

GETTING THE REAL STORY

CENSORSHIP AND
PROPAGANDA IN
SOUTH AFRICA



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South Africa's public image largely determined by what people see on TV

"In a world where atrocities compete with each other for time on television, the level of indignation is very hard to sustain with regard to one particular area."

By Peter Davis

I want to endorse what Patrick Nagle said about knowing just about everything that's necessary to know about apartheid. Everything else, everything we talk about now, censorship and so on, are simply nuances. The challenge is for us to transmit what we say, what we know, in such a fashion that somehow, it translates into political action. That is what is meaningful for me, and has always been in my films on South Africa.

I don't make any apologies for this point of view, since I'm independent and I really don't have any master. But in order to be effective, I have to have an outlet, which means access to television basically, because that gives the biggest audience. And it's at that point that problems arise.

Many years ago, when I had been living in the United States for a while, I decided what would be most useful would be to educate the American people about South Africa. And I've also come, over the years, to believe that the American public constitutes, in the struggle for South Africa, a critical mass. I believe that how America behaves with regards to South Africa makes all the difference in the world. I believe the United States has such power — a power which it hasn't begun to exert — that it could, given the will of the American government, rather easily effect change in South Africa in a very short time.

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By the time I began to work on South Africa, which is the beginning of the '70s, the Americans were abysmally ignorant about South Africa. South Africa was not an issue. It was enormously difficult — in fact, it proved impossible — to gain access to PBS. In 1974, I had a proposal on South Africa. I went to Washington to speak with someone with the Public Broadcasting Service who was personally *responsible for documentaries on PBS*. We had a very nice discussion, at the end of which he said to me, "Oh, by the way, where is South Africa?"

That was, as I said, 1974. I didn't get any money at that time. I got money elsewhere. By 1976, I had raised the money. I went to South Africa. I shot half the film, and my crew and I were arrested. The day I left South Africa was the first day I shot Soweto. And I thought that might make a difference with PBS. It took me another year to get that particular film on the air. I also had to endure another kind of censorship. I had to go through a television station. In fact, it was the most enlightened station in the United States. It was WGBH in Boston. I'd seen four pages of criticism of the text that I had written for the film, and I fought about this for three hours in a telephone call. I'd mentioned massacre of blacks in the text, and they asked questions like, "Well, were no whites ever massacred?" I was expected to put in something about whites being massacred. And then as an offshoot of this, "How many deaths constitute a massacre?" And then, just again in passing, I'd used the word "proletariat," and written in the margins was "proletariat, un-American word." After that, I did another couple of films which did not receive any help from PBS.

About 1984 I applied to one of the few sources of funding for documentaries in the United States, for funding on a film on Winnie Mandela. Actually, at that time it was about Nelson Mandela. It got changed later on. I had shot the whole film when it went before this group of peers, supposedly to decide whether I could be funded or not. Everyone was in favor except for one person, a Reagan appointee who was dead set against me. But it had to be unanimous. They passed the funding because this person, whose name I don't know, went out to get a cup of coffee. They passed it while he was away. This was a time when Mandela had slipped from consciousness. I wanted to revive the name of Mandela, and everything hung on a cup of coffee.

So then when working in the United States, you're confronted at least as much by problems related to American internal politics, the

workings of American television and the peculiar workings of the American public, as by censorship in South Africa. In a sense, censorship in South Africa has never been a problem for me, because I'm not allowed to go anyway. You just discount it. You either do it or you get somebody else to do it.

Now I want to ask why is it so desperately important for the South African government to gag voices of dissent. The government sees the English-language media, and now even one Afrikaans newspaper, as the enemy, and what is published in those newspapers as part of a warfare campaign that's fought with many kinds of weapons, whose aim is the overthrow of the government under the term "total onslaught." This perception on the part of the South African government is absolutely accurate. Where the government errs is in choosing to believe that this is a conspiracy of all these organs.

In terms of conventional weapons, the enemies of apartheid are extremely weak. I don't believe that apartheid will be overthrown by a revolution as it is popularly understood. South Africa consistently defies cozy historical patterns. It defines itself as it goes along, and that's something that makes it endlessly fascinating. In warfare, victory is achieved when the enemy's will to resist is destroyed. Ultimately this is a matter of morale and psychology, not of tanks and guns.

The government has all the tanks and most of the guns, yet it has not succeeded in crushing the will of the African people to resist. The struggle for South Africa is primarily, at this point, a psychological one, mainly with economic weapons and to some extent, with moral weapons. This is done by undermining the white economy inside South Africa and by weakening confidence in that economy outside South Africa.

South Africa depends on exports and upon investment capital. If markets are denied, the investment capital abroad dries up, and it will go into decline. The point of capitulation will come — if it comes, I'm not certain that it will — when white South Africans realize it is more expensive in treasure, perhaps in blood, to continue apartheid than to dismantle it. You've already seen the fragility of the South African economy in the withdrawal from Angola. For the white South African government to continue, the outside world must be convinced — especially foreign investors — that the country is stable, and will

yield a profitable return on investments. For the foreign capitalists, morality does not enter into the question, unless that morality is turned into a force that affects profits.

That is precisely what has happened in the United States in regards to South Africa. When companies like Polaroid and Ford found that business at home was suffering because of their bad image as supporters of apartheid, they pulled back from South Africa. In the struggle for South Africa's future, this word "image" is all important. Image is a public relations word that means how something appears to be, what it looks like to the public. It has little to do with reality. In fact, it's often directly contrary to reality and is intended to distract one's gaze from reality. Those who wish to defend South Africa present it as a country moving towards multi-racial democracy, where human dignity for everyone can be guaranteed if there is no interference from the outside world.

That is the semblance, the image, and the struggle for control of that image is vital to the future of South Africa in ways that are absolutely concrete. Just as in the world of Madison Avenue an image has a cash value, so it does in South Africa. The attempt to impose its image on the world has involved the government of South Africa in a multi-dimensional propaganda and disinformation campaign that's gone on for a quarter of a century.

I want to take you back now to 1960, to an event that left an indelible imprint on the mind of my generation. This was the Sharpeville massacre. I remember the shock of it, because it was the first proof that apartheid was not simply an injustice, but a murderous one. There were reporters at the scene, but no cameramen. Still camera people were there soon after. The film camera people came later to record the gathering up of the bodies.

Now of the actual event of Sharpeville, there's probably about only 100 feet of film, which is two and half minutes. I don't recall whether at that time I saw the news film taken after the massacre, but I've seen it many times since, and use it often in my work. There are bodies of women and men on the ground and a man wounded in the leg sitting up, a women being helped away. What's most striking is the police. Some stand around holding their weapons. Others direct black police in carrying the bodies to waiting vans. None of the white police are helping to carry the black bodies. One policeman, in a special affront to decency considering the occasion, carries a sjambok, a huge leather whip. These were the images that at that moment defined South Africa, defined apartheid to the world.

The pictures were seen all over the world. The result was condemnation by the world community, and the flight of capital from South Africa. It was clear that this was a cause-and-effect situation. I don't know if it has been accurately recorded, when and how the connection between South Africa's image and business confidence came to be understood by the South African government, but certainly by the late '60s, decisions were being made to counteract the negative image of South Africa in people's minds and replace it with a positive one.

A campaign of propaganda and disinformation to win friends and influence people was begun on a vast scale by the Department of Information. They began to produce films which portrayed South Africa as a land of racial harmony, with equal opportunities for all. Other films depicted South Africa as a staunch ally of the West, a bulwark against communism. According to these films, its strategic position straddling the Indian and Atlantic oceans makes it both a guardian of the West or a lifeline from the Persian Gulf, and indispensable for NATO's defence.

All of this propaganda was freely available from South African consulates around the world. For a long period in the United States, which was at that time very backward in the anti-apartheid struggle, this was virtually the only information on South Africa easily accessible to the average American school teacher who, ignorant of the true situation, would present the films to the class. Each time there's a crisis in South Africa, there's a wave of reaction on the outside that has a negative effect on the South African economy. Often international indignation dies down, although repression inside South Africa does not ease. The economy recovers because, with its cheap labor, South Africa can attract foreign investors. This happened after 1960, so that by the end of the decade, South Africa had recovered enough to be experiencing an economic boom.

In 1976 came the Soweto uprising. Now between 1964 and 1976, interest in South Africa had been at a low level. There had been documentaries, yes, but they tended to be tempered in tone. It would perhaps be fair to say that they were conditioned by the appearance of calm, that the whites had everything under control. This feeling was shattered by the Soweto uprising, and a new element came into the picture. What was critical now was that another kind of revolution had also been taking place. The world had experienced a revolution

of massive proportions in mass communications. Films shot during the '76 riots could be seen on television in New York, London, Stockholm, Tokyo, the next day.

We saw youths throwing stones and being shot down by the police. We saw municipal buildings in black townships burned, filmed from helicopters. We saw whips and dogs used against unarmed civilians. Almost for the first time, we heard blacks angrily speaking for themselves. And with supreme arrogance, Prime Minister Botha said, "There's no crisis," but the images appearing on daily television throughout the world proved the lie in this pronouncement. In fact, a British documentary took this statement for ironic titling. Once again, after a year of crises and a toll of hundreds of lives, the rioters were contained. But this time, there was a qualitative difference from what had gone on before in the eyes of news editors around the world. South Africa was now a hot spot and newsworthy — a place that could blow up again at any moment.

It was great television. Not only were the riots covered, but news representatives took up residence in South Africa and began to examine what it was in apartheid that drove people to erupt in this way. This was a salutary development. You must remember that from Sharpeville to Soweto, a period of 16 years, there was enough time for a generation outside South Africa to grow up in ignorance of what Sharpeville had meant.

And now I speak to people; I speak to students, and they don't know what Soweto was. What Soweto meant in public relations terms was that South Africa's image had slipped from the control of the white authorities into the hands of the black activists. Well, of course, the black activists were still dependent on white media. Their defiance, their protest, their torture, their dying, defines South Africa, not the game parks, the quaint tribal customs, the economic prosperity and racial harmony that the propaganda films offer.

The propaganda films were now plainly viewed to be lies, and the attempt to present South Africa as a reliable ally of the West was in danger, for no country so predictably unstable could be depended upon. Indeed, if communism was the bogey, then white domestic policies seemed guaranteed to push the black population into the communist camp. And this was not my conclusion, but the conclusion of a Central Intelligence Agency report in 1987. So the South African government itself was furthering the ends of international communism.

There was also a critical change in the image of black South Africans to the outside world. To many people outside South Africa, even many black people, the African population of South Africa had seemed submissive, passive, cowed. The question was often asked, "Why don't the blacks just rise up and revolt?" Then Soweto began to change that image.

Soweto showed clearly that blacks were as willing to die for their freedom as anyone else, that they were not passive victims. This example struck a chord in the hearts of black Americans, who had themselves taken up arms against racism and police repression in the ghetto uprisings in the late '60s in America. Jessie Jackson became an articulate spokesperson for black American concerns about South Africa and Trans-Africa, and Washington faced black organizations that began to lobby. And when the next crisis occurred, which began in 1984, Trans-Africa set in motion the series of sit-ins at the South African embassy in Washington to show solidarity with the people of South Africa. This was the single most important anti-apartheid act that has taken place in the United States. Prominent Americans volunteered to block the embassy and were arrested. At the same time, at American universities there were demonstrations. Typically, students would build a shantytown to represent black living conditions in South Africa in a campaign to force withdrawal of investment in South Africa.

There was a symbiotic relationship with the unrest in South Africa which fed the people who were carrying on the anti-apartheid campaign in the United States and made it easier to get access to the media. As things got worse in South Africa, the government no longer was able to pretend that this did not again constitute a crisis. It declared a state of emergency, which gave additional powers to the authorities. By the time the state of emergency was declared, South Africa had been, for over a year, the focus of attention of the world's journalists, and I think it was something that the white South Africans had trouble with. They had never experienced anything like this before, and they were totally unprepared for it.

I think that's why it took so long for the South African government to take action, especially against foreign journalists. The delay suggested a long debate had taken place inside ruling circles. They had to a certain extent been trapped by their own rhetoric. They had always maintained that they belonged to the so-called Free World, which also meant freedom of the press. This was part of their image. By imposing censorship on the Western news media, they appeared

to be cutting themselves off from that noble tradition. The authorities rationalized their move by saying that they were in a situation akin to war, and in wartime, censorship is normal. It was a clear analogy with Northern Ireland and, of course, the British censorship in Northern Ireland actually helps South African censorship.

They also said that the news media actually provoked insurrection, even going so far as to pay young people to commit unlawful acts before a camera. Such charges, which clearly would be a breach of law had they taken place, were never actually brought against foreign news agents and were clearly fabrications. The government needed to convince its own people and foreigners, if possible, that the foreign press consistently publishes lies about the country, and indeed is part of the international communist conspiracy.

The South African government's pre-emptive strike to seize back control of the image of South Africa was amazingly successful. There was some protest from the foreign news media, but they largely capitulated. Why did the Western news media, and in particular the Americans, give in so easily? I think the answer lies in the reason they were there in the first place. The American media were attracted to South Africa not because of its basic injustice, racism, fascism, but because it had broken out into open violence. The inhumanity of the apartheid system, which was there all along, which was first implemented in 1948, had gone relatively uncriticized up until the Sharpeville shootings of 1960. And there had been a decline in the tension up until Soweto in 1976, and then the decline until 1984, when a level of interest was sustained because the violence persisted, until the censorship imposed in 1986 brought about another decline.

American television is only interested in these explosions of violence, its Dracula-life blood. But if its life blood is denied by South African censorship, why are all the television agencies so anxious to remain in South Africa? I'm afraid it's because this drug-like fix of violence has not been totally denied. Bomb attacks by the ANC may be filmed if, in the words of a police official, they show the ANC in a bad light. The strife in the townships which reveals a struggle for power between radical and conservative elements may still be filmed. This has been called "black on black violence." The impact on the viewers is to support claims that blacks are only prevented from tearing each other to pieces by white law and order.

Because of its insatiable addiction to violent images, American television news lays itself open to manipulation by the South African Bureau of Information. The most recent example of such

manipulation is the Winnie Mandela affair, which is a public relations windfall for the South African government and will be squeezed for every drop of its propaganda value.

Up until quite recently, I had little faith that sanctions could be effectively applied, but I thought that the struggle for sanctions had great symbolic value and value in gaining solidarity in all the world. Now I believe that the entire anti-apartheid campaign has done enormous damage to the South African government. The economy is in a terrible state, and I think that much of this is attributable to the media blitz on the image of South Africa. Capital, domestic and foreign, has no confidence in the future of South Africa. I think the South African government has come to recognize this as the greatest threat so far to its survival, recognizing the link between the willingness of the American Congress to act against South Africa and the images on television that stirred people to action, that stirred people to move Congress.

The South Africans cut the artery in the flow of images. Under the current restrictions, there is a strong likelihood that if another Sharpeville were to occur, we would have no comparable damning images of it, so it would not endure for 29 years in our consciousness. The government has seized the initiative, and is beginning again to control the image of South Africa. I am pessimistic, but I also want to suggest to you that we have, with regards to South Africa, gone through a period which has resulted in overkill. We've been saturated with images of South Africa, and if we're thinking in political terms, thinking how to move people to action, we have to take into account what the audience is, and how it behaves.

And the audience, especially in the United States, is extremely fickle and apt to lose interest. In a world where atrocities compete with each other for time on television, the level of indignation is very hard to sustain with regard to one particular area of the world. So I think that we should look upon this period now, this enforced period, as a period of regrouping, and be thinking about how we should go on.