

# RESTORING THE DIGNITY OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY: A Case-study of Impartiality, SABC-style.

For any South African, the words 'Pietermaritzburg' and 'violence' go together. Since 1984, there was a simmering discontent which escalated into a full-scale war in 1987/88. Statistics of the numbers of dead and injured vary considerably, with PACSA (Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness) quoting 662 persons as shot, stabbed, hacked or burnt to death between January 1987 and March 1988<sup>1</sup>. PACSA noted that while the numbers of those dead or in detention can "indicate the severity of the crisis . . . numbers cannot really convey the level of trauma, sadness, frustration and anger that the people are experiencing day by day"<sup>2</sup>.

The reasons for the crisis were complex, with both economic and political dimensions. At the root of the continuing problem lies the grinding poverty of the majority of black people in the area. Unemployment is high: the Natal Midlands is a primarily agricultural region with limited industrial development. The large number of destitute families in the wake of the SARMCOL strike bears grim testimony to the lack of alternative economic opportunities. Infrastructure around Pietermaritzburg is very inadequate, township revenues are low, and housing development virtually non-existent. A study published in May 1988 found that "white decision makers" in all private and public fields, even "Government development agencies", generally agreed that poor infrastructures in black communities were a key factor in the violence<sup>3</sup>.

Politically, the conflict has taken on the form of an internecine battle between the opposing interests of Inkatha, a Zulu 'cultural' organization under the chairmanship of Chief Mangosutho Buthelezi, chief Minister of the KwaZulu homeland; and the United Democratic Front (UDF), a front structure with affiliated women's, civic, students', youth and white democrat organizations, allied with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Colloquially, the Inkatha groups are referred to as 'vigilantes', while the UDF-affiliates have been labelled 'comrades'.

Edendale has been a crucial area in the conflict. Originally mission land, the area is one of the few remaining places in which Africans can have freehold property. This has given rise to a stratum of landowners, and a large population of land tenants attracted to the area in the hope of finding paid employment in and around Pietermaritzburg. Historically, the state has refused to support the Edendale district by allowing it any measure of autonomy through local government, causing great resentment on the part of the landowners. Thus, the rift

between the local populace and the state has a long history<sup>4</sup>.

Inkatha, on the other hand, would like to make serious inroads into the area which it sees as an enclave needing to be incorporated into the 'Zulu Nation', and to this end a recruitment campaign was launched in September 1987. It has been suggested that in this dispute, the interests of Inkatha, and those of the state, coincide:

For the state, it would have been ideal for Edendale to be under the direct administration of the KwaZulu bantustan, controlled by an increasingly collaborative organization like Inkatha. For Inkatha control over Edendale would give substance to its claimed membership of the so-called "Zulu nation"<sup>5</sup>.

The 'Pietermaritzburg violence' is thus the result of interacting political and economic causes. The media image of the conflagration has however been reduced to the political. In a random sample of fourteen press cuttings taken from Natal and Transvaal newspapers, and covering the period January to June 1988, only one mentioned the UNISA study cited earlier, while two mentioned Buthelezi's thesis that: "apartheid had crippled black unity and had also subjugated blacks economically. Therefore, the roots of the trouble in Pietermaritzburg were also socio-economic"<sup>6</sup>.

For the rest, any analysis has been couched in terms of a double motive of an ideological conflict between Inkatha and the UDF, which is clearly analogous to faction fighting and the need for a strong police presence in the area. This dominant media interpretation is issued directly from the state, as evidenced in the appraisal given by Brigadier Jac Büchner: all along it had been a "black-on-black confrontation" – and to check and eventually halt it his (ie. Büchner's) men had been obliged to engage in some "reactive policing".<sup>7</sup>.

It comes as no surprise then, that these themes should be foregrounded in an in-depth feature on Pietermaritzburg violence, aired by the SABC as part of the evening news programme, NETWORK, on January 19, 1988. In this paper, I outline the way in which the violence is perceived in SABC terms. While the 'analysis', both explicit and implicit, is seen only in terms of the two motifs outlined above, its presentation strongly favours Inkatha, while at the same time appearing to be 'neutral' and non-partisan. I suggest that there is a clear consonance between the views of the SABC and those of the South African Police Force (SAP).

## ANALYSING THE VIOLENCE

"We in the South African Police, we are a law enforcement agency, we are not a political movement, we do not side with either the one grouping, or the other grouping . . . We are there solely to enforce the law and order, and . . . to re-establish, or restore the dignity of the people"<sup>8</sup>.

Büchner's message underlines the themes of political neutrality, non-sectarianism, and concern for the local population. Not unexpectedly this apparent neutrality disguises a deeper meaning, in which there is no neutrality, no standing back from siding with either grouping.

In the **NETWORK** programme investigating the violence in the Pietermaritzburg area, the reporter/commentator, Chris Olckers, never directly accuses either UDF or Inkatha of initiating the conflict. His message is nevertheless clear. At the outset, he tells us that the "trouble started" in Edendale. We then hear that "The United Democratic Front gained a stronghold in the trade unions and COSATU in particular". In SABC parlance, 'COSATU is immediately recognisable as SABC for 'troublemakers'. The UDF is set up as the initiators when we are told that Inkatha saw its position threatened by the UDF recruitment campaign. Specifically, they were threatened by what they saw as "a **foreign** organization, **foreign** to their **culture and tradition**". Inkatha is thus seen to be protecting from interlopers what is rightfully theirs in terms of unassailable and unchallengeable values: culture and tradition.



Brigadier Jac Büchner

Inkatha's legitimacy is strengthened as its case is presented first: "Inkatha has stated that the political strategies and tactics used by their opponents were designed by the ANC in exile". Buthelezi's face appears, his voice overlaid by Olckers' commentary. Shots of Buthelezi's supporters at the stadium give a visual impression of his power base. In contrast, no visuals of the UDF, either in terms of leadership or support, are provided. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, for an audience to identify with an organization of whom they have no visual image, the UDF remains ethereal.

Throughout the programme, the UDF is never provided

with an independent identity. It is only represented as a surrogate of the ANC. This is established visually at the programme's start, with the walls daubed there in different locations "VIVA ANGOLA – VIVA ANC – VIVA UDF". A second brick pillar is daubed with the slogan "UDF VIVA ANC". The camera then cuts to a close-up of a wall with "VIVA ANC". Verbally, Olckers spells out ANC dominance several times, for example: "Inkatha has stated that the political strategies and tactics used by their opponents were designed by the ANC mission in exile . . .". Thus the two protagonists in the "black-on-black" violence in the Pietermaritzburg area are firstly, **Inkatha**, and secondly, the **ANC**, acting through the UDF.

The **motivation** for the conflict is simple: "They (Inkatha) see it as a black-upon-black confrontation between themselves, who are committed to non-violent tactics, and those who oppose them because of it". Restated, Inkatha is non-violent, while the unholy ANC/UDF alliance is committed to violence. The latter oppose Inkatha on the grounds of their pacifist position, and this is the root cause of the confrontation.

## ETHNIC STEREOTYPING: FOLK DEVILS AND TRIBAL INNOCENTS

Several themes inform the TV programme. Most striking is that violence is **black-on-black** confrontation. Any challenge to this proposition is forestalled by Olckers invoking the ANC bogey:

"The ANC has also stated that when their people, the UDF, wipe out the so-called puppets, they are not doing so on the basis of a black-on-black confrontation but as barriers in order to reach into the hearts of the enemy, and to destroy that enemy. The puppets to whom the ANC has referred include elderly men, women and children."

Ethnicity is subliminally stressed through drumbeats for the first third of the programme. During the sequences in which the UDF is denigrated the music changes to an ominous whine of high-pitched string instruments, invoking the message of foreboding and doom.

The emphasis on race-based killings carries important implications: it absolves the (white) authorities from responsibility for the conditions in which the disputes arose, and from accountability for policing the outcome. It also assists the development of ethnic myths which define the protagonists as being different from the (white) viewers of **NETWORK** and therefore not subject to the same morality which governs those viewers. A corollary is that the violence is analogous to faction fighting: vengeful, self-perpetuating and outside the ambit of (white) authority. Later in the programme we are told that "years old squabbles are being settled under the guise of political violence". The unpredictability of traditional vengeance allows the authorities an ideological escape-hatch should they fail to "re-establish law and order". The same theme is reiterated at the very end of the programme: "When the needless violence has ended, there is always the problem of traditional revenge. Men, women and children who will not forget what has happened". The visuals accompanying the narration tell a different story: as Olckers speaks, a contingent of armed, uniformed police in two rows, headed by three white policemen, and followed by six black policemen, make their way across a path between rural huts. The message is clear: an unequivocal emphasis on order restoration and the competence of the police force.

The **racist tone** of the programme is evident from the fact that, although a programme about black people, the dominant voice throughout is that of the white commentator/reporter (Chris Olckers), and to a lesser extent, the white Policeman (Brigadier Jac B chner). These two define, narrate and pronounce on the situation in Pietermaritzburg. Only four blacks are given a voice, accounting for less than a minute of the programme's 13 minutes running time. A more important indicator of the way blacks have been backgrounded, are the circumstances in which they are presented. **Buthelezi** is given the most favourable treatment: a close-up; with back-up shots of his supporters. He is referred to by his full title: "Chief Minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi, President of Inkatha". Yet even he is not permitted to speak for himself: his position is summarized by Olckers, his voice overlaid by commentary.

The second black person 'interviewed' on the programme is **Janet Dlamini**. This section is crucial to the "meaning" of the programme, and worth reproducing at length. As has been the case so far, the programme is narrated through Olckers' voice-over: "At this home the Thabethe family gathered for a son killed during the struggle. His father was a senior Inkatha official." The camera provides us with an encompassing long shot of a house in good repair. On the left of this frame stands a burnt out kombi, which we saw in a previous shot. In front of the door of the home stand three men. A superscript reads: 22 December, 1987. The camera draws out to a mid shot. In the centre of the screen a woman lies on the ground in a prone position; her clothing ripped, shoulders and arms bloodied. We see the booted legs, and coat hems of four men, apparently in firemen's uniforms. On the extreme right of the frame we see the legs of a fifth man. Olckers' voice over 'introduces' us to the woman: "Mrs Janet Dlamini travelled from Johannesburg to attend the funeral". On-screen, we are now given a mid-shot of the kombi, this time from the front. The camera reveals the fields behind, which are pulled into a close-up. On the sound track we hear: "Two days after the funeral, the youths struck again. Four people have died, three of them burnt beyond recognition. She survived the attack, but the horror will not be forgotten". The visual cuts back to a long shot of the prone woman, in which the four firemen in uniform are now clearly visible. Two (black) plainclothed men lounge against the door. It is not clear whether they are police or family. The 'fifth man', whose legs we saw earlier, bends down to speak to Mrs Dlamini. Olckers' narration continues:

"She told the police cameramen what happened as they waited for an ambulance to fetch her."

(Voice of Janet Dlamini, indistinct): "They poured the petrol on us

(voice of unidentified man): They poured the petrol on you

...  
(Dlamini): ... on us. We were lying, the three of us, and ... ??

(indistinct) ... they just said the dogs must die."

When Ms Dlamini speaks, her words are directed by her unnamed (white) interviewer who dominates what and how much she says. More contentious is the **admissibility** of this scene. Little thought is given to the dignity of Ms Dlamini, or the propriety of the public broadcast of footage shot under these circumstances. This, despite Olckers' sanctimonious comments over her injured body



Chief Buthelezi

in the final scene, and quoted at the end of this paper. The scene was probably chosen for its ability to shock. Thus, the SABC shows itself to be susceptible to the seduction of sensationalist violence – but only selectively, when it provides ammunition in support of its argument.

The footage was shot by the South African Police video unit, not the SABC. This raises the question of the relationship between the two. It also casts doubt on the claimed neutrality of the police in the area. The material was part of footage shown to journalists by the press secretary for the Minister of Law and Order at Pretoria's central police station on the 28th December, 1987. According to Lieutenant Piet Bothma, the aim of the screening "was to show journalists incidents from the Maritzburg unrest"<sup>9</sup>. This is a clear, if unsubtle example of the way in which the state, through the agency of the Police, attempts to influence the agenda of not only compliant news organisations like the SABC, but also the press, who are usually thought of as 'independent'. The material included footage of the two other dead women referred to by Ms Dlamini<sup>10</sup>, and this footage may have been the source of the dead man shown earlier in the programme.

The final two black people to be given a 'voice' in the programme are an **unidentified black man and woman**. These two snippets were recorded in Zulu and captioned in English. **Vox pop** interviews always permit selection of the 'right' quotation, ie. the one which supports the preferred position. They request extra **white** policemen, one implication of which is that whites do a better job than their black counterparts. At stake here is selection, and the methodologically unsound practice of assuming that a small sample of random individuals (two in this case) speak for an entire community.

#### **DEMONIZATION OF THE UDF**

While the programme is uniformly patronizing towards blacks, there is a basic contradiction between those blacks who are led to evil by outside forces (the ANC), and those who are naive innocents, caught up in terror they do not understand.

The programme dehumanises the UDF/ANC surrogates through selection. In one sequence the soundtrack talks of the ANC/UDF alliance wiping out 'so-called puppets', "elderly men, women and children", while the visual track shows us scenes of a devastated homestead, the exterior of which is reduced to rubble, and the interior gutted by fire. Outside, a burnt-out kombi (also seen in later sequences) stands as testimony to a lost prosperity. A heightened sense of poignancy is created by the shot of a child's teddy bear among the ashes co-inciding with the mention of children killed. Although unstated, the implication is that UDF supporters were responsible for the demolition of the home, and the deaths which resulted therefrom. This impression is strengthened by running the detailed description of an eleven year old boy allegedly tortured by UDF supporters in the same sequence.

This example indicates the way in which the UDF supporters are debased as sub-human murderers and torturers. In contrast, little is said of the atrocities committed by Inkatha: when one of their supporters is killed, he is "killed during the **struggle**", a word which implies a righteous position, and a sense of heroism. An Inkatha supporter is referred to as "a senior Inkatha official", providing him with the legitimacy that comes with age and position, while UDF supporters are referred to either in terms of ANC surrogacy or by designations which underscore their youth, brutality and lack of status: "so-called young comrades"; "youths" who "strike" out and "mere children".

### **BLACKS AS TRIBAL INNOCENTS: RESTORING THE DIGNITY OF THE PEOPLE**

Alongside the view of some blacks as demonic agents, is an uneasy juxtaposition of Zulus as naïve innocents, guardians of a sacred trust, the Zulu 'culture and tradition'. These are the:

"... be-wilded (sic) people who do not understand the intrigue polity. Many do not even know who the UDF is, who do not understand why they should belong to Inkatha and others who haven't the faintest idea of what the policies of AZAPO and AZAZO are. Yet they are being killed because of the power struggle. Their homes have been destroyed and their families scattered".

In both cases, vulnerability is associated with **political** naiveté; once "the local population" becomes politicised, they face re-definition as "death-squads"; "so-called puppets" "the enemy" etc. Fear and superstition are part of this "traditional culture" expounded here in a pop-anthropology. Much is made of the fear of burning. The emphasis of this explanation is on necklacing as a method of intimidation, despite the fact that it has seldom, if ever, been used in Pietermaritzburg. This passage underscores two intertwined themes: firstly, the primitiveness of the people, a theme shown to be related to their apolitical status; and secondly, the barbarity of the atrocities to which they are subject. Why, amidst so much destruction, do SAP/SABC concentrate on the one form of violence which is not characteristic of the area?

### **STATISTICS AS 'PROOF'**

The scientific/statistical approach of NETWORK to the violence sits unhappily with the superstition/revenge

scenario outlined above. From the outset is an emphasis on **quantification**, and intellectual **control** of the situation. 'Factors' which cannot be 'measured', for example, the "the intimidation factor", are seen to be out of the grasp of the authorities. Geographic, population and morbidity data are manipulated through graphs, maps and mathematical formulations, which are taken to the point of absurdity: "In the first week of this month alone, 35 people were murdered, an average of five a day". Such manipulation does little to elucidate the root causes of the problem; in fact it may act to conceal them, by providing neat temporal distributions which bear little relation to actual events.

Statistical data is also used to dazzle the viewer. For example, UDF supporters are seen to have initiated the violence: "Figures reveal that 29 UDF supporters have died at the hands of Inkatha members, 95 Inkatha members have been killed by the UDF, and 113 others who died have not had any known political affiliation." The linguistic devices of abstraction and passivisation ensure that the source of these figures remains unstated. No indication of who collected the data, what methodology was used, or on what basis political affiliation was established can be recovered from the bland statement. Other, conflicting statistical data on the cause and effects of the violence was available from anti-apartheid organizations, such as the Black Sash, or PACSA at the time, but this was not mentioned. PACSA, for instance, quoted a figure of 282 persons killed to the end of December<sup>11</sup>, compared to the SABC's figure of 237.

The same linguistic device appears in the sequence demonizing the UDF: "Figures reveal that at least 16 children under the age of 18 have been killed." This quotation shows how statistics can be manipulated to lend support from **a priori** positions. Two months later, a Johannesburg paper, reported Büchner as saying that "there was not a single child under the age of 16 in detention by the police"<sup>12</sup>. Thus, when it suits the authorities, 'children' are defined as those under 18, yet when the state holds children in detention, the defining age is dropped to 16 years.

### **IDEOLOGICAL CLOSURE: PAPERING THE CRACKS**

The editorialising style of the programme's 'script' is written at leisure, with thought and consideration, but read in haste, once only. There is no opportunity to 'go back' as one might with a newspaper. Through deletions, simplifications, re-arranging and the collapsing of forms into single units, the ideological timbre of the text can be carefully controlled<sup>13</sup>. Conversely, the listener/viewer has less opportunity to decode the underlying meanings, and much is therefore taken as heard.

Much of the meaning of the programme is provided through the sub-text: the juxtaposition of words, visuals and music to create a single, synergetic meaning. Television has been described as an essentially **oral** rather than visual medium and linguistic processes are a vitally important consideration<sup>14</sup>. One immediate implication of this is the selection of words: "violence" vis-a-vis "struggle" when respectively applied to the UDF/Inkatha. The distancing of the commentator from sectarian discourse is another example: "so-called enemy"; "so-called young comrades" and "so-called people's court" are all predictable attempts to imply the illegitimacy of these

appellations. The acceptance of factional discourse, eg. "black-on-black confrontation"; "Chief Minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi, President of Inkatha" implies an endorsement of the organization.

The programme ends with bodies loaded into the trailer of a yellow police van, papering over all the contradictions of the past 13 minutes. A sense of finality, of ideological closure, is created by harking back to visual sequences already presented. The verbal track outlines the main themes covered in the programme: violence, vengeance, ANC complicity, apolitical innocence and demonic brutality. Olckers' voice-over once more gives us the dominant interpretation.

When the needless violence has ended, there is always the problem of traditional revenge. Men, women and children who will not forget what has happened. And as these children watch the police van with the mortuary trailer, so the next generation could also stand and watch another trailer with bodies being removed. A legacy of violence, left behind by people who saw other human beings as tools for their own evil aspirations. Like those who attacked Janet Dlamini, who had no political affiliations, but they showed no respect for life and human dignity".

The scene of the injured woman which so shocked us moments before, shocks us again. But television is the medium of reassurance, and the message we take away with us is the message around which the elaborate production effect of the **NETWORK** programme revolved. In Büchner's own words:

"I can assure you we have decided on a non-confrontation policy . . . we . . . will re-establish, or we will attempt to re-establish law and order in the areas, and to re-establish the – or restore the dignity of the local community, which is of paramount importance."□

#### References:

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