

II
BROADCASTING IN SOUTH AFRICA
BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

‘Well, sir, television at the Empire Exhibition is going to be the real thing
and no bamboozling the public.’¹

*- R. Holland, the manager and engineer of the
Empire Exhibition television demonstration, 1936.*

¹ Anonym, You Can Be Televised at the Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.13.

1. Introduction

Before the Second World War, broadcasting was a fairly new concept in South Africa. Although wireless amateurs had been experimenting with the technology since the early twentieth century, it was initially not an integral part of the public's everyday life. When regular radio broadcasts were introduced, they were mostly limited to the major urban centres. To the general public, television was still a foreign and rather fanciful concept.

However, two demonstrations changed the way many South Africans perceived television. In 1929, the Television Society from Britain arranged a presentation of the Baird television technology. The demonstration was given to a handful of television enthusiasts and notable persons only, but it received considerable press coverage. At the time, the idea was still so unfamiliar that a Cape Town journalist had to explain that 'television' really meant 'seeing at a distance'. He continued to explain that although one could not yet transmit a sport match taking place in Manchester all the way to South Africa, one would be able to see and hear somebody transmitting from another room.²

A second exhibit was given in 1936, at the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg. It was the first time that the South African public could experience television for themselves. Even here, people were not too sure what to expect of this new technological marvel, and some could not believe their eyes. Sceptics thought that it was a magic trick with mirrors and hidden projectors. Others were afraid that television, with which you could see what a person was doing in another room, would enable voyeurs to peep into your home.³

Nevertheless, South African interest was piqued. By the time the Second World War broke out, radio had become a more regular feature in South Africa, and television seemed like an excellent addition to radio broadcasting. These developments in terms of radio and television not only influenced the way the public perceived the two

² E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.138.

³ Anonym, 25,000 People Televised at Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1937-01-01, p.6.

media, but would also to a large extent determine the way in which the government would approach South African broadcasting after the War.

2. The development of broadcasting in South Africa

a. Wireless telegraphy

The development of wireless telegraphy is often ascribed to Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi. However, a young telegraph engineer developed the technique simultaneously and independently in South Africa. Edward Alfred Jennings was born in England. After working in Cape Town, he arrived in Port Elizabeth in 1896 to work at the Telephone Exchange. Jennings began experimenting with ways to transmit wirelessly, and soon his instruments worked so well that he linked it to a Morse code tape machine printer to form a wireless telegraph machine. Public demonstrations of his wireless system were very successful, and a formal request was made in the Cape Parliament to give Jennings funding for further research. However, the responsible Cabinet Minister, J. X. Merriman, was not convinced that wireless telegraphy was a good idea: ‘Life is troublesome enough with ordinary telegrams. With wireless telegraphy it will be unbearable,’ Merriman claimed.⁴

Nevertheless, Jennings remained positive. At a public appearance in May 1899, a prominent businessman, M. M. Laubser, praised his work: ‘Mr Jennings has been silently pursuing his studies for several years, on the same important scientific subject, and has arrived at results almost as satisfactory as those by Professor Marconi. All the more credit is due to Mr Jennings, as his pursuits have been carried on in his spare hours.’⁵ The press was equally positive about Jennings’s work. One newspaper hoped that, with an inventor of its own, South Africa would not fall behind the rest of the world in terms of wireless technology. Although Jennings’s work was interrupted by the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), it did spark an interest in wireless in South Africa.⁶

⁴ Quoted in E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.5.

⁵ Quoted in E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.5.

⁶ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, pp.5-6.

b. The wireless amateurs

In 1902, the Cape Parliament amended the 1861 Electric Telegraph Act. In its definition of ‘electric telegraph’, the amendment included transmissions made wirelessly. This was the world’s first legislation that covered the subject of radio. The law inspired other countries to pass similar laws, and soon the first international agreement on fixed wavelengths was reached.⁷

A decade later, amateur wireless operators (the so-called ‘hams’) started to build their own wireless sets. One of the earliest hams was a schoolboy from Durban, Frank Kuttel, who built a working set in 1912. By 1914, wireless transmission experiments had successfully been made between Johannesburg and Durban. During the First World War (1914-1918), unofficial wireless transmissions were not allowed – a regulation that interrupted amateur broadcasts. But when the war was over, hams across the world resumed their activities. In South Africa, a number of amateurs established broadcasting services. In Cape Town, amateurs such as John Samuel Streeter and Reginald Hopkins began experimental broadcasts, which included regular gramophone concerts. These transmissions received considerable press coverage, which inspired more amateurs to build receiver sets. Soon these two private radio stations could be heard in as far as the Karoo.⁸

In the Transvaal, radio amateur Arthur Sydney (‘Toby’) Innes ran one of the busiest and most successful amateur transmitters. Innes also had his own radio station, but his broadcasts did not stop at gramophone concerts. He gave personal interpretations of the music, made fun of his friends and even incorporated live performances by local artists. His broadcasts were so popular that not only radio amateurs tuned in, but even members of the general public who managed to obtain receiver sets.⁹

In 1920, radio broadcasting could be seen in action at a number of public demonstrations, for example at the Western Province Agricultural Show in Cape Town, and the Rand Show at Milner Park in Johannesburg. Thousands of curious

⁷ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, pp.6-11.

⁸ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, pp.6-11, 18.

⁹ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.20.

people saw these exhibitions. Many, however, thought that the wireless broadcasts were the result of clever tricks. Nevertheless, public interest in the new technology grew immensely, and more and more amateurs became involved.¹⁰

c. The first regular broadcasting stations

By the early 1920s, the number of radio amateurs had grown so much that the government introduced measures to regulate the increasing transmissions, stating that while they ‘recognised the value of the work being done by the amateurs, it would probably be more circumspect in issuing license [*sic*] in future.’¹¹ In 1923, the government called for licence applications. Only three licenses were awarded, one in each of South Africa’s major urban centres. In Cape Town, the license was given to the Cape Peninsular Publicity Association; in Durban, the Durban Corporation; and in Johannesburg the Association of Scientific and Technical Societies.¹²

On 1 July 1924, the new Johannesburg-based radio station, JB Calling, went on air. It was followed by the Cape Town station in September 1924 and the Durban station in December of the same year. Soon after their inception, however, these radio stations found themselves in financial trouble. One of the main problems was that, although listeners had to pay licence fees, the law did not make adequate provision for enforcing payment. The Johannesburg station stopped broadcasting at the end of January 1927. The Postmaster-General, who was responsible for broadcasting regulations such as awarding licenses, believed that the Johannesburg stations should be managed by the government, but he was unable to persuade the Cabinet. Instead, entrepreneur Isidore William Schlesinger, who had already had success in the insurance business and had practically established the South African cinema industry, was approached to manage the radio concern. Schlesinger agreed, and it was stipulated that his new African Broadcasting Company (ABC) would hold the

¹⁰ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.21.

¹¹ Quoted in G. Hayman & R. Tomaselli, *Ideology and Technology in the Growth of South African Broadcasting, 1924-1971*, in R. Tomaselli *et al.* (eds), *Currents of Power*, p.24.

¹² G. Hayman & R. Tomaselli, *Ideology and Technology in the Growth of South African Broadcasting, 1924-1971*, in R. Tomaselli *et al.* (eds), *Currents of Power*, pp.24-26.

broadcasting licence for an initial five years¹³. Later in 1927, when the licenses for Cape Town and Durban expired, they were also awarded to the ABC.¹⁴

d. The African Broadcasting Company

Although popular with many listeners, the Company continued to be hampered by financial difficulties. By 1929 the ABC's finances had reached a crisis point. Plans aimed at generating more public interest (and payment of licence fees) were introduced – including a spruced up programme line-up that provided more entertainment, an early-morning physical exercise programme, higher quality news broadcasts and open-air actuality transmissions.¹⁵

These measures were quite successful. Yet the ABC came under a great amount of criticism, especially for the disproportion between English and Afrikaans programmes. As a commercial enterprise backed by mostly English dominated businesses, the language of South African radio was predominantly English and even though the ABC introduced limited Afrikaans broadcasts in 1931, it was not enough to satisfy Afrikaans listeners.¹⁶ The commercial, English-orientated nature of the ABC radio services would inspire the government to bring radio under state control, and was bound to fuel the future fears of commercial television and its possible effect on Afrikaans culture.

e. John Reith and the South African Broadcasting Corporation

The ABC's license was due to expire in 1937. Before renewing the concession, Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog personally invited the head of the BBC, Sir John Reith, to visit South Africa. Reith was asked to investigate South African broadcasting, and to make recommendations for its future. In his autobiography, Reith explained the

¹³ In 1932, the ABC's licence was renewed for another five years.

¹⁴ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, pp.1, 88, 96; G. Hayman & R. Tomaselli, Ideology and Technology in the Growth of South African Broadcasting, 1924-1971, in R. Tomaselli *et al.* (eds), *Currents of Power*, pp.26-27; P. B. Orlik, Southern Africa, in S. Head (ed.), *Broadcasting in Africa*, pp.139-140.

¹⁵ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, pp.141-143.

¹⁶ G. Hayman & R. Tomaselli, Ideology and Technology in the Growth of South African Broadcasting, 1924-1971, in R. Tomaselli *et al.* (eds), *Currents of Power*, p.29.

reason for his visit: ‘The South Africans were unhappy about their broadcasting organisation. General Hertzog, the Prime Minister, invited me to visit them that they might consult me as to their policy in the future development of broadcasting in the Union.’¹⁷

Reith visited the country from 6 September to 19 November 1934. In his report, Reith first stressed the importance of the broadcasting industry, as he believed that the South Africans did not understand the potential power and influence of broadcasting. Moreover, because of its power, it was important to manage the industry properly: ‘As the assegai to the naked hand, as the rifle to the assegai, so and more is broadcasting rightly institutionalized, rightly inspired and rightly controlled, to any other instrument or power – but in the service of wisdom and beauty and peace.’¹⁸ Reith strongly recommended that the South African broadcasting service be brought under the auspices of a public corporation like the BBC. The corporation should be an autonomous statutory body, and under no circumstances could it function as a government controlled organisation or a state department. The corporation would have to be controlled by a Board, and the corporation would have the sole right to manage the country’s broadcasting.¹⁹

On 25 March 1935, the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, C. F. Clarkson, announced that, in following with Reith’s report, the government would not renew the ABC’s licence when it expired in 1937. The new Broadcasting Act, No. 22 of 1936, was passed in June 1936 and came into action on 1 August 1936. The act resembled the concept act that Reith included in his report to Hertzog very closely. Provision was made for the establishment of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and all broadcasting rights were assigned to the new Corporation. The SABC Board members would be appointed by the Governor General.²⁰

The new law even provided for television: should South Africa get a television service, it would also be controlled by the SABC. However, television was still

¹⁷ Quoted in P. J. Meyer, *Genl. J.B.M. Hertzog-Gedenklesing 11: Genl J. B. M. Hertzog, Sir John Reith en die Uitsaaiwet van 1936*, p.2.

¹⁸ Quoted in P. J. Meyer, *Genl. J.B.M. Hertzog-Gedenklesing 11*, p.6.

¹⁹ P. J. Meyer, *Genl. J.B.M. Hertzog-Gedenklesing 11*, p.3.

²⁰ P. J. Meyer, *Genl. J.B.M. Hertzog-Gedenklesing 11*, pp.17-18.

financially unviable, and it was clear that the government and the SABC were not yet considering establishing such a service.²¹

3. Early television demonstrations

a. Baird and the Television Society demonstrations, August 1929

The development of television was a culmination of many different inventors' efforts²² and in the early years, the television pioneers often demonstrated their technological inventions to fellow scientists and members of the public. Scottish inventor John Logie Baird was one of the most prominent pioneers of television. In the 1920s, Baird was actively involved in developing and exhibiting his television apparatus in Britain and abroad.

After a series of unsuccessful and ineffective inventions – including the air-soled shoe and a homemade haemorrhoid cream – Baird turned his attention to television in the early 1920s. With limited funds, he used scrap materials to build his equipment. By 1924 Baird had succeeded in transmitting a flickering image across a few feet. In 1925 he made a simple public demonstration in the Selfridges department store in London's Oxford Street. However, the image quality was nothing like the clear pictures we see today. The television system used only five scanning lines (as opposed to today's 625 lines), and was called a 'shadowgraph', as it only showed a silhouette outline image. For Baird, this was not true television. He wanted his system to produce shades of grey and enough detail to form a recognisable picture.²³

In October 1925 Baird had a breakthrough when he managed to transmit a recognisable image with shades of grey. This time, the image consisted of 30 lines. The development paved the way for the world's first public demonstration of television, on 26 January 1926. By 1928, Baird had established a transmitter station in London, from which private demonstrations of television were conducted almost

²¹ P. J. Meyer, *Genl. J.B.M. Hertzog-Gedenklesing 11*, p.8.

²² See Chapter I, p.27.

²³ BBC, 'John Logie Baird'. Internet: http://www.co.uk/heritage/in_depth/70tv/baird.shtml, s.a. Accessed: 2007-05-11; BBC, 'John Logie Baird (1888-1946)'. Internet: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/baird_logie.shtml, s.a. Accessed: 2007-05-11.

daily. He also succeeded in making the first transatlantic television transmission, between London and New York. This led to an experimental television service in London, delivered by Baird Television Ltd, which began in 1929.²⁴

Meanwhile, Baird had turned his eyes towards South Africa with the intention of promoting amateur broadcasts. The Baird Company was aware of an interest in television in South Africa, because the company had received a number of enquiries from South African wireless amateurs. Baird hoped that with more amateurs and inventors focussing on television, the technology would develop even further and faster. In September 1928, South African newspaper *The Star* reported that television would soon come to South Africa:

A cable received from London to-day [*sic*] announces that the Baird Television Company has either come to an agreement or is negotiating an agreement for the marketing of Mr. Baird's invention in South Africa through the Schlesinger organisation.²⁵

The article continued that these negotiations followed repeated requests by the Baird Company for the exploitation of television in South Africa. As the organisation in charge of radio stations in South Africa, the Schlesinger organisation was the obvious group to approach. *The Star's* report was confirmed by the *Rand Daily Mail* when it carried the big news: 'Television to start soon on the Rand'²⁶. The Baird Company had reportedly decided to send a group of engineers with the necessary equipment to South Africa to start a television service. The service would start in Johannesburg before the end of 1928, and subsequently expand to other centres in the country.²⁷

The report was too optimistic. It would be another year before television came to South Africa – and then it was not as a broadcast service, but merely as a demonstration of the technology.²⁸ In August 1929, the Vice President of the

²⁴ BBC, 'John Logie Baird'. Internet: http://www.co.uk/heritage/in_depth/70tv/baird.shtml, s.a. Accessed: 2007-05-11; BBC, 'John Logie Baird (1888-1946)'. Internet: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/baird_logie.shtml, s.a. Accessed: 2007-05-11; Anonym, Television for South Africa, *The Star (City Late)*, 1928-09-07, p.11.

²⁵ Anonym, Television for South Africa, *The Star (City Late)*, 1928-09-07, p.11.

²⁶ Cited in E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.136.

²⁷ Anonym, Television for South Africa, *The Star (City Late)*, 1928-09-07, p.11; E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.136.

²⁸ Anonym, Television Tested. To-day's Remarkable Exhibition, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-22, p.11.

Television Society, Lord Angus Kennedy, landed in South Africa for the promised demonstrations. The first exhibit was held for members of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science at the engineering laboratory of the South African College in Cape Town.

The images were not very crisp, and were distorted by electrical interference. Yet the demonstrator's face was easily recognisable, and his voice was clear. Through the loudspeakers, Kennedy explained that what he was demonstrating was not entertainment yet, but a scientific experiment. Television technology was still being developed. Kennedy continued by giving his audience a taste of what would come: 'Experiments now being made show that Colour Television will be a fact of the future. It has also been discovered that a scene can be 'televised' even in complete darkness.'²⁹

Another demonstration was given in Cape Town, at the top of Government Avenue. A number of dignitaries, including the mayor of Cape Town, the Town Clerk, and the principal of the University of Cape Town, Sir Carruthers Beattie (who would later serve on the first board of the SABC) attended. Next, Kennedy departed for Johannesburg, where he gave even more impressive demonstrations at the Witwatersrand University grounds. The first demonstration, on 22 August 1929, was specially arranged for a group from *The Star* and featured theatre personality Gwyneth Nelson Keys.³⁰

Lord Kennedy himself made an appearance. Although the pictures lacked a 'quality of sharpness'³¹ and faces seemed 'unnaturally daubed'³², they were nevertheless well defined and easily recognisable:

The onlookers clearly saw Lord Kennedy's hand conveying a lighted cigarette to his lips. They saw the cinder on the cigarette glow – though it appeared to glow white and hot red – when he took a 'pull', and they saw the stream of smoke afterwards issue from his mouth. He displayed the

²⁹ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.138.

³⁰ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.138.

³¹ Anonym, Television Tested. To-day's Remarkable Exhibition, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-22, p.11.

³² Anonym, Television Tested. To-day's Remarkable Exhibition, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-22, p.11.

ring on his finger and called attention to the whites of his eyes as a test of the detail visible in the image, and as a test they afforded fairly convincing evidence.³³

For the next few days, newspapers explained how television worked and why it would be useful. Both *The Star* and the *Sunday Times* remarked on the usefulness of television in instantaneously transmitting stock exchange prices:

Instead of the comparatively slow reporting of prices by the present-day tape machines, it would be possible to televise the actual price board at a stock exchange so that brokers and others possessing a small receiving set...could watch changes the instant they are posted up.³⁴

Another use listed by the *Sunday Times* was the ability to broadcast pictures of wanted criminals to police stations across the country.³⁵ The potential of television news was mentioned by *The Star*, who claimed that the display of current events as they happened could serve as competition to the bioscope.³⁶ Although the emphasis was not on television as a source of recreation, the entertainment possibilities were indeed suggested by the appearance of the entertainer, Miss Keys.³⁷

After the Johannesburg demonstrations, another exhibit was held in Pretoria's city hall.³⁸ Throughout the demonstrations, Lord Kennedy emphasised the reason behind his visit to South Africa, namely to get more and more people interested in the medium to ensure the medium's rapid development.³⁹ But the press was well aware of the stumbling blocks in establishing a television service in South Africa, of which the biggest was the setting up of equipment. Television would require its own transmitter station, as well as expensive receiver sets. According to *The Star*, the latter created a paradoxical situation, as it would be futile to establish a television service before the

³³ Anonym, Television Tested. To-day's Remarkable Exhibition, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-22, p.11.

³⁴ R. F. S. Dewdney, Seeing through Walls. Television Comes to the Rand, *Sunday Times*, 1929-08-25, p.19. See also Anonym, Television Tested. To-day's Remarkable Exhibition, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-22, p.11.

³⁵ Dewdney, R.F.S., Seeing through walls. Television comes to the Rand. *Sunday Times (Johannesburg)*, 1929-08-25, p.19.

³⁶ Anonym, Television in South Africa, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-23, p.10.

³⁷ Anonym, Television. Further Experiments To-Day, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-26, p.10.

³⁸ E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.140.

³⁹ R. F. S. Dewdney, Seeing through Walls. Television Comes to the Rand, *Sunday Times*, 1929-08-25, p.19; Anonym, Television in South Africa, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-23, p.10; Anonym, Television Tested. To-day's Remarkable Exhibition, *The Star (City Late)*, 1929-08-22, p.11.

intended audience had receivers, but at the same time people would not buy receivers if they had no certain prospects of actually using them.⁴⁰

Another significant problem was funding. A few years before the demonstrations, South Africa's three radio stations had been buckling under financial difficulties, and the ABC was not faring much better. It could scarcely be expected that there would now be enough money to set up the very expensive enterprise of television. After the demonstrations, ABC head I. W. Schlesinger declared: 'Wait and see – the time [for television] is not yet ripe.'⁴¹

By now, public interest was stirred, but it would take another seven years before they would be able to glimpse the new medium for themselves.

b. The 1936 Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg

In 1929, television was demonstrated to a handful of enthusiastic viewers. The general public, however, could only read about the new marvel in their daily newspapers. But in 1936, television once again came to South Africa. This time, anybody who bought a 2-shilling entrance ticket for the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg could experience the new medium in action. What was more, not only could they see images transmitted over several small screens, but they could have *themselves* televised.⁴²

The Empire Exhibition was held at Milner Park in Johannesburg and encompassed more than 100 acres. Preparations began two years before the opening on 15 September 1936, and the organisers aimed to host an Exhibition that would be nothing less than spectacular. The grounds were adorned with an artificial lake, fed by an artificial waterfall and surrounded by a unique South African rock garden with rare specimens of Cape flora. Jacarandas were planted all over Milner Park. A long main avenue, called Prosperity Avenue, was illuminated at night and led to the central point of the Exhibition, a 200-foot (±61-metre) high tower. The tower would be visible

⁴⁰ Anonym, Television for South Africa, *The Star (City Late)*. 1929-08-23, p.10.

⁴¹ Quoted in E. Rosenthal, *You Have Been Listening*, p.140.

⁴² Anonym, You Can Be Televised at the Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.13.

from all over Johannesburg, and at night its searchlights would be seen from miles away. A 6-metre high bubble fountain was also illuminated at night.⁴³

Several members of the British Commonwealth, as well as some mandated territories, had their own pavilions or exhibitions, including Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Nigeria, Nyasaland (now Malawi), Uganda, Palestine⁴⁴ and Zanzibar.⁴⁵

Some of the most remarkable displays were a scale-model of the Great Zimbabwe ruins, a 50-metre long working model of the Victoria Falls, a miniature of the entire Witwatersrand goldfields from Randfontein to Springs, and a deep-sea aquarium. The aquarium, with its butterfly fish and sea horses, was indeed a magnificent sight and in fact an experiment in science: before the Exhibition, it was not sure whether deep-sea fish could survive at an altitude of 1500 metres. The exhibits from Palestine included full-scale models of several Biblical buildings, such as the Tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon.⁴⁶

The Johannesburg Exhibition was part of a series of world's fairs held across the globe. The first true World's Fair was the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, commonly known as the Great Exhibition or the Crystal Palace Exhibition. The purpose of these fairs was, as declared at the 1851 Exhibition, 'to forward the progress of industrial civilization'⁴⁷. It also served as a showcase of national lifestyles and a comparison between the development stages of different countries. Indeed, in 1936 exhibitors from across the world came to Johannesburg to show their wares. It was a wonderful opportunity for South Africa to display its

⁴³ *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Bulletin 4*, s.a.; *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Overseas Bulletin 3*, s.a.

⁴⁴ At the end of the First World War, Britain received a League of Nations mandate over Palestine. In 1948, Britain withdrew from Palestine, and the region became the State of Israel. See UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 'Middle East Peace Process: Historical Background'. Internet: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394644>, s.a. Accessed: 2007-12-13.

⁴⁵ *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Overseas Bulletin 1-7*, s.a.

⁴⁶ *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Overseas Bulletin 1-7*, s.a.

⁴⁷ J. E. Findling (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*, pp.xvii-xviii.

economic prowess to the rest of the world. As the *Rand Daily Mail*⁴⁸ explained: ‘The intention of the Exhibition is to show the whole of South Africa to the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth to the world, and thus it is a symbol of a national as well as a wider unity.’⁴⁹ The Exhibition gave overseas exhibitors the chance to ‘come and see what they can buy from us, as well as what they can sell’⁵⁰, which would serve to further trade relations between South Africa and other countries. Furthermore, the Exhibition would benefit the tourism industry as well as trade and other industries, as tourists would come from across the globe to visit the Exhibition. Those who did not come would read about South Africa and, particularly, Johannesburg. According to the *Rand Daily Mail*, this publicity would ‘give a permanent stimulus to our tourist trade.’⁵¹

As an example of modern technological development, television often had a special place at these Fairs. In fact, the medium’s name was coined at the International Electricity Congress, which was held as part of the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.⁵² In 1939, American television made its official debut when it was launched at the New York World’s Fair.⁵³ Television was also demonstrated at a number of other fairs,

⁴⁸ For the discussion on the Empire Exhibition and particularly the television demonstrations, the *Rand Daily Mail* was used as the main source. In 1936, there were only a few Afrikaans newspapers and magazines and although some of them did report on the Exhibition, it was to a much lesser extent than the *Rand Daily Mail*. The focus was also different: while the *Rand Daily Mail* reported widely on technological wonders and international displays, *Die Burger*’s reports were concentrated on the cultural fare. In a series of articles on the Exhibition, renowned Afrikaans author M. E. R. (the writer’s name of M. E. Rothmann) wrote about the Khoisan exhibition, and used this as background for her musings on South Africa’s different ethnic groups. See M. E. R., By die Rykskou: Ou Abram en sy Mense, *Die Burger*, 1936-10-31, p.14; M. E. R., By die Rykskou. Bantoe, Boesman ... en Witman, *Die Burger*, 1936-11-07, p.14. The television demonstration was mentioned in one article that was practically identical to a *Rand Daily Mail* article. Compare Anoniem, Televisie op die Rykskou, *Die Burger*, 1936-09-23, p.2; Anonym, Television comes to S. Africa, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-23, p.18.

⁴⁹ Anonym, Empire Spot-Light on Johannesburg, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.8.

⁵⁰ Anonym, Empire Spot-Light on Johannesburg, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.8.

⁵¹ Anonym, Empire Spot-Light on Johannesburg, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.8.

⁵² A. Abramson, The Invention of Television, in A. Smith (ed.), *Television*, p.16; R. W. Brown, Paris 1900: Exposition Universelle, in J. E. Findling (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of World’s Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*, pp.235-238.

⁵³ M. Carsey & T. Werner, ‘The Time 100: Builders & Titans. Father of Broadcasting’. Internet: <http://www.time.com/time/time100/builder/profile/sarnoff.html>, 1998-12-07. Accessed: 2006-12-13; D. G. Larson, New York 1939-1940: New York World’s Fair, in J. E. Findling (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of World’s Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*, pp.291-303.

including the 1937 French International Exposition in Paris and the 1933-1934 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, which attracted three million visitors.⁵⁴

When television came to the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg, the technology had advanced significantly since the Baird demonstration in 1929.⁵⁵ And this time, it was not an overseas company that brought television to South Africa, but a South African radio and television amateur, Lennox Rhind. He was assisted by a number of engineers and specialists, including F. R. Milsom; V. K. Krause, a local radio expert; M Reiner⁵⁶, a British television engineer; and Robert Holland, an American television specialist who ran the equipment at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition's television exhibit.⁵⁷ The system used was also not the *Iconoscope* developed by the Baird company, but rather that of the Edison Swan Electric Company of London.⁵⁸

The television exhibit was eagerly awaited. Having heard of the new technology for a number of years, the public showed a great interest in seeing what the medium was about, how it worked, and how far it had developed. Some were sceptical, however, and would 'smile politely when television is mentioned'⁵⁹. According to a *Rand Daily Mail* reporter, this scepticism was understandable, because 'television has been coming for so long that they are more than justified'⁶⁰.

When the Exhibition opened on 15 September 1936, visitors queued up to finally get a glimpse of television. But the ship transporting the equipment from London was held up for a number of days, and the apparatus could only be ready a week after the

⁵⁴ J. Allwood, *The Great Exhibitions*, pp.140, 144; *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Bulletin 60*, 1936-08-08; J. E. Findling, Chicago 1933-1934: A Century of Progress Exposition, in J. E. Findling (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*, pp.266-274.

⁵⁵ Anonym, You Can Be Televised at the Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.13; Airfarer (pseud.), Television Demonstrations at Empire Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-16, p.8.

⁵⁶ According to the *Rand Daily Mail* of 16 September 1936, it was H. J. Reiner; the *Rand Daily Mail* of 1 January 1937 reports that it was J. H. Reiner. The official Empire Exhibition Bulletin calls him M. Reiner, and this is the name used here. See *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Bulletin 60*, 1936-08-08, p.1; Airfarer (pseud.), Television Demonstrations at Empire Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-16, p.8; Anonym, 25,000 People Televised at Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1937-01-01, p.6.

⁵⁷ *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Bulletin 60*, 1936-08-08; Airfarer (pseud.), Television demonstrations at Empire Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-16, p.8.

⁵⁸ *Empire Exhibition: South Africa: 1936, Bulletin 60*, 1936-08-08.

⁵⁹ Airfarer (pseud.), Television Demonstrations at Empire Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-16, p.8.

⁶⁰ Airfarer (pseud.), Television Demonstrations at Empire Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-16, p.8.

opening. When the equipment was finally set up, a private demonstration was given to invited guests, including a Reuter's representative. The next day, the *Rand Daily Mail* described the first screening: 'Thousands of green streaks of lightning chased each other across a screen, the continuous buzz of a revolving wheel, a blaze of light from behind black curtains and, in a few seconds, all these consolidated into the picture of a laughing little girl – it was South Africa's first picture transmitted by television.'⁶¹

It was in fact *not* the first time that television was transmitted in the country, and it is unclear whether the reporter was aware of the Baird demonstrations in 1929. This exhibit was definitely different, however, in that it was much more accessible than the 1929 demonstrations. Not only would thousands of visitors have a chance to see television broadcasting in action, but members of the public would be able to appear on television: 'For the first time in South Africa anyone may have himself televised. All he has to do is to walk on to a stage and sit before a television transmitter.'⁶² The person on the stage would then appear simultaneously on six television screens. By the end of 1936, after three and a half months of the Exhibition, 25 000 people had had themselves televised.⁶³

Milsom added to the excitement by predicting that it would not be long before television would be a commonplace form of great entertainment that would bring the masses a lot of joy. He also foresaw the use of television as a news medium: 'Possibly, the important day's happenings would be flashed on the screens in a thousand homes and the people would see the news while it happened as well as read about it afterwards in the papers.'⁶⁴

Despite the great excitement with which South Africans welcomed television at the Exhibition, the press was aware that the successful transmissions would not lead to a television service once the Exhibition was over. At the start of the Exhibition, already, a *Rand Daily Mail* columnist predicted: 'It would seem, however, that even given every success, South Africa will have to wait a long time before there is any

⁶¹ Anonym, Television Comes to S. Africa, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-23.

⁶² Anonym, You Can Be Televised at the Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.13.

⁶³ Anonym, You Can Be Televised at the Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-15, p.13; Anonym, 25,000 People Televised at Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1937-01-01, p.6.

⁶⁴ Anonym, 25,000 People Televised at Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1937-01-01, p.6.

likelihood of having its own television service.’⁶⁵ The main obstacle was the high costs involved: ‘none but a wealthy and long-established company could even think of inaugurating such a service.’⁶⁶

Near the end of the Exhibition, another *Rand Daily Mail* contributor echoed the sentiment: ‘Unfortunately, South Africa will not be in the happy position of seeing a television service established for a long time to come.’⁶⁷

4. Conclusion

Before the Second World War, broadcasting had developed from a brand new technology to a service enjoyed by many ordinary South Africans. Initially, many were convinced that both radio and television were the result of clever illusions, and that wireless transmissions were not a reality. Then, as radio spread through the rest of the world and became more common in South Africa, it was soon regarded as one of the most important communication media of the twentieth century.

But even though South African wireless pioneers were often at the forefront of their science, it took a while before its value was recognised by the government. As interest in radio grew, however, the government began to realise the need to regulate the broadcasts. Furthermore, it became clear that licensing was not enough. The experience of commercial broadcasting through the ABC demonstrated that, if the government wanted to regulate the quality of the broadcasts and the equal treatment of English and Afrikaans, the whole broadcasting industry would have to be controlled by a state corporation that was responsible to Parliament. The early television exhibitions also demonstrated the possibilities of audio-visual broadcasting, as well as the popularity such a medium would probably enjoy among the public.

When the Second World War broke out, broadcasting legislation was already in place to control not only radio, but also a possible future television service. All radio and

⁶⁵ Airfarer (pseud.), Television Demonstrations at Empire Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-16, p.8.

⁶⁶ Airfarer (pseud.), Television Demonstrations at Empire Exhibition, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1936-09-16, p.8.

⁶⁷ E.M.B. (pseud.), Dancing and Television, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1937-01-09, p.4.

television broadcasting services in South Africa could only be introduced by the SABC, and only with the government's permission.

The experiences with pre-war radio and television broadcasts played a very important role in the government's approach to television after the Second World War. It had taught them valuable lessons about commercial services, government control, licensing and the dangers to especially the Afrikaans language if broadcasting was not efficiently regulated. For decades after the war, the government would refuse to introduce television in South Africa, and the medium became the subject of a heated debate in Parliament.