CONCLUSION:
TELEVISION SCREENS –
WINDOWS, SHIELDS AND SEPARATORS

"Apartheid works [...] it has effectively managed to isolate the white man [...].
[He] can only relate to the syndrome of his isolation. His windows are painted white
to keep the night in."

-Breyten Breytenbach[1]

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[1] B. Breytenbach, The Alienation of White South Africa, *in* A. la Guma (ed.), *Apartheid*, p.142.

Television as a window to the world

When the theories and technology of television were being developed, the new invention had many forms and many names. But it was Constantin Perskyi's coining of the term 'television' (or 'seeing at a distance') in 1900 that signified the powerful character the medium would have in the century that followed.

It would take quite a few decades before television became a common medium throughout the world. When it did, it opened a fascinating window into faraway events, people and places. Like no medium before it, television brought the world into the homes of millions of ordinary people. But just as television screens became a view into a large world, the medium showed its potential as a tool for manipulation. In Germany, for example, television had been introduced by the Nazi regime in the 1930s, and was used for propaganda.

In July 1969, television's ability to showcase the world took an enormous step forward. Millions of television viewers across the world – the so-called 'armchair millions' – watched as astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon. The event was spectacular: it was the first time that any human had walked on an extra-terrestrial body. But this feat was made even greater and more real by the fact that television footage of the moonwalk was transmitted live. Suddenly, television became more than just a window to the world. It was a window into human daring and greatness, and to the infinite universe with its boundless possibilities.

In South Africa, however, this window was closed. When television was spreading to more than half of the world's countries in the 1950s and 1960s, South Africans had to rely on other, less modern forms of communication to bring them their news. But only a few people seemed to complain about it openly, and those who did were mainly from the opposition parties and the newspapers that supported them. Television was still a fairly unknown medium among most South Africans, and despite the United Party's promises to establish television if they were elected into office, the National Party remained in power.

Then, in 1969, the moon landing changed things quite drastically. The veil over television was momentarily lifted when the television footage of the moonwalk, or 'Moon Television', was shown at selected venues. South Africans arrived in their thousands to see the screenings, and got not only a glimpse of man on the moon, but *especially* a peep of the medium they had been missing out on for decades. South Africans realised that, far from being the West's leading nation, they were really outsiders who could not take part in the magnificent society that had been able to send man into space. Moon Television gave South Africans a brief look into the larger world – but it also highlighted that the only position from which South Africans could look trough that window to the world, was from the *outside in*.

Television as a shield

It was television's very ability to bring the world into living rooms that caused the NP to reject the medium for nearly two decades. Television should be kept at bay, they argued, in order to protect the country and its people. The medium would threaten many aspects of South African life: the economy, important industries such as local film and theatre, and especially the morals of all South Africans. Many of these reasons were, however, often little more than excuses. There was more to the NP's determination to keep television out than the protection of ordinary South Africans' morals.

The NP's policies, in fact their whole political position, were based on ideologies that were becoming increasingly unpopular in the rest of the world. If television opened a window into a multiracial, democratic world, South Africans – particularly NP supporters – might become more aware and open to a way of life that did not include NP ideology. Television also threatened industries, such as the press and cinemas, in which many NP supporters, members and even Cabinet Ministers had financial interests.

The absence of television was therefore used as a shield to protect the NP's financial and political position. But around 1969, the situation changed. First of all, after the moon landing, many South Africans looked at the government's reasons for television's absence in a new light. If television was *really* that bad for a country's

morals and intellect, how had the Americans, who had had television for forty years, been able to achieve something as remarkable as the moon landing? If South Africa was really such a modern and prosperous country as the NP would have everybody believe, why could it not find the money, infrastructure and manpower to establish television? Moreover, television had proven itself to be one of the most magnificent technological developments in the world. Why did the NP find it necessary to shield South Africans from such a marvellous invention?

Secondly, the absence of an official South African television service could only be an effective shield as long as there was no other way for 'foreign ideologies' to enter South African living rooms. By the end of the 1960s, South Africans could receive satellite broadcasts directly from overseas, without government approval or regulation. At a time when South Africans felt embarrassingly isolated and became increasingly hungry for television, such unsanctioned broadcasts posed a threat to government control. In order to shield South Africans from these foreign ideologies, and ultimately to protect their own position, the NP then decided to establish a state-controlled television service.

Before the 1970s, it was the *absence* of television that served as a shield. After 1976, however, it was the state's control over South African television that became the protective screen.

South Africa's state-controlled television service was more than just a shield to protect South Africans from anti-apartheid ideals. In order to uphold and entrench the existing NP ideology, television was also used as a screen to separate South African cultures, languages and people.

Television as a separator

For two decades, the absence of television acted as a separator. Television promoted multi-racialism, argued the NP, and such anti-apartheid messages could endanger the segregation the government had worked very hard to entrench. Then, when South African television was introduced, it was segregated – just like the society in which it had originated. For many years, there was a service for white people, and a service for

black people. Moreover, the black service was further divided along linguistic and ethnic lines.

Having separate services for different language groups was not necessarily a new or unique phenomenon. In Belgium, for example, it has been common practice for years, and there are separate networks and stations for French and Flemish viewers.[1] But in the already heavily segregated South Africa, the language divisions were more than a practical consideration. Linguistic divisions on television were determined by race and ethnicity, and were in line with the NP's policies of segregation and separate development. Even though many black people could understand English and Afrikaans very well, it would be many years after television's introduction before black performers had important roles on white television. Besides, it was not merely a question of understanding a 'white' language. The SABC argued that, just because black viewers could understand English and Afrikaans programmes, it did not mean that the programmes would be suitable for black consumption. According to the SABC, black viewers had a lower level of visual understanding than white people, and most 'white' programmes could therefore not be shown to black audiences – not even if the programmes were dubbed into an African language. Black people had to have their *own* programmes that reflected, nurtured and cultivated their *own* cultures.

While the SABC was determined to give black South Africans their own, separate window to the world, they would make sure that this was not a window into the white man's world. South African television would not, to echo former Prime Minister H. F. Verwoerd's words, show black people 'the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze.'[2]

Television screens

In South Africa, the window to the world was veiled for many decades. When the NP government finally relented and introduced television in the 1970s, this veil was lifted, if only partially. There were still many foreign influences from which the

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[1] D. Biltereyst, Television in Belgium, *in* J. A. Coleman & B. Rollett (eds), *Television in Europe*, p.88.
[2] D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.71.

government wanted to shield South Africans, and the NP still wanted to keep white and black South Africans divided. But if the NP used television as a shield and a separator, it was to protect more than South African morals, attitudes and ways of life. It was really to protect their *own* control over South Africans, whether white or black.

Even though South African television only began in the 1970s, its history started many decades earlier. By the 1960s, politicians had learnt enough about the medium to be aware of its potential: but while the opposition parties saw possibilities for economic growth and cultural stimulation, the NP focused on television's potential to damage their position. Long before its introduction, television became an important instrument in the political battles between the UP and the NP. But it was more than just a political tool: television became a *symbol* of their different ideologies and visions for South Africa. On the one hand, it stood for everything that was modern, progressive and part of a magnificent human society. On the other, television represented that which was immoral, harmful and threatening. However, despite the different views on television and, ultimately, the modern world, both the NP and its opposition recognised one thing: television was a powerful invention that could, across great distances, mould thoughts, change identities and shape societies.

Further research

Although some aspects of South African television have indeed been studied, there are many themes, stories and questions that have yet to be explored. One subject that has been neglected is a comprehensive narrative history of South African television *after* its introduction in 1976. Within this subject, there are several different topics and approaches to consider.

Firstly, the programmes and personalities of South African television should be documented thoroughly. A second possible topic of study is the South African broadcasting companies. Although the SABC has been researched and analysed, the other television institutions – M-NET, ETV, and especially Bop-TV – remain largely unexplored. In 2007, broadcasting licenses were awarded to four more companies,

namely Telkom Media, On Digital Media, e.Sat and Walk On Water.[3] This makes the South African television landscape even bigger and opens more opportunities for academic studies.

In this dissertation, the segregation of television between white and black services was explored. What was *not* investigated was the position of viewers categorised as coloured and Indian. In the research into television audiences that was done before the introduction of television, the differences between white and black audiences were highlighted, but the Indian and coloured cultures were not included. This is interesting, as the Indian languages were mentioned – in fact, it was used as a reason why television would be too expensive – in the television debates of the 1960s.[4] But once television was introduced, the same languages did not seem to receive any consideration. From 1979, coloured and Indian Christian ministers were used as presenters on the daily devotional programmes, and in the 1980s, coloured presenters appeared alongside their white counterparts on the white television service.[5] But were these appearances evidence that the state accepted these cultures to be compatible with white South African culture? Where did these groups fit in according to NP and SABC policy?

Another important topic is the role of television in the political and social changes in South Africa. For example, six months after television was officially introduced, the Soweto uprisings began. The uprisings were to play a significant part in South Africa, and have been hailed as a major turning point in the fight against apartheid. Did television have any impact on the way the June 1976 uprising was seen? Did the Soweto uprising have an influence on television and the way it was controlled by the government?

The suggested research, together with this dissertation, will enrich the study of South African television and further the understanding of a medium that has played an integral role in South Africa's political and cultural life for *more* than the thirty years that it had been on air.

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[3]   Bizcommunity.com, 'USAASA Welcomes New Pay TV Channels'. Internet: http://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/66/18078.html, 2007-09-14. Accessed: 2007-10-12.
[4] See Chapter III, p.72.
[5] See Chapter VII, p.173.