

SABC-TV: 'A BIAS AGAINST UNDERSTANDING'

by John van Zyl.

Republished from The Star

With the first anniversary of the introduction of television into South Africa past, most television commentators and journalists have had a stab at assessing its achievements. Their verdict (from both the English and Afrikaans Press) has generally been unfavourable – the hardware is unsurpassed, but the software has hardly begun to realise the potential of the medium. Television has, in fact, been just that: neither good nor bad, just medium.

However, when one callibrates the comments and the specific complaints, a far more disturbing pattern begins to emerge. Beyond the sticky fingers that foul up a newscast and the rank amateurism of some plays (both in the writing and in the production) lies a far more insidious misuse of the medium.

A phrase used by BBC television programmers during a refreshing period of soul-searching a few years ago provides a useful slogan: "a bias against understanding".

It was used to question the quality of news reporting which relied so heavily on the specific and the personalised story to convey a concept, and it raised a number of very interesting principles of television journalism. I would use it to describe three characteristics of SABC-TV which lie behind the complaints levelled at it.

This characteristic is best illustrated by the preponderance of nature programmes which provide a form of anodyne knowledge, mere fact designed to disturb as few viewers as possible, and inform even fewer.

The non-controversial examination of life under the sea, or in Paraguay, or the Galapagos islands eventually results in a sort of numbness, a non-discriminatory piling up of facts about nature.

It is even counterproductive, in that those viewers that take ecology seriously are turned off (the phrase is exact) nature conservation and similar valuable attitudes.

The point about nature and like programmes is that they are ultimately free of ideology – unlike any educational programme investigating the growth of cities or shifts in population, or the processes of history and sociology. The whole structure is never shown, only one facet.

A potentially interesting programme, the interview with Solzhenitsyn, was presented baldly without the subsequent discussion and controversy that followed the programme when it was shown on the BBC. The structures and processes that govern relations between Russia and America, or communism and capitalism, were ignored in favour of some cheap anti-communist propaganda.

Behind every educational programme lies the paranoia of the Nationalist – that discussion will lead to the questioning of authority, the Word revealed if not made flesh.

The Vorster-CBS interview showed the paranoia in full flight, the Prime Minister smugly "outwitting" the interviewers by refusing to divulge any information. The impression created was that he was either afraid the truth would hurt him or that he was afraid he would be trapped into revealing some of the idiocies of government policies.

This attitude infests the whole service. Programmes on black music, have to be doctored to make them appear to be less of a cultural achievement. The very absence of any black culture on TV, or even of investigations of white cultural or sociological processes reveals the mediocrity of the programme devisers. The fatuousness of presenting a programme on Bantu education immediately after the Soweto riots shows an insensitivity that is glaringly obvious in as powerful a medium as TV.

The lesson to be learnt is that television is an informal channel of communication beamed to families in their own homes and therefore sensitive to the exploration and revelation of processes and insensitive to the bald and excessive presentation of fact.

A concomitant of the informality of the medium is the interest of the viewer (in his family situation) in individuals and individual viewpoints, not statements by representatives. Television is a guest invited into the sitting-room and the same basic courtesies obtain. The statements by Cabinet Ministers, and the prepared exegeses by spokesmen like Cliff Saunders and Chris Rencken are alien to the domestic viewing situation.

When comment is needed on TV it is far better to call on individuals not connected with the SABC, like newspaper editors, business executives, and, crucially, the people themselves most affected by an incident or piece of legislation.

The fact that no black pupil is asked what he really thinks about Bantu education (not to mention black headmasters or editors), and that the viewer is given predigested pap by a television employee instead, is part of the bias against understanding.

The so-called pyramid of access which SABC-TV usually exploits results in the same official faces being called on to comment — Dr McCrystal, Dr Uken, Mr Manie Mulder etc — with predictably the same viewpoint.

Television has a hunger for reality, for the idiosyncratic opinion, and has a capacity for making the viewer experience immediately and without mediation.

The small screen begs that personalities be of low key and speak to private experience. The irritation generated through the use of footage of politicians preaching at public meetings can result only in a diminution of respect for politicians (and television producers).

The series of speeches presented as news on the Day of the Covenant — an interesting exercise in the typology of Nationalist rhetoric — could have been interesting only to

very close relatives of the speakers. It is symptomatic of the rule by decree to which one is becoming accustomed.

It was only the pressures of the township riots that forced SABC-TV to present fairly immediate and urgent news that allowed the viewer to experience the extent of the violence. This immediacy, the fact of simultaneity, that something is happening now and you are watching it, is the greatest strength of TV, and seldom exploited by SABC-TV. Not just because of technical reasons, but for ideological ones. Actual news is dangerous, it cannot be predigested and controlled. When the broadcasting authority intervenes between the viewer and the process, it filters away the process or event and substitutes a form of propaganda more or less subtle.

SABC-TV is, finally, good, safe entertainment that cushions the viewer against too much reality.

What is missing is the effective programme (or even shot) you would prefer to forget, but always remember. The concentration camp episode of "The World at War" so typically nearly not shown — proves this point. Instead, the viewer is given an Angolan war trivialised into "Brug 14," stories instead of issues, a public service used as a party mouthpiece, and ultimately, television so dull that the R108-million sticks in your throat when you think of the uses to which it could have been put. □

Articles printed in Reality do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Editorial Board.

RATES (6 issues—published every two months)

DONOR SUBSCRIBERS

S.A. R10,00 p.a.
U.K. £5,00 p.a.
U.S.A. \$15,00 p.a.

ORDINARY SUBSCRIBERS

S.A. R2,00 p.a.
U.K. £1,25 p.a.
U.S.A. \$3 p.a.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Chairman: Peter Brown
Vice-Chairman: Alan Paton
Board: H. Bhengu, E.H. Brookes, M. Buthelezi, M. Corrigan, M. Dyer, C. Gardner
F. Laband, S. Lundie, S. Msimang, S. Nqayi, P. Rutsch, J. Unterhalter.

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

Send to: Reality, P.O. Box 1104, Pietermaritzburg South Africa 3200