

Broadcasting change: An aerial overview of South African television debates in an age of constant transition

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Abstract

This aerial review concentrates on the development of the South African television industry as chronicled and analysed by scholarship. Academic reflections on the evolution of television are categorised into three main periods: First, the advent of South African television, second, the transitional period, and third, a period of stocktaking. The overview aims to provide readers with key academic discussions during these periods and the historical context within which they took shape. Looking at issues ranging from censorship, nation-building, restructuring and globalisation, to event television, edutainment programming and community TV, the South African television environment is shown to be in constant transition.

Keywords

Apartheid, edutainment, globalisation, nation-building, SABC, South African television

Introduction

It is impossible to review South African television debates without noticing the profound impact the country's apartheid past had (and still has) on the evolution of research in the field. A characteristic of the study of South African television seems to be a constant negotiation with the legacy of apartheid—whether implied or explicitly thematised. Contemporary developments of the medium are often also depicted as an effort to correct television's propagandistic and racist state-controlled beginnings. This aerial review summarises these developments in three distinct

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periods (the advent of South African television, the transitional period, and the stocktaking period) in order to demonstrate how unique the introduction and subsequent evolution of South African television scholarship is—a perspective that is somewhat overlooked internationally. Television scholarship came to South Africa late, but it developed quickly. In the process, it contributed extensively to understanding a complicated past. Through the prism of television, academics approach questions around fairness, equality, independence, representation, and a multitude of rights-related issues in a way rarely found elsewhere than in South African scholarship. What follows below is by no means exhaustive but aims to provide a condensed yet comprehensive understanding of the central and most relevant preoccupations of South African television scholarship framed within a clearly delineated context.

Scholarship surrounding the *advent of South African television* largely concerns itself with what Graham Hayman and Ruth Tomaselli (1989: 1) called ‘the relationship between an international technology and a local ideology’. This includes scholarship chronicling political debates about the introduction of television and censorship. As apartheid came to a fall, the country was presented with a unique opportunity to construct an entirely new society based on the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. As apartheid was ending, a period of reform in public services became necessary, including the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Scholarship in/about this *transitional period* predominantly reflected on policy changes introduced by the new government, resulting in the SABC’s dependence on advertising revenue. Event television as a process of nation-branding is highlighted in a context of ‘rainbow nationalism’ and reconciliation. Finally, the *stocktaking period* especially included research that views South African television in a globalised world context, driven by neoliberal ideologies and a ‘collapse of will’ by governing administrations (Duncan and Glenn, 2010: 45). This includes reflections on programmes such as soap operas and drama series and their function as cultural products within a new public sphere. Concepts related to nation-building, national identity, language, and representation became regular topics of discussion—often in relation to specific programmes and genres. Additionally, the meaning of true broadcast independence is debated in the context of reduced governmental funding that leaves advertising as the primary source of revenue for the television industry.

The advent of South African Television (1976-1990)

The debates pervading political discourse related to the advent of South African television have been richly documented by national and international scholars. Authors such as Edward Corrigan, Rob Nixon, Lynette Steenveld, Larry Strelitz and Malcolm Theunissen all write about the events leading up to and directly following the introduction of television in 1976. Peter Orlik’s work is often quoted as a useful scholarly collection, documenting debates during this historic moment (Orlik, 1968, 1970, 1974). Several studies detailing this period originate from scholars outside South Africa, especially the United States (Orlik, Nixon) and Canada (Corrigan). One reason could be that South Africa was one of the last developed countries that phased in television. This excited

international academics such as Randall Harrison and Paul Ekman (1972: 3), who saw the introduction of television as a “‘last chance’ to explore certain research questions about the impact of television in modern societies’. To identify television research opportunities, they wrote a report that roughly set out the country’s research landscape. They cite several university departments that expressed interest in the study of television (Harrison and Ekman, 1972: 14-19). It is clear from their list that the interest in television was connected to the social and psychological impact of the medium, with several academics noting their interest in television’s potential impact on children. They listed only one university approaching research from a communications perspective (the Rand Afrikaans University). In the end, Harrison and Ekman appear rather sceptical as to the research capabilities of South Africans:

In sum, South Africans have an interest in the potential of television research. They appear to have some, but not all, of the research skills needed to tackle the more difficult empirical problems. But most important, at the moment, they do not appear to be organized or funded in a way which will allow them to take full advantage of the research potential in front of them (Harrison and Ekman, 1972: 19).

Although a rather harsh judgment of the South African intellectual set-up, it is true that reflecting on television academically was new. However, that is to be expected, since television had not yet been introduced to the public. Television studies, as we know it, did not exist. This quickly changed in the 1980s and 1990s as scholarship on the topic grew within South African universities. Today, the majority of universities have departments that include television as part of degree programmes and academic research.

The devil’s own box

Initially, television debates revolved around the fact that the technology came to South Africa under controversial circumstances. The research of both Corrigan and Nixon focuses on the political developments since the early 1950s. Corrigan (1974: 15) points out that by 1970, a total of 118 nations already had a television service (20 of them African countries), yet the South African government continued to block attempts to bring this technology to the country. When the British *Rank Organisation* proposed to supply South Africa with this commodity in 1953, the proposal was rejected by the government, and shortly afterwards television was banned. This scenario also features in the work of Nixon (1994). He describes this move as ‘the most drastic act of cultural protectionism in the history of the medium’ (Nixon, 1994: 120). Writing from a theological perspective, Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans (2018: 185) partly attributes the rejection of television to the government’s ‘deeply religious, Christian nationalist approach’. Her work also draws on Bernard Cros (1996) whose observations during the House of Assembly debates (1958-1969) found that ‘[...] television was considered an idol—a god located within the household, with the ability to hypnotise the viewer—thus transgressing the first of the 10 Commandments’ (Scharnick-Udemans, 2018: 185). Scharnick-Udemans contends that the government sought to define television along a religious binary not as sacred, but

as blasphemous—thus making religion and media technology intrinsically incompatible (2018: 188).

Many academics (Corrigan, 1974; Nixon, 1993; Orlik, 1970; Scharnick-Udemans, 2018; Richard West, 1978) turn to Hansard and print media (for instance, *Rand Daily Mail* and *Cape Times*), to document television's banning/unbanning in Parliament. The verbatim accounts of parliamentary discussions in Hansard reveal how vehemently parliamentarians such as the Minister of Post and Telegraphs, Albert Herzog, opposed television. Herzog saw television as the 'devil's own box for disseminating communism and immorality' (Hansard, 1959: 5020) and that it would only be introduced to South Africa 'over [his] dead body' (West, 1978). He further claimed that the 'effect of wrong pictures on children, the less developed and other races can be destructive' (Corrigan, 1974: 15). He also feared that imported programmes would encourage 'race mixing' and would make black people 'dissatisfied with their lot' (Australian Institute of International Affairs 1967: 8). Nixon moreover demonstrated that the head of the SABC, Piet Meyer (1959-1981), believed television to serve a liberal and communist agenda, which seeks to make 'men effeminate and women manly' (Nixon, 1994). In his inaugural address, the Prime Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, initially called television a 'spiritual danger' and compared it to the evils of the atom bomb (Hansard, 1960: 3002). However, he later changed his tune when it became clear that the tide of technological developments was unstoppable, due to the advancement of satellite technology (Nixon, 1993: 132).

Within this context, the first moon landing is often highlighted by television scholars as significant. People around the world watched the first human steps on the moon on their television sets. Significantly, the South African public felt short-changed by the government for not being able to witness this extraordinary event along with the rest of the world (Scharnick-Udemans, 2018; Nixon, 1994, 1999). This made television a campaign issue, with the opposition promising to legalise its use, and the government realised it would lose power unless it changed its rigid stance. Orlik (1970: 245) observes that the 'continued refusal of the South African government to permit the introduction of television [...] provides interesting insights not only into the political climate of South Africa, but, more importantly, into the way in which television is perceived as a vehicle for socio-political change'. Likewise, Harrison and Ekman (1976: 102) note that the principal question permeating South African discourse at the time was whether television would be *useful* to the country. While the issue provoked scholarly interest, television's social impact was of 'more than academic interest' to the everyday South African, regardless of race.

In her detailed study of Hansard, Carin Bevan (2008: 91) similarly points out that until the arrival of satellite television, the 'little bioscope' was not deemed essential to retain power by the governing party—so 'they simply did not want it'. More demanding 'works of national importance' took priority over debates on the introduction of television. For instance, financing the implementation of apartheid policies such as the 1950 Group Areas Act and the 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act were prioritised, since they were seen as essential for the survival of white people in South Africa. This was influenced by national and international developments which threatened white power in the country. Key developments Bevan highlights are the civil rights movement in the

United States, the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Verwoerd, the Sharpeville massacre, the rise of the liberation movement in South Africa, the advancement of communism in Africa, as well as the liberation of previously colonised African states (2008: 80-83). Beyond the above, Bevan also stresses that there were several other reasons for the rejection of television, which are not as readily discussed in popular scholarship. Her thesis highlights seven additional factors debated in parliament prior to the introduction of television (2008: 61-91): (1) economic costs and consequences, (2) geographical coverage, (3) programme resources, (4) the lack of manpower, (5) rapidly changing technology, (6) the immediate need for a countrywide and multilingual radio service, (7) the negative impact on sports, cinema, theatre and the press. Significantly, she also documents arguments in favour of television made by the opposition (2008: 94-99), who argued that introducing television was a matter of maintaining the country's image as a leading African nation. The opposition also emphasised the educational potential of television when utilised in classrooms and training environments. It was also seen as a 'great boon to the elderly, the sick and those who could not leave their homes to go to sport events, the theatre or the cinema' (2008: 96). Moreover, the lack of television broadcasting capabilities prevented the country to take part in significant international events—which, as mentioned above in relation to the moon landing—was becoming a major source of frustration with the public. Achievements by South Africans such as those of 'record-breaking swimmer Karen Muir and heart transplant pioneer Chris Barnard', could not be celebrated effectively to the benefit of South Africa's international reputation (2008: 98).

Ideology and state control

Eventually, the government realised that a television ban would not prevent illicit content consumption. Nixon highlights this concern by referring to statements made by an extreme nationalist member of Parliament:

Jaap Marais warned that satellite broadcasts 'will be a mighty force in the hands of the Russians and Americans ... [T]hey will try to give greater actuality and striking power to the propaganda issuing from the platform of the U.N.' (Nixon, 1994: 142).

Corrigan highlights the fear that the political attitude of the public may change as they begin to hear more criticism of apartheid and the ruling government. By creating its own programming, however, the Nationalist Party believed it could maintain the status quo by providing easy access to vetted nationalist content. Corrigan (1974: 22) stresses that the special 'Commission of Inquiry into Matters Related to Television' spoke of the medium in exactly these terms. It stated that television must 'be controlled if it is to render the highest and best service to the country'. In his analysis of the Commission's 1969 report, Corrigan highlights the Commission's emphasis on the need to control television, since, according to them, the introduction of foreign programmes would lead to 'the "spiritual, cultural and moral" detriment of the nation' (1974: 22). Corrigan documents that state control was deemed necessary to 'give direct and unequivocal expression to the

established 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' (1974: 23; see also the *RSA Report*, 1969: 16). He quotes the Report's argument that governmental control is necessary to prevent the medium from becoming one

[...] propagating the 'provocative' behaviour of discontented and frustrated individuals as an example worthy of emulating by other like-minded persons. Moreover (sic) a good community service should never debase itself to become the mouthpiece of immature so-called 'reformers' who do not know what is at issue or what they want to achieve (Corrigan, 1974: 23).

The Commission recommended that television should be introduced in two phases. First, establishing a single channel serving Afrikaans and English speakers (meaning the white population). Second, introducing another channel to the African population, ultimately leading to the establishment of the Bantu Television Service, which was to create programmes for the remaining nine language groups in the country (Corrigan, 1974:16).

In *Homeland Harlem and Hollywood*, Nixon focuses on the linkages between nationalism and censorship (1994). Scharnick-Udemans (2018) builds on this perspective by connecting these two concepts to 'Afrikaner nationalism as a political ideology', which itself had a 'complicated liaison with a particular Christian national ethic that was informed and legitimized by the Dutch Reformed Church'. Hayman and Tomaselli (1987, 1989a, 1989b) imply that television technology created an opportunity for the ruling party to mould national ideology by allowing people to habitually watch carefully curated programmes. Ideology, according to their neo-Marxist interpretation of the concept, is constructed through 'the apparently obvious and normal rituals of everyday living' and can thus be described as 'the medium through which all individuals experience the world' (Hayman and Tomaselli, 1989a: 2). From this perspective, television technology becomes a vehicle to shape a national ideological mindset via the propaganda content consumed. The act of tuning in daily, Hayman and Tomaselli (1989a: 2) argue, is a ritual of sorts through which especially urban audiences 'experience the world beyond the geographical limits of their daily life'. The images people consume from within their living-rooms become the reality of their worldview. Politicians feared that the 'Trojan horse technology' would destroy the ruling ideology by introducing liberal ideas.

From this perspective, Ron Krabill (2010: 163) asks what the 'communicative space created by television' reveal about the ideology of apartheid society. In his audience study, Krabill approaches the complexities of racial politics by investigating the peculiarity of a society where American sitcoms, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), featuring black families were enthusiastically received by white audiences, while at the same time, it was illegal to disseminate the image of Nelson Mandela (who was then considered a terrorist). Krabill (2010: 4) notes that some white viewers dismissed the show as 'mere entertainment' and 'too American' to challenge their worldview. This prevented them from recognising the duplicity of their viewing habits set against the racially motivated ideology that structured their day-to-day lives. Why the apartheid government did nothing to censor such shows, Krabill argues, is because this gave the government (and indeed the

audiences themselves) the opportunity to frame their inherently racist ideology within the context of ‘simple’ cultural differences rather than racial discrimination (2010: 157). Conversely, other white viewers believed that the show *did*, in fact, open their eyes to the possibility of an integrated society and felt that ‘*The Cosby Show* did more for race relations in this country than anything else ever has’ (2010: 4). Black South Africans, in turn, linked the show’s popularity to its representation of a ‘safe’ black family whose lives resembled and, to some extent, unproblematically reflected the dominant views held by the white middleclass.

The transitional period (1990-2002)

During this period, scholarly debate is driven by analysing and documenting how the South African media landscape was restructured to prepare for the introduction of democracy. Although the first democratic election was not until 1994, preparations for this transition were set in motion at the beginning of 1990 with the release of Nelson Mandela. The need to reform the broadcasting system was quickly identified as essential for the success of a free, fair and peaceful election and general transition. Therefore, television was one of the first services to be restructured as an independent public service. Although in later years the overall academic consensus became that television regressed somewhat to politicised ways (Colin Sparks, 2009; Foeta Krige, 2019), the first years after 1994 were, according to Ruth Teer-Tomaselli (2005: 563), the ‘golden season of public broadcasting in South Africa’.

The ethos that motivated a large part of this period chased journalistic freedom and programming that equally represented the multi-racial make-up of the country (P. Eric Louw, 1993). In the wake of the transition, Teer-Tomaselli and Keyan G. Tomaselli (1994) succinctly point out some of the most pressing challenges South African television faced. To them, a key issue was how the SABC would respond to the first democratic elections as an organisation closely associated with past oppression. Secondly, they stressed the challenges South Africa would face to ‘fulfil its PSB mandate against the background of social, economic and technical changes taking place in the 1990s’ Thirdly, they ask how South African television would ‘maintain itself as a site of excellence across the programming spectrum (entertainment, education and information)’ without becoming dependent on ‘international media giants’ (1994: 10). Subsequent academic research seems to focus on aspects of these three challenges, including event television as a response to the fall of apartheid on one hand, and the restructuring of the SABC on the other.

Clive Barnett (1999) also discusses the challenges television faced during the transition and notes that, at times, the responsibilities placed on the broadcasting sector resulted in contradictory tensions. By considering policy developments during the transition, Barnett discusses these challenges in the context of the legacy of apartheid, equality, language rights, independence and internationalisation. These concepts are unpacked by also considering the critical impact regulatory agencies such as the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) had on the reimagining of broadcasting in South Africa. Informing Barnett’s analysis are three functions that were bestowed on the media

during the transition (1999: 281ff). Firstly, the media ‘was given a pivotal role in the democratic information policy enshrined in the ANC’s blueprint for post-apartheid transformation, the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP)’ (1999: 274). The programme was intended to ensure transparency and access to information by means of effective communication. Secondly, the economic development of the country was an important focus of the new government. Broadcasting was therefore ‘identified as a central element of industrial policies directed at boosting economic growth and development by fostering foreign investment and international competitiveness’ (1999: 275). Thirdly, major involvement of electronic media was deemed imperative for ‘national reconciliation and unification’. In this sense, it was regarded as the ‘symbolic representations of the “rainbow” concept of “One Nation, Many Cultures”’ (1999: 275). Barnett emphasises the importance of the latter function by explaining South Africa’s specific perspective on ‘nation-building’.

Nation-building in the South African context of the 1990s is not officially understood merely as a project of constructing a single, overarching national culture or identity. Policy makers have conceptualised it primarily in terms of facilitating processes of exchange and dialogue between South Africa’s different cultural, regional, and linguistic communities (Barnett, 1999: 275).

The ANC’s overarching approach during the transition was to develop policies and media strategies to ‘depoliticise ethnicity’, which created inherent pressures between the depoliticised intensions and the realities of their implementation. This is so, Barnett notes, because depoliticisation means the equal redistribution of resources which in fact ‘tend to exacerbate tendencies towards the politicisation of cultural identities’ (1999: 275). To aid the reconciliation effort, the media (especially radio and television) were therefore seen and debated in scholarship as a tool to unify the nation through deliberate programming and the coverage of special nation-focused events.

Reconciliation: Broadcasting significant events

Academic discussion related to South Africa’s approach to transmitting the transition revolves around the concept of ‘liveness’ as a way to construct or *re-construct* nationhood. In *Broadcasting the End of Apartheid: Live Television and the Birth of the New South Africa*, Martha Evans (2014) gives a detailed account of how South Africa constructed what has become known as ‘rainbow nationalism’. She argues that the transition of South Africa into a perceived new nationhood was largely due to the skilled utilisation of television’s immediacy. Drawing on Dayan and Katz’s (1992) theory of ‘media events’, Evans evaluates this process of nation-building and the public’s adoption of this new sense of ‘nationhood’. She maintains that ‘liveness’ enthralled mass audiences to the extent that it helped to unite the nation under one multi-racial identity. Her investigation focuses on how the image of Mandela was key to this process. She traces live events from Mandela’s release, the 1994 election and Mandela’s inauguration through to the ultimate transformation of his image into the nation’s Madiba (Mandela’s Xhosa name). Kristin

Skare Orgeret (2015) also provides a valuable analysis of Mandela's broadcasted inauguration as a concerted effort at nation-building and modernisation, which breaks starkly from the apartheid regime's 'ideology of partition'. Additionally, Orgeret's PhD dissertation (2006) entitled *Moments of Nationhood: The SABC news in English—the first decade of democracy* also provides an important perspective on nation-building events by including empirically gathered data through the interviewing of influential media professionals of the period.

An important aspect of media event broadcasting is the inclusion of additional programming beyond the actual live events (Evans, 2014). A key approach of the SABC was notably to bookend live events with programmes demonstrating the organisation's commitment to balance, fairness and journalistic accuracy. This included the introduction of live televised political debates featuring all sides of the political spectrum. One noteworthy debate Evans refers to is the *Nightline* debate following Mandela's release which featured recently returned exile Thabo Mbeki, Buthelezi and Pik Botha. Evans (2012: 166) points out that the SABC 'began to televise and stage its own talks, playing a pivotal role in broadcasting and facilitating the debates of the transition'.

Evans also evaluates the role live televised sport events played in the construction of national identity. Arguing that 'these are occasions of overt displays of nationhood, analysis of the events provides an effective means of tracking the emerging post-apartheid national identity' (2012: 5). In this regard, Evans specifically focuses on the 1995 Rugby World Cup that was held in South Africa. The event was a powerful moment during which 'Mandela managed to generate support for the new rainbow nation through deft handling of national symbols' (2012: 5). Lynette Steenveld and Larry Strelitz (1998: 610) point out that the media focus was particularly significant given the sport's 'traditional association with English imperialist, and Afrikaner nationalist interests'. They further summarise the spiritual tone this media event created in the hearts and minds of watching viewers:

For South Africans this was a year of being accepted as members of the 'Western world'. The reverential tones and implied historical importance of the event to be represented thus invited anticipation and awe from the viewers. South African spectators were not addressed as rugby supporters, but as witnesses to a spiritual occasion – the coming into being of a nation, the returning from isolation (Steenveld and Strelitz, 1998: 616).

However, not everyone sees this effort to use live event broadcasting for reconciliation as positive. Many scholars identify it as an overt act of media manipulation. Albert S. Fu and Murray (2017: 35) note that television and cinematic representations of the 1995 Rugby World Cup marked 'a decisive turning point in racial reconciliation', which 'is akin to substituting wishful thinking for actual fact'. Steenveld and Strelitz (1998) also question the decision to broadcast the event as 'a national occasion for everyone' as it created a certain mythology around the concepts of 'nationhood' and the 'rainbow nation'. To them, broadcasting the moment in the way it was, 'represented no more than a utopian moment' that 'in no way laid the foundation—as the media and the government politicians would have us believe—for the creation of a collective self-identity' (1998: 625). From these perspectives, scholars indicate that the spectacle of the live event

communicated an ideal rather than reality. Steenveld and Strelitz end their argument with a telling quote from Richard Dyer (1985: 222), framing the televisual event as a moment that created ‘a sense of “what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised”’ (1998: 625). This debate continues today at each significant sporting event—for instance, the hosting of the FIFA World Cup (2010) and, most recently, the 2019 Rugby World Cup final where the media once more portrayed the nation unified—only this time not under Mandela, but under the team’s first black captain, Siya Kolisi. In marketing circles, the portrayal of sport mega-events continues to be seen as an opportunity for ‘nation-branding’ as opposed to ‘nation-building’ (Brendon Knott et al., 2015).

In contrast, the broadcasting of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as an event, created a totally different tone within the new national consciousness. The TRC was a quasi-legal body that provided a restorative space for victims, and perpetrators alike to testify to what happened during apartheid in order to move beyond the trauma of the past. The celebratory sentiment of coming together which was so central to the portrayal of the events mentioned above, could not be replicated during the TRC. Instead, it served as a wake-up call exposing violence that permeated South Africa during apartheid. In this sense, the broadcasting of the TRC became an additional tool for reconciliation and national unity (Orgeret, 2015). It was undeniably a historic occasion from a broadcasting perspective because it also marked the first time that a truth and reconciliation process was documented on camera and televised. Writing as the TRC was still in session, Edward Bird and Garda (1997) point to the responsibility placed on the media to create transparency and a sense of inclusion with the public:

The TRC’s success for the South Africans will be won or lost within the media. Not all of those subjugated by apartheid, in whatever form, will be heard by the commission, and the media, through their pervasiveness, will play a pivotal role in representing and recollecting the experiences of South Africans, as part of an effort to ease the pain and move towards reconciliation (Bird and Garda, 1997: 334).

Their analysis of the process included the monitoring of current affairs programming as well as evening news bulletins in English, Sesotho, Nguni and Afrikaans. The monitoring was done by senior media and film studies students who were tasked to analyse the coverage as first-language speakers (Bird and Garda, 1997: 335). Based on this analysis as well as on emerging public criticism of the TRC and comments by members of the Commission themselves, Bird and Garda conclude that the media coverage, though transparent and accurate, ‘lacked a sufficient context, and the news values attached to the reports were more closely related to the horror of the torture than the life stories and dignity of victims and survivors’ (1997: 341).

Krabill (2001) considers the symbiotic relationship that existed between the TRC and the South African mass media while also pointing out the contradiction in using a medium as a platform that was also investigated as complicit in the perpetuation of apartheid atrocities (see also TRC, 1997, 1998). He notes that ‘South African mass media have served as both essential actors in the TRC drama, as well as the stage on which much of the drama has been performed (1999: 568). Krabill draws interestingly on Hayman and

Tomaselli's (1987) conceptualisation of the 'levels of ideology in broadcasting' through his analysis of the TRC's rather brief investigation of the role of mass media during apartheid. These levels comprise the ideology of (1) programming, (2) channels, (3) institutions and organisations, (4) legislation, and (5) the broadcast technology itself. Krabill considers these levels of ideology by analysing the TRC's special hearings on the media (TRC, 1997) as well as the final report issued by the Commission (TRC, 1998). He concludes that while the hearings provided some interesting insights, 'the opportunity for a deeper analysis of mass media under apartheid was largely lost' (2001: 583). Several journalists, editors and politicians later published memoirs, which also give valuable insight into the role the media played during apartheid and the transition—thus further highlighting the opportunity missed by the TRC. The work of Frederik van Zyl Slabbert (2000), Max Du Preez (2003), Allister Sparks (2003), Foeta Krige (2019) and Freek Robinson (2021) provides engaging reading for a rounded understanding of the conditions faced by media professionals throughout the evolution of SABC's complex history.

In addition to the levels of ideology, Krabill also bases his investigation on the concept of the 'media event'. He sees the TRC squarely within this 'new narrative genre', since it adheres to the principles identified by Daniel Dayan and Katz (1992): 'being live; being planned outside of the media; being pre-planned; being presented with reverence and ceremony; and enthralling very large audiences' (2001: 569). Krabill stresses that 'the consistently high ratings received by the live TRC radio broadcasts and the weekly *TRC Special Report with Max du Preez* on television' is evidence of the occasion's status as a media event (2001: 569). Significantly, Krabill argues, a media event is seen to 'play a special role in fractured societies' (2001: 570), which South Africa obviously was at the time. It helped anchor the concept of human rights within South African public consciousness by routinely using the term 'gross violations of human rights' (2001: 570). Prior to the TRC, Krabill notes, one would have been 'hard-pressed to find this phrase in public usage [...], yet now it is ubiquitous' (2001: 570). A significant value of seeing the TRC as a 'media event' is, therefore, the genre's ability to not only address conflict, but also *reconciliation*. By referring to Dayan and Katz (1992: 8), Krabill maintains that this is what distinguishes the TRC from 'daily news events, where conflict is the inevitable subject' (2001: 570).

Evans (2016) in turn questions the status of the TRC's broadcasting as a 'media event', for two reasons: Firstly, there was not as much live broadcasting as one might believe when reading about the event. In fact, only two moments were televised live: the opening of the Commission and the controversial testimony of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela about the activities of the Mandela United Football Club. The latter, Evans argues, caused the ANC to distance themselves from the proceedings because, while the opening broadcast intimates it was apartheid that would be on trial, Madikizela-Mandela's testimony illustrates the extent to which the TRC began to also focus on the human rights violations committed by anti-apartheid activists (2016: 705). To this day, this remains highly controversial, because many believe the Commission gave the impression that the apartheid regime was less violent than the liberation movement (2016: 717). In this sense, the TRC did not manage 'the integrative power of media events'. Moreover, audience

participation (rather than audience ratings) is a prominent characteristic of a ‘media event’, which, given its purpose, the TRC could not ethically accommodate (2016: 717). Secondly, Evans suggests that ‘despite the appearance of immediacy, transparency, and spontaneity’, a media event requires certain predictability for it to be effectively mediated. Since the TRC was about listening to traumatic accounts of victims and perpetrators respectively, their testimonies could neither be mediated nor anticipated. Evans therefore argues that the televising of the TRC was far ‘too conflictual and complex to play out as a media event’ (2016: 706).

The perpetrator-victim debate remains a contentious issue to this day when it comes to evaluating the impact of the TRC and the SABC’s decision to not only broadcast the event, but also create additional programming around it. A notable programme was the *Truth Commission Special Report* series (SABC, 2023), spearheaded by Max du Preez—a well-known Afrikaans-speaking anti-apartheid journalist (Du Preez, 2003). It ran from 21 April 1997 to 29 March 1998 across approximately 88 episodes (see SABC’s Truth Commission Report website). By closely analysing key moments on the show, Michelle E. Anderson considers how the *Truth Commission Special Report* series engaged with narratives ‘around apartheid-era perpetrators who participated in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ (2020: 8). She ultimately argues that the involvement of the media actively influenced people’s perception and/or acceptance of the transition and the country’s approach to reconciliation—a hypothesis supported by scholars such as Corinne Paver and Wolf (2008), Martina Fischer (2011) Lia Kent (2012) and Anja Mihr (2020). Anderson’s focus on the representation of perpetrators on television thus provides an important reflection on a central albeit controversial aspect of scholarly debate in South Africa.

Chronicling key changes

P. Eric Louw’s edited collection of essays (1993) provides a key sequential chronicle of the ‘media policy debates’ prevalent during the transitional period between 1990 and 1993. It includes the independent perspectives of 15 media policy researchers (see for instance Viljoen, Cronje, Currie, Tyson, Pinnock, Lascaris, and others). It serves as a useful insight into how scholars of the time sought to not only engage *with*, but also directly *influence* high-level decision-making on post-apartheid media policy. Debates, according to Louw, generally followed two lines. First, those aligned with the ANC formulated visions for a new media landscape reflective of an equal and diverse society. Second, scholars more aligned with the National Party (NP), concerned themselves with questions on ‘how to re-order what exists’ (Louw, 1993: 4; see also Orgeret, 2009). The collection provides an outline of ‘what has been advocated in South Africa’s media policy during the early 1990s’, while also drawing attention to new considerations that should occupy media policy scholars of the time (1993: 4). From questions related to the democratisation of airwaves and the necessity of community radio, to issues related to financing the SABC, censorship concerns and political approaches to media policy, Louw’s collection remains a key text of scholarly views on how media policy should change to fit the needs of a new South Africa.

Teer-Tomaselli provides the most accessible analysis of the restructuring period—describing in detail the process the SABC underwent to move from a state-controlled mouthpiece to a public service broadcaster (Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1994; Teer-Tomaselli, 2005). In her contribution to Janet Wasko's, *A Companion to Television* (2005), Teer-Tomaselli notes that an overhaul of the SABC's governance and oversight mechanisms started with the formation of a 'Task Force' in 1991 under Professor Christo Viljoen (SABC board chairperson and Dean of Engineering at the University of Stellenbosch). Teer-Tomaselli (2005) claims the 'Viljoen Report' echoed the views of an increasingly vocal civil society, emphasising the need for an independent national broadcaster committed to 'local programming, educational broadcasting, the liberalization of broadcasting through the issuing of new licenses, and most importantly, the establishment of a regulatory body for broadcasting' (: 562, see also Louw, 1993; Leslie, 1995). Louw (1993: 11) highlights that the Viljoen Task Force, 'represented the most coherent and organised attempt during the 1990s to influence National Party politicians to adapt a more "liberal" ("de-politicized") media policy'.

Teer-Tomaselli asserts that this led to the formation of the *Independent Broadcasting Authority* (IBA), which was tasked to reduce the monopoly of the SABC. This included the formulation of new policies on the function of the public broadcaster, the importance of promoting local content and, the need for cross-media ownership and control (2005: 536). According to Colin Sparks, one of the main functions of the IBA was to act as 'a buffer between the government and broadcasting, ensuring that no one party could capture it in the way that the National Party had in the past' (2009: 200, see also Horwitz, 2001). In the end, the IBA recommended that the SABC be limited to two public broadcast television channels (SABC1 and SABC2), and that a new licensed independent commercial channel (SABC3) should be introduced (see more, Teer-Tomaselli, 2005).

Viola Candice Milton (2009) also provides a thorough overview of channel identities as they changed over time. She sees the channel changes as failing to address racial and economic biases—with poorer black communities often being marginalised, caricatured, and stereotyped. Additionally, several academics point out that in the aftermath of the channel reshuffling, affluent 'CIW' viewers (an industry term for Coloured-Indian-White audiences) opted to change to the new subscription channel, M-Net, which was established in 1986. Duncan (2001), Teer-Tomaselli (2005) and Sparks (2009) concur that this did not immediately affect the SABC, because it gained viewers from the previously excluded black communities. Yet scholars agree that in 1996 this reality led to the SABC sliding into significant financial difficulties as advertisers preferred to invest in channels attracting a richer demographic. The financial crisis crippled the SABC, since they could not rely on the government, which reduced funding for the organisation. Teer-Tomaselli (2005: 560) notes that since the 1980s, the SABC developed a schizophrenic identity as it had to function as an independent public service broadcaster, while also dependent on advertising revenue to cover costs.

Researchers point out that a consultancy period with the international firm McKinsey and Associates was established to save the SABC. The so-called 'McKinsey Process' recommended cutting costs by reducing local content, replacing it mainly with programmes from the United States which was significantly cheaper than producing original

programmes (Duncan, 2001; Teer-Tomaselli, 2005). Other policy changes occurred during this period, most significantly the 1999 *Broadcast Act*, incorporating the SABC into a limited liability company, and the 2002 *Broadcast Amendment Bill*, addressing continued financial difficulties of the SABC with the formation of two management boards (Teer-Tomaselli, 2005: 565). These policy changes raised several concerns. Early on, Michael Leslie warned against the Americanisation of the South African television industry. He notes that the introduction of ‘American-modelled content, financial and structural adjustments’ would reinforce ‘the ideological power of racist capitalism in South Africa’ (1995: 165). He highlights that during this transitional period, three strands dominated restructuring debates: equal access to television (a priority for liberation parties such as the ANC); privatisation (benefiting the business elite); and deregulation along the free market (benefiting media-financial interests). Later, Milton partly attributes the racialisation of HIV/Aids on screen to the SABC’s ultimate dependence on advertising revenue. Sparks (2009) recognises that power in South Africa did not shift to the masses, but from one governing elite to another. He notes that what made South Africa’s transition to democracy so exemplary, is that politically it was entirely committed to social inclusion. Nevertheless, as the development of television moved beyond the transition phase, concerns about state control within the media came to the fore once more—primarily due to the unchallenged ANC becoming more divided within itself. This directly affected the television broadcasting system, which struggled between meeting contradictory goals. On one hand, it was required by the governing elite to meet ‘purely commercial criteria’, while on the other also expected to ‘reach under-represented groups’ (2009: 214).

Stocktaking (2002-)

Commercialised expansion and globalisation

Blessed Ngwenga (2015) addresses the prevailing crisis of independence of the post-apartheid SABC by investigating staff perspectives on ‘power, knowledge and identity’. She argues that historical processes now make it ‘difficult to separate the SABC from the state and, for this reason, the role of the public service broadcaster (PSB) is tied to the national narrative which itself is tied to the larger global matrices of power’ (2015). Duncan (2008: 21) attributes this decline to the market-friendly presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999-2007). She notes that ‘executive overstretch’ severely damaged the integrity of the SABC during his administration. Why this occurred, Duncan argues, is to some extent due to the assumption that the challenge of broadcasting independence would resolve itself simply because of the country’s transition to democracy (2008: 25). This also suggests that tension and misunderstanding still exist about what ‘independence’ means within broadcasting. Duncan advances that the transition to independence has not actually been properly completed, thus allowing for backsliding. She documents various attempts of the Mbeki administration to ‘increase the control of the executive arm of government over broadcasting’. As such, Duncan refers to Roger Southall to describe the current democratic climate. Southall coined the term ‘low intensity democracy’ to

describe a form of governance where ‘the formal requirements of democracy are met, yet under conditions of decreasing competition and declining popular participation’ (2004: 74-75). Writing at the time of Jacob Zuma’s presidential ascent, Duncan predicted a further decline of independence. This could be expected, Duncan notes, due to Zuma’s professed homophobic, ethno-chauvinist and sexist views. For broadcasting, this could again mean state-imposed morality-based censorship.

Under Mbeki’s market-driven policies, South Africa has assumed many neo-liberal characteristics—which are linked to technological advancements and globalisation (Duncan 2008). Clive Barnett (2002) defines media globalisation as a ‘complex set of related processes’ which include among others ‘the restructuring of ownership’ that ultimately ‘re-articulates the domestic space’. This has given rise to questions related to South African television’s expansion across Africa—a process which took shape from 1995 onwards. Musa Ndlovu (2003) acknowledges the financial benefits this offers to a struggling organisation such as the SABC but wonders if the move also constitutes a form of media imperialism. He summarises how privatisation and commercialisation allowed the SABC and M-Net to expand into Africa: In 1995, M-Net grew from a single subscription-based channel into a satellite network (DSTV) with over 30 channels focusing on entertainment content such as films, sport, series as well as children’s and magazine programmes. In collaboration with the Multichoice Company, SABC added two pay channels to the DSTV network in 1998 (SABC Africa and Africa2Africa). Ndlovu declares that this expansion is viewed by many media commentators as a form of ‘re-colonisation of the African airwaves’ (Kandjii, 2001) with ‘media imperialistic tendencies’ (Pieter J. Fourie and Lucas M. Oosthuizen, 2001). Seeing the entire African continent as a region and not as 54 distinct countries, DSTV and the SABC threaten to drown out national channels. Ndlovu notes that this means that, regarding regional broadcasting, the SABC may be abandoning its social responsibility for commercial reasons, thereby destroying the public service of local broadcasters. Quoting Chin Chuan Lee (1979: 68), he suggests that this equates to an ‘institutionalisation of media commercialism at the expense of public interest’. However, beyond the financial benefits, Ndlovu also points towards a counterargument. The expansion of South African services is argued to allow people across Africa to gain knowledge and participate in changes happening beyond their respective borders—something that South Africa did not have under apartheid. From this perspective, the enlargement can also be viewed as an effort to adhere to democratic principles and expand public responsibilities to other nations. Given these two perspectives, Ndlovu (2003: 298) concludes that the current commercialised expansion of South African television ‘seems to vacillate between “re-colonisation” and “de-colonisation” of Africa’s cultural/information sphere’.

These advancements into Africa are contrasted by failings to provide adequate subnational/community television. In his study of policy developments between 1990 and 2011, Chris Armstrong (2013) paints a bleak picture of South African television’s ability to effectively provide localised content. The *Independent Broadcast Act* (1993) and the *Electronic Communications Act* (2005) emphasise the need to develop television’s public service on national, regional and local levels. This includes community television within the provinces, yet several failures have left this sector without funding, even though they

are subjected to high signal distribution charges by Sentech (owned by the state). Armstrong's research points towards several policy failings. He concludes that by 2011, 'the community TV sector was in a dysfunctional state; and in the public and private TV sectors, the commercially orientated national channels SABC TV and e.TV were characterised by insufficient engagement with the realities of viewers living beyond the country's primary urban centres.' This, he argues, is due to 'ruptures in deliverable policymaking and significant policy implementation missteps' (Armstrong 2013: 128).

Edutainment

Edutainment programming has a long post-apartheid history. Barnett (2002) notes that this form of programming was an early part of the broadcast strategy. He points out that the 1996 *Educational Broadcasting Plan* set an agenda recognising the impact of the open media markets. It recommended a strategic move away from 'overtly pedagogical programming' by including educational messages within 'popular programming formats and genres' (2002: 101). This included seeing documentary, soap operas, talk shows and drama series as 'vehicles for educational broadcasting in order to attract large, general audiences' (2002: 101). Drawing on several scholars' focus on edutainment television (for instance, Kincaid, 2002; Nariman, 1993; Singhal and Rogers, 2000; Slater, 2000; Slater and Router, 2002; Vaughan and Rogers, 2000), Milton summarises edutainment television as programmes that (2009):

- depict social problems and value conflicts
- motivate the public sphere towards prosocial values
- depict positive role models exhibiting values that members of the public are encouraged to emulate

Along these lines, one of the first programmes developed as an edutainment programme is the popular youth-focused drama series *Yizo Yizo* (1999-2004). Commissioned by the SABC in collaboration with the Department of Education, the series formed part of Mandela's 'Culture of Learning, Teaching and Service' campaign (COLTS), which was a nation-wide attempt to address apartheid's destructive impact on schools (Barnett, 2002: 99). During its 6-year run, the series attracted a large viewership (between 1.2 and 2.1 million viewers per episode), but also sparked debate across South Africa (Barnett, 2004: 259 & 2002: 99). On one hand, it was praised for bringing to light the dysfunction of the education system in rural communities. On the other, it was criticised for being too graphic in the depiction of violent abuse. Barnett traces the realistic/graphic themes and resulting controversies of the series by considering the show in the context of media globalisation. He argues it has potential to 'realise the principles of active media-citizenship rooted in the struggle against apartheid' (2002: 108). Given the programme's success in sparking conversation (not only in media and academic discourses, but also directly between children and adults), Barnett concludes that the show illustrates how media-globalisation 'makes more dialogic models of children's media-citizenship both

more viable and all the more imperative' (2002: 107-108). Magriet Pitout and Ndlovu (2001) also broach the controversy of the show, maintaining that calls to cancel it was short-sighted. However, they also suggest that the excessive violence detracts from its positive message. They put forward that the programme fails in its social responsibility by offending a large part of the public (2001: 19). Particularly interesting in this regard is Rene Smith's (2000) focus on *Yizo Yizo* as a complex project addressing violence in a decidedly gendered context. According to Smith, the series was extremely important. However, as an educational project for mass consumption it fails to break stereotypes that connects township life to black violence (2000: 26). Teer-Tomaselli (2005) further notes that youth-centred programming such as *Yizo Yizo*, *Gaz'lam* (SABC1, 2002-2005) and *Backstage* (e-TV, 2000-2007) are quintessentially South African in their ability to 'deal with gritty, sometimes terrifying circumstances facing the younger generation of viewers, while at the same time providing positive role models and coping strategies for those facing gang violence, substance addiction, domestic abuse, teenage pregnancy, and the other challenges of a fast-developing society in transition' (2005: 570).

Soap operas emerged as one of the most popular genres on South African television and have received significant scholarly attention (Hannelie Marx Knoetze, 2004, 2015; Hester Lockyear, 2004; Oluwayemisi Mary Onyenankeya et al. 2020, 2022). More than other genres, it participates in the post-apartheid efforts of nation-building, while also highlighting lingering and/or emerging social problems. In her overview of South African post-apartheid programming, Teer-Tomaselli (2005) highlights the prominent placement of soap operas ('soapies') across all South African channels. This she attributes largely to the genre's ability to amass substantial viewership and thus advertising revenue. She also notes the genre's connection to edutainment, since viewers can identify with characters in social situations that resonate with their own experiences. Contrary to American soap operas, Teer-Tomaselli argues, South African soapies can create a unique sense of real-life relevance by prioritising location shooting over studio-based filming in programmes such as *Egoli—Place of Gold* (M-Net, 1991-) and *Isidingo* (SABC3, 1998-). She identifies that soapies tend to (a) 'be anchored in contemporary reality to a greater extent than their American counterparts', (b) reference 'topical events such as the World Cup soccer and rugby' and (c) include raw subject matters such as rape, HIV/Aids and racism. The combination of these elements ultimately serves to create 'a specifically "South African" type of drama' (2005: 570).

Taking on a more critical view of the portrayal of certain social issues in dramatic programmes, Milton (2009) criticises the SABC in the wake of the restructured, market-driven environment. She argues that the SABC is no longer able to serve the public through content with an edutainment objective. She notes that 'public (service) broadcasting should play a critical role in shaping the ability of individuals to participate effectively in the normal life of society—i.e. create publics, not audiences for advertisers' (2009:116). Pieter J. Fourie (2003: 148) similarly emphasise the need for South African broadcasting to 'return to the basic principles underlying the philosophy of public service broadcasting' if it is to meaningfully exist in a market-driven industry motivated by privatisation, globalisation, digitisation and commercialisation without losing sight of the

post-apartheid vision of transformation and equality. Milton further notes that the concept of the ‘public sphere’ is complex, given the ‘multi-ethnic, multi-racial, post-apartheid character of today’s South Africa’ (2009: 133). She points to the prevailing racial and linguistic segregation of the SABC’s channel construction, thereby questioning how social issues affecting specific spheres within society can be represented without indirectly causing stigmatisation, stereotyping and marginalisation. Analysing the representation of HIV/Aids in television programmes such as *Gaz’lam*, *Tsha Tsha* (SABC1, 2003) and *Soul City* (SABC1, 1994-2015), Milton concludes that the on-screen framing of HIV/Aids promotes the impression that it is exclusively a “black” disease’, despite the fact that ‘the seropositivity of whites in South Africa is six times the number for Europe and the United States, while both regions have much larger white populations’ (2009: 131).

Oluwayemisi Mary Onyenankeya, Kevin Onyenankeya and Oluyinka Osunkunle also point to problems of stereotyping by considering the portrayal of indigenous African cultures in a multi-racial society such as South Africa. They do so by turning to a close textual analysis (2021) as well as an audience perception analysis (2020) of the soap opera *Generations: The Legacy* (SABC, 2014-). Their results indicate that ‘the majority of audiences felt the soap represents indigenous cultures as the “insignificant other” and perpetuates stereotypes about traditional indigenous groups’ (2020). They conclude that there is an attempt to ideologically frame the new, homogenised South Africa as a binary better to the indigenous belief systems within the country. Because of the ‘moralising and socialising’ effect of soaps, they call for a more positive and nuanced portrayal of indigenous ‘values, practices and beliefs’ by ‘deemphasising sociocultural stereotypes.’ If this is achieved, they argue, South African soaps can contribute progressively to an inclusive national identity (2022: 68).

As for languages, the national identity of South Africa is still fraught—particularly the Afrikaans language vis-à-vis the Afrikaner cultural identity. Milton (2008) notes in an appraisal of Afrikaans programming on SABC that the diversity of South African national cultures still plays a central role in South African politics. Therefore, the function of television (and radio) in negotiating between different national cultures is emphasised (Milton, 2008). This is difficult. Ever since the end of apartheid, Afrikaans has taken root in public consciousness as the apartheid language, which resulted in the representation of Afrikaans on television being reduced. Responding, the independent Afrikaans film industry boomed, and niche Afrikaans channels emerged on other platforms—for instance kykNet on DSTV. Hilke Steenkamp (2016) considers the appropriation of patriarchy and nostalgia in Afrikaans programming as part of a business strategy where the insecurities of the Afrikaner (specifically Afrikaner men) are utilised for commercial purposes. She specifically criticises this by way of discussing the reality show *Boer Soek ’n Vrou* (*Farmer wants a Wife*, kykNet, 2008-). In this format adaptation, women are paraded in front of a farmer in the hopes that he selects one of them as his future wife. The women are expected to answer whether they love God, babies, cooking, and quiet homely living. If not, they are deemed as incompatible with the farmer and sent home by him. The series is hugely popular with audiences and as such, Steenkamp argues that in *Boer Soek ’n Vrou* ‘patriarchy and nostalgia work in conjunction to repackage, re-brand and reconceptualise

the image of the white farmer' (2008: 325). Steenkamp concludes that the programme serves a nostalgic yearning that 'presents the audience with a benevolent, compassionate and idealised version of a historically problematic figure' (2008: 333). Steenkamp suggests that the creation of such nostalgic programmes seek to render patriarchal notions as meaningful escapism. Other Afrikaans programmes deal with nostalgia and the image of the Afrikaner in a more nuanced way in order to take part in the exercise of nation-building—albeit in a revisionist way. Milton (2014) discusses the KykNet drama series *Donkerland* (kykNet, 2013) from this perspective, arguing that it is an attempt to 'grant viewers an insight into contemporary anxieties about belonging, identity and what it means to become South African in present-day South Africa'. By way of a close textual viewing, Milton concludes: while *Donkerland* looks at identity from the vantage point of the Afrikaner, its nostalgic appraisal of the past ultimately manages to 'revisit and renegotiate the values upon which, in the end, South African (and not just Afrikaner) identities are based (2014: 341).

Conclusion

This aerial review of South African television scholarship has sought to present some of the key debates and preoccupations of a complex history spanning almost 50 years. It is evident that academic reflection on South African television is rich, nuanced and interdisciplinary. The study of television is extremely thorough in its investigation of political decision-making as well as ideological views and market-driven policy choices—all of which constructed the multifaceted media climate we face today. The history of South African television and its scholarship is therefore hugely significant for the discipline of television studies more generally given the context in which it was initiated into the country. As one of the last 'developed' nations that introduced television, its impact on the development of democracy and human rights cannot be underestimated. It is therefore surprising that international attention to South African television has not been more pronounced.

The aim of this article is to draw more attention to the richness of television studies in South Africa (of which this article only touches the surface). Whether it chronicles history, investigates 'liveness' or questions identity representation, one thing is certain: South African television scholarship is not *only* about television. It is about the myriad of complex cultural experiences—the good and the bad—that make up a country dealing with the consequences of various political abuses of power and the subsequent identity confusion still noticeable today. Therefore, as Milton notes about the SABC, South African television 'can be seen as a metaphor for the South African society: it is unsettled, it is in transition and it is in many ways not unlike the society it represents and reflects on' (2009: 115). Academia is faced with the mammoth task to make sense of this unsettled industry confronted with the constant insecurity of globalisation, politicisation and the struggle for identity. If the above argument manages to convince readers of this characteristic of South African television scholarship, the article has achieved its goal.

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