

# 12. Television's fight for survival

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It would be both meaningless and unproductive not to reflect on the impact television has had on the South African social and political dynamic since its delayed introduction in 1976. It is a well-documented journey. To an information-starved population, the decision to hold back would have seemed ridiculous and sinister, which it was. But at the time, if you lived in the ruling National Party's fantasy political laager, the justification probably made twisted sense. Back then, the state-run South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) had monopoly on radio broadcasting and believed television posed a major threat to the influence and hegemony of the Afrikaans nation, where the English language would inevitably be promoted due to programme availability, and that news content and advertising would create unfair competition for the Afrikaans press.

Interestingly, change was forced by an event not only way beyond our shores, but beyond our planet. When Neil Armstrong landed on the moon in 1969, South Africa was one of the few countries unable to see the event broadcast live. Odd it now seems in a broadcast environment where any news event is inevitably played in live and real time! Insidious pressure started, and the minister in charge at the time Dr Albert Hertzog, who famously called television "the Devil's box," and who was worried about mixed race images and aspirational advertising that would make the population dissatisfied with its lot in life, was forced to start rethinking his strategy. The upshot was the population (mainly white) being given the famous test pattern at first, and then a steady diet of entertainment carbohydrates – the trough of which has never been emptied. Those who made the teenage transition from radio to television will forever have programmes like the *Brady Bunch*, *Bonanza* and actor Tobie Cronje's *Willem* etched in our pre-frontal cortex.

As much as I'd like to devote the rest of this observation to a trip down television's hall of fame and infamy, it's best to confine my observations mainly to television news, its current role in South African society and where it might be heading in the future. On the latter, I strongly believe – and not because I work in the medium and need an income – that it still, in spite of the powerful threat from social media, has a vital role to play in terms of influence and information dissemination. Television news, by virtue of its ability to go live to a hotspot, stays with the story, and having it related by someone who is not only familiar to audiences, but has, hopefully, earned their trust. This makes the information more real, tactile and believable through the images that are being captured and relayed. Right now, the medium remains in survival mode, and its future depends on its ability to integrate seamlessly with other mediums. As the live story is being broadcast, it's

now incumbent on the television news service to make sure its pipe of information from the field is also being sliced and diced in order to accommodate and feed other platforms from Instagram to Twitter. Furthermore, it's critical that those who are presenting the news (anchors) are using social media for optimum interaction with an audience that is now well versed in concentrating on more than one screen – the other being the ubiquitous smartphone.



In an executive media strategy and coaching course I have been running for 30 years, I tell business and political leaders that, in times gone by, a 24-hour news cycle was utilised where radio initially reported the story, newspapers and magazines gave background and context, and single 30-minute 7pm or 8pm television bulletins provided time-dated pictures. With the advent of 24-hour television news channels harnessed with social media, this has reduced the time quotient to a 2.4 second news cycle where all engagement happens in hyper-accentuated real time, and where a news anchor is interviewing a newsmaker with one eye on a Tweetdeck. Observations, questions and criticism are noted, processed, and can be used to add value (and entertainment) to the conversation.

It is now not only incumbent on television news stations, but also general entertainment services to make sure they are corralling their audiences from every angle. As I've mentioned, this is all part of what has to be a survival strategy. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism states that television viewing in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States has declined by 3 to 4% per year on average since 2012. These declines, it says, are directly comparable to the declines in print newspaper circulation in the 2000s and, if compounded over 10 years, will result in an overall decline in viewing of 25 to 30%. The institute also notes that the decline in viewing among younger people is far more pronounced both for television viewing in general and for television news specifically. The upshot, according to the institute, is that the loyalty and habits of older viewers prop up overall viewing figures, and risk

obscuring the fact that television news is rapidly losing touch with much of the population. While comparable decline figures in South Africa are hard to come by, one must assume that the local market will eventually, if not already, start to feel the erosion of the medium. It's worth considering the data – a known fact is that television reaches well over 90% of the South African population across all ages and demographics, while digital penetration, as of late-2019, was about 20 percentage points lower. So, when it comes to elephants in the room, television still has the loudest trumpet call. In television's favour, according to global research and insights company WARC, over 70% of the available television audience is actively engaged with the medium, and people spend more time watching the big screen than the small screen. For now. But conventional wisdom says the game is changing and changing fast.

There are over 20 million smart phones in the country. The technology in one's hands is improving with frightening acceleration and, most importantly, the cost of data is now coming down – by 30% in Vodacom's case. This means a new pipeline of content delivery is being re-opened after some shaky forays in the past. Cell C's doomed content platform, Black springs to mind. But, in essence, not only will the network providers up their efforts in creating bespoke content, but brands are also raising their game. The mantra in the past few years in brand communication has been content and story creation direct to social media, mostly via the YouTube channel. As someone who observes the brand and advertising world for a living through my television programme *MaggsonMedia*, I've noticed an astonishing improvement in quality. It poses a real threat to television as we know it. My own consumption habits have changed, and I'm now prepared to give a brand a chance to inform and entertain me if the content is well produced and compelling. So, if television for the moment maintains its high ground and dominant position, but acknowledges that its fight for relevance is underway, how does it regroup and persevere?

Again, I want to confine my argument to the television news sphere where I have been a full-time anchor for over a decade, and the editor-in-chief of a leading news channel for 12 months before opting to stand down. Let me start with content. Television news needs to move beyond the parity that often exists among competing local services. It's a difficult and fine balance to manage. When the president addresses a news conference on a matter of national importance, all rival services will and must carry live coverage. The failure though is often in the post-event analysis in which the viewer needs to be told why a decision or pronouncement is important, and what it means for society at large. And then into phase three, which television news services often fail to do, and that is to take the viewer into the lived reality of the population where such a decision will either impact lives positively or negatively. Too often, television news dies on the alter of policy pronouncement without interrogating purpose or impact. Aside from the critical integrative approach that I have already referred to, television news also needs to understand its unique role not only as a purveyor and explainer of serious information, but that it has

a role as an entertainer. Some years ago, I interviewed a senior staffer at Sky News in Britain who likened his service's offering to a supermarket where all food groups were available. So, if monetary policy was the roughage we need, show business and/or human-interest stories are the carbohydrates. The secret, he said, was to find the balance on a daily basis. In a country like South Africa, beset daily with tragedy and difficulty, television news either fails to find the carbs or believes it will reflect badly on our high-minded ethical principles if we lighten up or dumb down slightly. As someone who has reported the South African story from the frontlines for over 30 years across all platforms, it is a relevant and worthy argument. But in order for television news to survive, it has to understand that it competes alongside YouTube cat videos. As I tell my media coaching clients, television's real power always lies with the remote control in the hand of a distracted viewer with attention deficit disorder. If we are not offering variety and constant change of mood and tone, they move on with the click of a button.

## “24-hour television news has been reduced to a 2.4 second news cycle”

Television's immediate survival also depends on advertising against the backdrop of many brands opting for a digital-first marketing strategy. Whether that is effective or not is another debate, but advertising revenue is a key component in television's fight for survival. If television advertising revenue declines on a steep curve, it means television services including news will be forced to trim back costs. In the news space, that means less travel, less investigative capacity and more parity as stations rely on set-piece news (media briefings, media releases) which is then detrimental to the fundamental *raison d'être* of television news – *to act as a powerful societal watchdog*. Imagine the fallout if cost-cutting prevented the media from carrying wall-to-wall coverage of the Zondo Commission?

So, the remaining question is – and one I get asked all the time - will television be around in 20 years? The best answer I can give is – did you imagine that Netflix would be around five years ago? One doesn't know. But television, by its very heft, has all the tools to survive. However, unlike the once dominant Tyrannosaurus, it has to learn to adapt much quicker than it is doing right now, and understand it occupies a shared future which, as I've mentioned several times already, depends on how successfully it understands and utilises a strategy of meaningful integration.



Jeremy Maggs, an alumnus of DUT Journalism, is a television and radio presenter who has been in the business for over 30 years. Currently, he is the host of eNCA's weekday lunchtime news programme. He also hosts *MaggsonMedia*, a programme with an emphasis on media and advertising. Jeremy acted as editor-in-chief of eNCA for 12 months before stepping down. Prior to that, he was editor of Radio 702's Eyewitness News for eight years. He writes for the Financial Mail on the advertising industry and edits the publication's annual review *AdFocus*. Jeremy has also worked for SAfm and Power 98.7 where his show *The Power Update* won best current affairs programme at the Liberty Radio Awards. He has been inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame, and he presented the award-winning television quiz show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. Jeremy is the author of a bestselling book *Win! Compelling Conversations with 20 Successful South Africans*, and is currently completing his second book titled *My Final Answer*.