Cliff Saunders interviewing two black schoolteachers and wringing from them the admission that there was intimidation behind the resignation of teachers in Soweto is *creating news*.

TV news has several built-in features that comment visually on the words spoken by the newsreader. The use of lurid or emotive graphics can slant the news. The typical map used by SABC – TV depicting South West Africa and Angola has an arrow pointing south, with a hammer and sickle at the northern end. Other local examples are the use

of crude caricatures of Carter or Castro, contrasted with the usual slide of a smiling, benign Vorster. When we look closely at SABC – TV news some depressing features emerge.

The absence of overseas news on some evenings, the fact that the SABC has only one representative (Carel Leenhardt in London) overseas, and the excessive use of news commentators like Saunders and Pretorius gives the news a bias which is always noticeable and sometimes is downright crude. I cannot imagine another television service in the "free world" (that concept so assiduously bandied about by SABC – TV) that would tolerate so many eager pre-digestors, or masticators, of the news.

It is common knowledge that television programmes that offend the sensibilities of the administration of SABC – TV are summarily banned. The programme on the link between smoking and cancer, the comments by Dr Boris Wilson on the high cost of South African television, the Postmaster General's remarks on the telephone shortage have either been banned or cut from programmes during the past two years. One, of course, does not know how many other programmes, like Stuart Pringle's programme on Soweto, have been shelved indefinitely, or strangled at birth.

Two surveys conducted by *The Star* and the Department of Journalism of Rhodes University respectively have revealed some interesting statistics. *The Star* reported on 12 June, 1976 that Cabinet Ministers were getting nearly 10 times as much exposure on television as spokesmen for all the country's opposition parties combined. In brief, the survey found that in 24 newscasts (nearly eight hours of viewing time) Cabinet Ministers were featured 38 times for a total of 27 minutes. Compared with this, United Party spokesmen featured six times, for a total of about two minutes.

This is, of course, not the whole picture. The featuring of Cabinet Ministers for the promotion of Government viewpoints uncritically can by no means be regarded as news. The only place where this might take place is within a discussion programme, and then hopefully, with a critical interviewer, or an Opposition spokesman to test the validity of the viewpoint.

Apart from the Cabinet Ministers, there is a series of familiar faces of pro-Government black spokesmen and white spokesmen belonging to the "pyramid of access" that can be relied upon to trot out obliquely the familiar bogeyman of Communism, corrupt black governments and "hypocritical" Western politicians.

The Rhodes survey conducted by Whitehead and Cockayne, under the supervision of Professor Hansen, investigated the news broadcasts over a month during the period September – October, 1977. Although the findings were not totally conclusive, some of the results are significant. It was found that 32 per cent of the news times was given to political representation i.e. reports pertaining to the

policies or principles of political parties in South Africa. This is already significant in terms of the proportion of "hard news" and "purportive news".

Of this time 47 per cent was devoted to showing and hearing of government officials and National party officials. 34 per cent of the political time consisted of hearing statements from or news about government and National Party officials. When these figures are combined it may be seen that 81 per cent of political news was centred on government or National Party officials. The rest of the

statistics are depressingly predictable.

It is obvious that the party in power will always have an advantage of newsmaking and newsworthiness, but it is only a television service which is overwhelmingly an official service which will provide such an accessible platform for government views which are not tested or probed by informed interviewers.

It is this, finally, which makes our television service an *official* one rather than a *national* service.□

Canada and the Anglo-Boer war

The Anglo-Boer War of 1899 - 1902 was the occasion of Canada's first major overseas military campaign and relatively little has been written about the participation of the Canadian contingents. I am engaged in researching the role of the Canadian forces in this conflict and will be travelling throughout South Africa over the next three months collecting pertinent material.

I would be most grateful if readers could assist me in this project by contacting me if they are aware of letter, diaries, scrapbooks, photographs, paintings or any other material pertaining to the Canadians. I am anxious to visit battle-sites where Canadian troops were engaged, routes they traversed and graves and would appreciate local historians assisting me in their areas.

In addition to the troops there were also Canadian correspondents, doctors, nurses, priests and teachers engaged here during the war years. During my travels I am also hoping to contact descendants of Canadians who settled in South Africa after the War.

Any assistance that readers can provide in connection with this project will be gratefully received.

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LOOK

In your stubborn desire to be static,
you can corrupt hearts and destroy lives.
You can disfigure the landscape.
You can fill the air with jangling propaganda.
But you cannot touch the sky.

That is beyond your reach.
The sky has its own times and motions:
it lightens and darkens;
it saddens and brightens.

It hangs and spins above you,
a perpetual reminder
that life is change.

by Vortex