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# News, lies and videotape: creating a permanent memory of televised truth: an initiative to remember the past and take the TRC forward

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# News, Lies and Videotape

## Creating a permanent memory of televised truth

An Initiative to remember the past and take the TRC forward

By Sarah Crowe

There's a great line in a number by African American poet, Lynton Kwesi Johnson which he would have sung but I'll just say: The revolution will not be televised the revolution, the revolution will be live. But of course while our revolution was not televised where it mattered most, HERE, it was flashed around the world and provoked a sense of outrage like few other news stories had done in the history of broadcast news.

The Korean War is said to have been the first televised war. But a cumbersome process of getting the film from the battlefields of Korea on to an aircraft, to a broadcast station and finally beamed into millions of homes, meant the war was anything but live. Then came Vietnam and the reports of human rights abuses in America's name and the unforgettable sight night after night on the evening news of their sons and fathers and husbands returning home in body bags, finally turned the tide of American public opinion irretrievably against the war.

IMAGINE for a minute if the SABC had reported LIVE on our Vietnam, the war in Angola. Imagine if the Rivonia trial had been like the OJ Simpson trial. IMAGINE if the SABC had gone in with the troops into the townships in 76 . . . Well there probably wouldn't have been an 84 or an 85 or an 86 . At least we could not have said then we did not know it was happening.

A country much more like our own in its attempts to transform itself, Russia, tried that at a very early stage of its second revolution. When the cameras went in with Russian troops into Chechnya, the pictures so shocked the new government that the television station was ordered to edit the pictures.

When it was first launched in the United States in the 1930s -- a time when radio was huge -- news people, journalists, thought it would be a FAD, a fashion, a passing phase.

But modern history is forever marked by images, images from television that have defined unforgettable moments in history . . . . think of the German youth hacking away at the Berlin Wall, the young Chinese man standing in front of the mighty tanks of the Red Army in Tianneman Square . . . and the Gulf War, the first fully televised live war that changed CNN from being Chicken Noodle News to what it is today, and totally transformed television news and the making of history. These moments remind us of the awesome power of television news. It is, and I believe, will increasingly become, the tool for how ordinary people and even historians remember history. We've

seen it now in the past few weeks with the Kosovo crisis. But of course this is a flawed view of history. There is a fallacy that journalists are where the news is. With television in particular, the opposite is in fact true -- news is where the journalists are. As we move, at the speed of the world wide wait, towards a time when the media will be dominated by news on demand -- when the viewer wants to see it and not when journalists are ready to deliver it -- it can only be a good thing for establishing a democracy, and a culture of human rights.

With dishes and digital news satellite services, technology is today the most powerful weapon against totalitarian regimes. This means that, even if it is only for the elite few initially, we will have a front seat at the making of history.

So where was television when we needed it most in this country, when it could have been a mirror that showed us just how divided we were, how strange we were, how crude and cruel we were. Of course it hadn't escaped the old order just how powerful television could be, and how keeping us us out the picture as long as they possibly could ultimately meant they were able to hold on to power much longer than they otherwise would have.

And so many of us bought the arguement that they wanted South Africa to get the very best, the very latest full colour technology, when they finally did bring us television in 1976? Ironically, even though that date marked the beginning of the end for the apartheid government, what we mostly saw over those days almost exactly 33 years ago, was the test pattern. South Africans would hurry home, or stare for hours at shop windows, at . . . the test pattern.

For years we were duped -- black South Africans mostly knew what happened in their areas, whites though, did not know or did not want to know and the SABC helped them not to know. The extraordinary propaganda put out by the SABC has never fully been revealed. One of the many ironies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that the SABC submission was made by executives who still today enjoy positions of power and privilege while there has been a purge of top journalists in recent years. The submission by these men, some of them former Broerderbonders, did not reveal as much as it should have, exactly how the politicians through the SABC skewed our understanding of what went on here. But the clip we'll show after this, will remind us how glamorous newsreaders put a credible spin on the real news. The TRC Special Report programme revealed years later just what lies we had been told.

About half of my journalism career in this country, I've worked in the foreign media. In the mid-80s after helping set up the New Nation, I produced for BBC Television here. The South African story was a hugely powerful television story. The pictures that we, in international television, sent out from South Africa night after night -- of black youth being shot at and beaten by white policemen, the endless funerals that followed with their evocative freedom songs and stirring speeches -- lit a fury in viewers and gave rise to widespread sympathy for the South African people and their liberation struggle.

From the cashier working in Dunn's stores in Ireland, to the Notre Dame student in Washington, to the dock worker in Sydney Australia, to the peasant African farmer and the schoolchildren of Holland and Sweden -- they all as one wanted to do something . . . go out on to the streets in protest, go out on strike, call for sanctions,

collect money for the ANC . . . anything. Botha's government was furious and began expelling foreign journalists.

If television had not been there then history would have been very different. And if South Africans had seen all those pictures and heard all those stories, instead of only the savagery of necklacing, I would wager that apartheid would not have lived quite so long.

So when we came of age and turned the cameras on some of those old perpetrators, our status turned from a pariah state to a miracle nation. The world looked up at the way in which we dealt with the truth and appeared to reconcile ourselves as well. Much of he TRC was captured on camera and the miles and miles of footage now lie within the SABC and copies will soon be sent to the National Archives and kept there.

But it shouldn't end there. This extraordinary testimony must not gather dust and become a vague memory of South Africa's past. My hope is to see the creation of a permanent place where generations of South Africans to come will be able to access the truly memorable programmes of TRC Special Report, and the tears, the drama, the shock and the anger of the early live televised submissions, the big names, the F.W de Klerk's, the Winnie Mandelas, the Eugene de Kocks and the ordinary victims with forgettable names. All these people, all their stories must be unforgettable.

So this NEWSEUM to Broadcasting History would include the TRC material, and hopefully much of what has gone into this conference, the art, the installations, as well as the early African Mirror material and SABC footage. It would be interactive; where school children could create their own news bulletins; call up on a computer with CD Rom, the names of their grandparents who's tales made up the South African story; view how South Africans saw the state of emergency and how the rest of the world saw the same events.

It should be then a memory of the awesome power of television, so that even if we never had tickets to the making of our history, we can make sure that future South Africans will get a front row seat of their past.

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