



HAL
open science

Why South Africa's Television is only Twenty Years Old: Debating Civilisation, 1958-1969

Bernard Cros

► **To cite this version:**

Bernard Cros. Why South Africa's Television is only Twenty Years Old: Debating Civilisation, 1958-1969. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1996, pp.117-129. hal-03217863

HAL Id: hal-03217863

<https://hal.science/hal-03217863>

Submitted on 5 May 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Alizés (*Trade Winds*)

Revue Angliciste de La Réunion

N° 12

Taboos



October 1996

*Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines
Université de la Réunion (France)*

Why South Africa's Television is Only Twenty Years Old: Debating Civilisation, 1958-1969

We must not forget that in Europe the climate is such that young people have to stay indoors, and it may be an advantage to those countries to have television in order to keep the youth occupied. In America, where the climate is better, a different argument applies. There the young people are running so wild on the streets that they have to be enticed back into the home by television. In South Africa, however, where we have such a lovely climate, why should our youth be kept indoors?

(Hon. M. van der Merwe, House of Assembly, 22 May 1963).

The debate over the introduction of television in South Africa gained impetus at the end of the 1950s and coincided historically with a crucial shift in the doctrine of the National Party government which had been in power since 1948: after a decade of adaptation and transition from old-style segregation, the nationalists began to enforce a harsher, more doctrinal form of apartheid and a Christian-National socio-economic policy. It was in this context, under the guidance of Prime Minister H. F. Verwoerd, that television became the arch-enemy of Afrikaner interests and nationalist politics. On the other hand, most of the government's liberal opponents were in favour of television, so that TV became a violent political battlefield for the two major ideological forces in white South Africa. For ten years, the whole debate was constantly underpinned by these two world views at odds with each other: an urge to protect white domination and survival in South Africa *versus* a traditional liberal conception of progress which

made television inevitable and necessary in a developed country. In many ways, it was the continuation of the 150-year old feud between Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans. Both the Afrikaner nationalists and the liberals firmly believed that they were the champions of Western civilisation in Africa. But in the name of a similar claim to save that type of civilisation at the southern tip of Africa, one side demanded TV while the other rejected it.

When Hendrik Verwoerd assumed power in 1959, the Afrikaners had started to invest methodically the upper hierarchy and key sectors of the state and society: government, public firms, state corporations, industries, trade unions, organisations and media concerns. The SABC was a vital objective because of the formidable power vested in electronic media in terms of influence and propaganda and because of its reputation as a stronghold of liberalism. Therefore, practically all opposing forces, stifled as the *Broederbond*, a powerful secret society created in 1918 to promote Afrikaner interests, conquered the Corporation, filling its upper echelons with reliable executives who took the place of mostly liberal-minded English speakers. Several members of the SABC's Board of Governors, including Chairman Dr S. H. Pellissier and several top executives, were 'Broeders,' many of whom were appointed after Verwoerd came to power. Thus, many excellent professionals were shown the way out because they did not suit the powers-that-be. Though impossible to prove, it is probable that those people would have been a powerful force in favour of television because of their insiders' position at the SABC. At least a fertile ground for TV was made barren.

A decision for introducing TV lay in the Cabinet's hands, more particularly in those of the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, who was in charge of broadcasting. Between 1959 and 1968, *i.e.* the very decade during which TV was deemed undesirable, the position was held by the fiercest opponent TV has ever known: Dr Albert Hertzog, *a.k.a.* "Dr No." He came to represent stubborn resistance to the medium and went down in history as the staunchest opponent to the "little black box." A very conservative mind, he did not have much of an innovative spirit and was little interested in technological advancement, unless it was of

any good to Afrikanerdom. But however identified with his particular figure, the arguments he used against television were taken up by most TV opponents as they stemmed from a specific interpretation of Afrikaner nationalist ideology and as they could be linked to the Christian-National Calvinist conception of society which prevailed under Verwoerd.

The nationalist world view rests basically on the survival at all costs of the *volk* (the Afrikaner people *stricto sensu*, i.e. white Afrikaans-speaking men and women of Dutch, German or French Huguenot descent) and the consciences, morals and culture of its members, by ensuring complete political domination of South Africa in the context of a stern religious approach to the organisation of life and society. In fact, at the core of such conceptions lies a Calvinist fear that TV is a devilish instrument which could soon replace God in the hearts of the people. In Assembly, Nationalist MP H. D. K. van der Merwe quotes a *Sunday Times* reader who describes the TV set as "the house god... the idol [which] the masses watch in wonder" (2 May 1967: 5280). In fact, the Nationalists fear that TV might replace religion as the "opium of the people." "[TV] is spiritual opium," adds Hertzog (5287). Such a behaviour also breaks the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other God before me" (Exod. 20: 3). In other words, if TV lures people away from the church, it endangers the *volk*'s survival.

It is therefore by educating his children through Christian-Nationalism at school and in church that the Afrikaner fulfils his divine mission of eternal domination of the country. This pre-eminence of the *volk* over the individual means that the individual's identity and freedom can only develop within the boundaries of his given community. Because it does not account for that dimension, TV was seen as a moral danger to family and youth. This attitude was also the consequence of a fear of the unknown as television "will bring about unpredictable consequences" (Hertzog, Ass., 23 May 1963: 6610). Many nationalists endowed television, a competitor for traditional school and church teaching, with a direct, unmediated, *necessarily negative* influence on the minds. "Television virtually has an hypnotic effect on persons" (ibid.). Hertzog particularly feared the imitative behaviour

initiated by TV. "When television is introduced into a home and the children are continually seeing acts of violence, crime, sex crimes and immorality, it must of necessity have an adverse effect on those children" (ibid.).

Though very few of them had actually watched TV themselves, the Nationalists loved to quote from alarming reports written by scholars on TV's negative effects which stated that TV had a degenerating influence on the minds. In 1960, before the Senate, Hertzog quoted an American scholar: "Television as a destroyer of the human spirit is a bigger menace than the atom and hydrogen bombs" (Sen., 21 March 1960 1145). In 1963, he added that "television has become, in the Western World, the greatest destroyer of family life" (Ass., 22 May 1963 6525). Such was the nationalist position, despite the fact that the SABC and the government would have the final say as to any programme broadcast. "Better safe than sorry" could have been their motto.

Hertzog feared above all the quantity of programmes needed to feed the "one-eyed monster." He thought, rightly so, that South Africa alone did not have the technical, financial and human capacity to cater for so many hours of programmes (all TV plans projected a minimum of five hours a day), and that ultimately South African TV would have to turn to Britain and the United States for supplies. This view entailed a gradual invasion by "liberalism," which entrenched freedom and fulfilment within the boundaries of every individual. Television was therefore not advisable because it would divert the Afrikaners towards other cultural references alien to them, but would not provide them with sufficient programmes relating directly to their own history, culture and language; it would impede upon the development of the *volk* as a distinct entity; by promoting autonomous behaviour of the individual both in front of the screen and through the programmes, it would allow everyone to exist *outside* the *volk*, and in so doing would break up the sacred, essential *volk* solidarity. "We dare not sell our national soul and that at the high cost of introduction and maintenance of television" (Dr Otto, Ass., 22 May 1963 6517).

The youth had to be particularly protected from television because they represented the future of the Afrikaner's God-sent mission in the country. As Hertzog puts it: "The child who looks at television is often to a large extent no longer the leader in his area; he feels inferior and at best is only a follower. It is very important to us in South Africa that the White nation should be the leaders and remain the leaders" (Ass., 22 May 1963 6525). British and American programmes were not advisable, particularly at the time of the Civil Rights movement in the USA. It would not be a good thing to see all those Blacks rioting and confronting police forces on the streets of Little Rock, Arkansas, and Birmingham, Alabama, when South Africa's government was advocating co-operation and peaceful separate development of races. Allegedly, all the American series also displayed systematically the white man as the baddie and the black man as the goodie (6530) — ideologically, American influence was considered at least as lethal as Communist imperialism. The early 1960s context left no doubts in nationalist minds:

South Africa, the stronghold of Western White civilization in Africa, is to an increasing extent being threatened by a flood of malicious propaganda from outside and by subtle misrepresentations and false reports from within our own borders which are calculated to undermine Christian way of life and continued orderly existence (J. H. Visse, Ass., 31 January 1964: 570).

Obsessed with the "total onslaught" launched by all "the Communists and Leftists who often shield themselves behind the name of liberal" (Hertzog, Ass., 22 May 1963 6530), the Afrikaners viewed everything foreign as potentially destructive for them. The necessary imports which scared Hertzog were like loaded dice or time bombs: "There are few programmes in which you do not find that propaganda" (Ass., 22 May 1963: 6530).

Naturally, most of the time, nationalist officials identified their purely Afrikaner impulses with "the interests of South Africa." Albert Hertzog criticised the Opposition for having no consideration for such a lofty ideal as patriotism:

This is always the argument: Other countries do it and that is why we must also do it. That is also their argument in connection with apartheid. Other countries do not have apartheid, why must we have it? The argument is always that we should do what other countries do whether it will be to the advantage of South Africa or not and whether you will thereby cause South Africa's downfall or not (Ass., 22 May 1963 6523-24).

Those dangerous ideas would hurt the preservation of the cultural heritage which had always been the spearhead of the Afrikaner struggle. Above all was the language issue. Afrikaans was very symbolical, proving a powerful unifying device ever since the Afrikaner started to think of themselves as an original community back in the late 19th century. In the first place, the dependence on English-speaking programmes implied that English would eventually and necessarily outbalance Afrikaans, since no Afrikaans programmes were available outside South Africa. The Afrikaans newspapers would also suffer. They had played a valuable role in the development of Afrikaner identity. Such unjust competition from TV would result in a dramatic fall in readership and the weakening of all South African press groups. The weakest ones happened to be *Perskor* and *Nasionale Pers*, both controlled by Afrikaner interests and firmly engaged in the fierce uphill battle for the advancement of their community. By losing the support of the newspapers, which had been at the forefront of the nationalist struggle since the 1870s, the Afrikaner could only yield ground on the propaganda scene they had struggled to occupy. Such a decline would be enhanced by the inevitable competition for advertising revenues since it was not considered that television could be fully financed by licenses and/or state grants only.

Television also had to vie against a well-established and popular medium: radio. Its most devoted zealot was Albert Hertzog whose hate for TV was as great as his love for radio. In 1959, he appointed the new SABC Executive Chairman P. J. Meyer, an old friend of his. With this powerful support, Meyer started to set up Radio Bantu, the generic name for seven Black radio stations using the concept of "one nation, one station." Following the Afrikaner principle of serving

autonomous *volke*, each station targeted one particular ethnic group, using its language and broadcasting appropriate programmes over the areas allotted to each population, the *bantustans* or homelands, as well as the biggest townships, in order to stimulate, and sometimes create, a sense of belonging to a given ethnic group. This principle proved an efficient tool in the development of the “grand apartheid,” so that behind Hertzog, many nationalists would not even consider an unknown, formidable — awesome? — medium when radio’s ethnic pattern suited perfectly the objectives of apartheid. From a social point of view, radio’s technical characteristics entailed greater freedom while TV alienated the individual.

In our time, the radio has become the most intimate friend of the moving and busy man. Unlike the film and the written word it does not bind one to a specific place. One can put a small radio in one’s pocket and listen while busy with something else (Meyer 13).

The nationalists thought, by and large, that the opposition United Party and all the imperialist and liberal forces inside South Africa and outside (Americans, Soviets, Europeans) were a threat to the Afrikaner *volk* because they advocated racial integration. In other words, “the National Party perceived TV as an agent of *cultural fusion* that would subvert their efforts to promote *cultural fission*” (Nixon 35). For the Afrikaners, “civilisation” meant their own particular heritage, since they defined themselves as radically different not only from the various Black nations but also from other White groups, including the English speakers. Refusing television was a typical 1960s Afrikaner defensive move, the only possibility for the *volk* to avoid being swallowed up by the Black masses through the influence of the Anglo-American liberal spirit. The discourse was coated in an apocalyptic tone which promised the end of the world to those who did not believe. “If, at the present time, you introduce television, you will pay for it with the end of the white man” (Hertzog, *Cape Times*). This curse, loaded with Calvinistic undertones, and the theme of white extinction was common to the whole of the ultra-nationalist discourse. As De Wet Nel explains, TV would bring political integration which would, in turn, bring “the end of the Western civilisation in South Africa, the political eclipse of Whites and everything they have built up over a period of more than 300

years" (quoted in Giliomee 42). As a rhetorical argument, Albert Hertzog says in Parliament that Belgium, "influenced by that propaganda, [had] morally collapsed." Surely white South Africans would not let such downfall happen. Hertzog particularly rails at Britain, the former colonial oppressor, from which South Africa had just become fully independent by quitting the Commonwealth. Even in England people will tell you that they have developed a "guilt complex" instead of a "pride complex" (Ass., 22 May 1963: 6531).

On the other side of the field, those who expressed themselves in favour of television were by and large the liberal forces of the country: most of the English speakers, who accounted for less than 40% of white South Africa, a great part of the industrial world, and their political representative, the United Party (UP). The English-language press was also engaged in the fight for television. Being very widely read even by Afrikaners, it probably had some genuine influence on public opinion. The most trivial event, like a trip abroad by an SABC executive or a technical adviser, became a clue to the coming of TV to the country.

According to the liberals, the anti-democratic extremist Afrikaners endangered the future of the country by refusing all forms of progress. Their refusal of television was the expression of their all too famous "*laager* spirit," named after the circle of ox-wagons formed by the Afrikaner *trekkers* in the 20th century to defend themselves against Black attacks. The UP jeered at the Cabinet by saying that many small countries, some in Africa, had already started television services and that South Africa, which boasted to being so superior to them, was not even considering it yet.

Through unflattering comparisons, UP representatives kept hitting at Afrikaner backwardness hoping to hurt their pride which they knew was always a very sensitive spot. One of them, J. D. du Basson, compared television with other modern appliances — "In the whole civilised world today television is already as common as the radio, the telephones and the jet aeroplanes" (Ass., 22 May 1963: 6513) —, and particularly with the motor-car which had become necessary in spite of

its negative aspects: "Thousands of people die on the roads, but I still have to see the Minister selling his American motor-car because of that and go home in the evenings by horse and cart" (6514). The image referred directly to the rural mentality and way of life the Afrikaners had always glorified, and can be interpreted as a deliberate sneer. This type of reasoning was regularly discarded by Hertzog as biased: "Every matter has its good and bad sides. Even a snake has a good side. Even *dagga* [marijuana] has its uses but that does not mean to say that for this reason I should harbour a snake in my bosom or that for this reason I should encourage the public to smoke dagga" (Sen., 21 March 1960: 1140-41). Moreover, TV was of much lesser quality and interest than the cinema: "Television is simply in reality a miniature bioscope [after the Afrikaans word '*bioskoop*': 'cinema']" (1141).

Refusing TV equated refusing the outside world and was a threat to South Africa's position in the world. The idea of "civilisation" encompassed the great Western values found in Britain and the United States, those of freedom, equality, individualism, free-enterprise and progress — in other words those of "liberalism." Accepting television was just the normal way things should go. The English-speaking section had always been at the top of broadcasting advances. They brought radio to South Africa in the early 20th century, then developed it in the 1920s and 1930s for the essentially English-speaking audience and, in a way, had come to consider broadcasting as their property.

Concerning the contents of television, the SABC, as a public service, should aim at a high ideal and try and emulate the BBC. The SABC had been created in the wake of a report written in 1935 by Sir John Reith, BBC founder and Director General, and before they were driven away, SABC executives, mostly liberal English speakers, had fought for the ideals of political-free management and content, equal service for all listeners and educational programming. This latter point was particularly brought forward in political arguments in relation to the issue of civilisation:

The educational value of television exceeds all the disadvantages it may have . . . We must do everything in our power to provide the

backward section of our population with the necessary education so that civilized standards can be maintained in South Africa no matter what may happen at the political front" (Du P. Basson, Ass., 22 May 1963 6514).

A *Cape Times* editorial summed up television's main qualities seen from the liberal positivist standpoint: "If used properly, I repeat properly, the medium can be of inestimable value in restoring and maintaining links with the outside world, supplementing education and generally improving the knowledge and sharpening the critical faculties of the nation." Yet, the insistence on the need to use the medium "properly" shows how aware the advocates of TV were of possible political encroachment. This threat hovered over a TV service just as it was experienced in radio which the Afrikaners were usurping for raw propaganda purposes, thus emptying the medium of its natural function as public service.

The language issue was not considered by the liberal English-speaking section as a real problem either, as several countries such as Canada or the Congo — a poor underpopulated Black African country — had overcome it by adapting their programme schedules. But as English speakers they were confident in the strong position of their language in the world, a position which could not be shared by the isolated and insecure Afrikaans speakers. Finally, cost and technology were always hotly debated. It is not possible to underestimate such a genuine practical fact: television implies heavy investments, even more so in South Africa where the distances to be covered were enormous if one intended to provide a full-scale *public* service implying equality for all viewers. Actually, South Africa could have become one of the first countries to have television had it not been for financial reasons. In 1929, John Logie Baird, the inventor of television, who had sent his revolutionary device to be shown to the public of South Africa, was turned down because of the heavy sums involved. Thirty years later, the government stuck to the same rhetoric saying it had other financial priorities, such as the *bantustan* policy. Investing such a huge amount of capital into a still underdeveloped technology whose advantages were highly suspicious was hazardous. The government, backed by SABC technicians, maintained that the introduction of TV would be studied

once the medium reached a sufficient level of quality abroad and once colour broadcasting was fully mastered to avoid a costly and useless switch from black and white. South Africa would wait until sufficient progress had been made in order to learn from mistakes and avoid repeating them. Yet, such an argument could have been a perfect justification for never doing anything since the major characteristic of progress is that it has no end and that something more sophisticated always comes up eventually...

By 1966, given the power's radicalism against TV, nobody could have imagined that ten years later South Africa would be watching its first programmes. A number of changes took place during the second half of the 1960s which gradually altered the face of Afrikaner nationalism and opened a breach for TV. A conflict arose in NP ranks between the party's two wings: the NP ideologues (the *verkrampes* or "rigid") favourable to the continuation of the full-fledged Verwoerdian apartheid doctrine, were gradually replaced with men who, in the footsteps of new Prime Minister B. J. Vorster, believed that there was a need to adapt the system (the *verligtes* or "enlightened"). The party's identity crisis reached an apex when several NP right-wingers resigned from government. Albert Hertzog was their senior leader. Public opinion interpreted immediately his resignation from Cabinet in February 1968 as the green light for TV.

Things were also changing in White society. The Afrikaners felt less and less receptive to the rigorist Calvinistic approach to life. The rise in living standards since the war had given birth to an Afrikaans middle-class who, through urbanisation and contacts with the English-speaking minority, was more inclined to accepting evolution, either political or technological, and tended to reject strict dogmatic positions. Opinion polls showed that Afrikaans speakers were favourable to TV though slightly less than the English speakers (59% to 75%) (*Cape Times*, 17 March 1969). Pressure was building up. No government can ignore the man on the street when it claims to hold its legitimacy from him and the NP felt a political threat growing with a genuine risk to lose power. The UP included the issue in its 1966 general elections platform with this slogan: "Want TV? Vote UP!" The

isolation of South Africa on the world scene was further reinforced by this stubborn refusal of television, as more and more people began to feel they were becoming the laughing-stock of the Western world which South Africa was always so proud of saying it belonged to. In 1969, the successive moon flights were not seen live in South Africa and caused a serious stir in the country. "The moon film has proved to be the last straw... The situation is becoming a source of embarrassment for the country." (*Sunday Times*, 7 July 1969). The industrial community (electrical and electronics firms) was also very concerned and thought that TV could boost employment, sales, exports to neighbouring countries and international prestige. Millions of rands could be made easily.

It took the government two more years to announce that TV would be launched and that a commission would first investigate the matter. The Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to Television was headed by P. J. Meyer himself and ten of twelve of its members were Broeders. In an illegal move, Meyer first passed the ensuing report to the Broederbond before it was tabled in Parliament. (Secret Broederbond document cited in Wilkins 13). As to the nature of the service, here is an excerpt of the report published in 1971:

An SABC-controlled radio and television service for South Africa should, in the interests of all its people, give direct and unequivocal expression to the established Christian Western set of norms and values that are valid for South African society in all spheres of life, in order to strengthen and enrich our own religious and spiritual life. . . . all radio and television services shall have a Christian and a broad national character. Only in this way will it be possible to ensure from within that the broadcasting services of our country will be introduced and presented by norm-conscious officials and in such a way that the morals and morale of the community will not be undermined and especially that no programmes harmful to the youth of our country will be presented. (§135, 16)

The advancement of Afrikanerdom and apartheid had not been forfeited. In fact, television would not bring the liberalistic thrust many people had been waiting for, if only for one reason: the liberals were

deprived of the political power to take effective steps for the introduction of TV. As a matter of fact, during all those years, TV was absent, few people knew what it really was, but it took on a central place in the political and social debate of the country to the extent that it had acquired a superior dimension, becoming either a diabolical device or an instrument of good. As for the arguments that had been put forward against TV, they served as guidelines for the service that was finally launched on January, 5 1976. Three channels would finally come up based on an ethnic pattern (one White, two Black ones). But SATV had to wait for its twentieth birthday last January to finally do away with apartheid by reshuffling the channels along linguistic *and* thematic lines accounting for real public service preoccupation.

*Bernard Cros.*¹

¹ Université Michel-de-Montaigne, Bordeaux-III, 3 ter Place de la Victoire, 33076 Bordeaux Cedex (FRANCE).

WORKS CITED

Cape Times 17 March 1969.

Cape Times 29 April 1971.

Giliomee, Hermann and Lawrence Schlemmer. *From Apartheid to Nation-Building*. 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1990).

Hertzog, Albert. Interview. *Cape Times* 1 December 1969.

Meyer, P.J. *SABC-SAUK Radio Bulletin* 14 May 1962: 13-15.

Nixon, Rob. "Keeping Television Out: The South Africa Story." *Intermedia*, August/Sept. 1992: 35-36.

Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to Television (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1971).

South Africa. Hansard, Assembly Debates. Pretoria: Government Printer.

South Africa. Hansard, Senate Debates. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Sunday Times, 7 July 1969.

Wilkins, Ivor and Hans Strydom. *The Super Afrikaners* (Johannesburg: Ball, 1978).

