

When All the World's A Stage: The Impact of Events on News Coverage of South Africa, 1979-1985

Stanley O. Gaines, Jr.
Pomona College

David C. Roberts
Psychological Corporation

Donald J. Baumann
Texas Department of Protective
and Regulatory Services¹

A time series analysis was used to investigate: (1) whether a significant increase in news coverage of South Africa occurred during the critical years of 1979 -1985; (2) whether the geographic origin and/or sociopolitical impact of events, rather than deaths *per se*, caused the increase; and (3) the manner in which the increase occurred. Results indicated that two symbolic events (i.e., a series of riots in twenty-one South African townships, internal to South Africa; and the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Bishop Desmond Tutu, external to South Africa) cumulatively were responsible for a significant rise in news coverage of South Africa. The relationship of these symbolic sociopolitical events to the forces that shape short-term news headlines and long-term social change in general, including the imminent demise of apartheid in particular is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Although the South African policy of apartheid, built largely upon the edifice of racial separation, has existed since 1948,² civil unrest and violence in that nation escaped the attention of many American journalists prior to the 1980s. Since the early-to-mid 1980s, however,

Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 16, No. 1

South Africa appears to have become a routine feature of daily news reports. But has news coverage actually increased in an objective sense? If so, what factors are responsible for such an increase? Furthermore, what can we learn about the forces that shape short-term news headlines and long-term social change, using South Africa as a vehicle for exploration?

Clearly the media can influence public perception and events.³ But the way in which the media themselves are affected by events can influence public perception, and exactly *how* the media are affected is unclear. For example, it is possible that in the case of South Africa, increases in the number of deaths due to civil unrest have led to increases in American news coverage. On the other hand, deaths in and of themselves may not be sufficient to influence the media in a lasting fashion. Related to this latter point is that although periodic large-scale eruptions of violence and deaths in South Africa can be traced back to the early 1960s⁴ intensified media interest seems to be more recent in origin. If this is true, then aspects other than the sheer number of deaths resulting from those events must have been responsible for the violence as well as the current surge of interest in South Africa.

An alternative to examining only the relationship between news coverage and violent deaths is to explore the nature of the events that underlie these phenomena. News coverage is not a hit-or-miss endeavor and deaths do not occur without a reason. Whether in South Africa or any other country, both must be related in some way to a more fundamental cause: Prominent events. Some important aspects of those events are easily discernible, whereas others may be less obvious.⁵ Both the obvious and not-so-obvious aspects may be essential in understanding the impact of events on the mass media. Moreover, events do not occur in a psychological vacuum. Events that come to the attention of the public (i.e. "outstanding" events) receive "special" psychological attention and evaluation, thus providing a basis for future expectations and beliefs.⁶

The more obvious aspect of an event is its geographic origin. Events can be either external or internal to the borders of the nation under media scrutiny. Consider external events: Media attention may focus on these events because they are played out on the "world stage." With regard to South Africa, the United Nations has consistently called for sanctions since the early 1960s⁷, private anti-apartheid groups have been galvanized throughout the world⁸, and some observers have gone so far as to assert that Communist infiltrators have attempted to dismantle the system of apartheid.⁹ Now consider events internal to South Africa. The media may focus on these events because they stand out in stark contrast to a backdrop of events that occur in most other nations and because they underscore

Gaines, Roberts & Baumann—When All the World's A Stage

the uniqueness of the policy of apartheid. Such contrast effects, which are well-documented in the psychophysical literature,¹⁰ are also evident in broader social phenomena, such as judgments of facial expressions or physical attractiveness¹¹, criminal acts,¹² and especially attitudes.¹³ Contrast effects generally require no more than a simple comparison between two sets of stimuli and occur when one set of stimuli comes to be perceived as more different in terms of extremity (but not functional relation) from the set of stimuli against which the initial set is to be judged.¹⁴ For example, South African policy can be compared with the policy of most Western nations¹⁵; through that comparison, the sheer power and size of the white minority in South Africa and the absence of its parallel even on the continent of Africa itself is made more visible.¹⁶ More specifically, when the largest interracial church in South Africa allows interracial marriages and civil disobedience, the comparison to current policy in the United States can be made, and the relative permissiveness of such a church becomes more newsworthy through such a comparison.

Unlike the geographic origin of a potentially newsworthy event, the sociopolitical impact of that event is rather nonobvious. Events within the sociopolitical domain may be characterized as related overtly to public policy, or the events may be symbolic in nature. We may distinguish between policy-related and symbolic events as follows: During a public policy event, an organization may express a specific goal or plan. The aforementioned church decree is an example of a public policy event. It also illustrates the fact that some forms of policy are symbolic—they have “cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response.”¹⁷ However, not all symbolic events are related to policy. For example, Black South Africans remember the riots that occurred in the Soweto township by symbolizing the anniversary of the riots via demonstrations. In either case, American media coverage may increase.

So far, we have discussed the relatively independent impact of geographic origin and sociopolitical impact upon American media coverage of South Africa. As shown in Figure 1, they can also be considered in combination. That is, the geographic and sociopolitical aspects of an event together may magnify the effect of the event upon the news media. In addition, multiple events within or between categories may intensify this magnification. The events listed in Figure 1 represent each of these possibilities and were identified in the present study on the basis of their relationship in time with potential increases in U.S. coverage of South Africa.

FIGURE 1

Classification of Major Events Occurring
Between January 1, 1979 and October 30, 1985

Sociopolitical Impact	Geographic Origin	
	Internal to S. Africa	External to S. Africa
Policy	Event 4: Church decree 3/21/83	Event 1: U.N. Sanctions 3/7/81
	Event 5: Constitution vote 11/2/83	
Symbolic	Event 3: Soweto Anniversary 6/17/82	Event 2: Reagan-Botha meeting 5/14/81
	Event 6: Township Riots 9/15/84	Event 7: Tutu's Nobel Prize 9/16/84

Some types of events would be expected to increase news coverage to a greater extent than would other events. For instance, external events might gain more media attention than events occurring within South Africa because of the restrictions that South African censorship historically has placed on the accessibility of internal events.¹⁸ Furthermore, since American journalists frequently assume that their readers have little interest in events occurring outside the United States,¹⁹ those journalists may not cover internal South African events surviving censorship on a regular basis. For example, the 1983 Constitutional Vote guaranteeing rights to all except Blacks in South Africa may receive relatively less press coverage than the 1981 Reagan-Botha meetings initiated by, and held in, the United States. American journalists may also attend more to purely symbolic, rather than to policy-oriented events; those journalists might dismiss the practical value of many policy changes as “merely cosmetic.”²⁰ Symbolic events, however, may prove quite effective in spurring coverage; the urgency and drama of such events, reminiscent of the emotionally charged Civil Rights Era that the United States underwent a generation ago, may be of particular interest to American journalists.²¹ Moreover, such symbols may be potent because they are personal and evoke a readiness to respond in the community.²² Consider again the Reagan-Botha meeting in light of its symbolic value or, more dramatically, Bishop Tutu’s 1984 Nobel Prize contrasted with the Constitutional vote.

In the present study, data on the events, deaths, and articles related to South Africa were subjected to an interrupted time series analysis.²³ Three major hypotheses regarding American news coverage of South Africa were explored: First, a significant increase in the

Gaines, Roberts & Baumann—When All the World's A Stage

number of stories per observation period was expected, during the time span (1979 to 1985) under consideration. Second, the geographic origin and sociopolitical impact of events, rather than absolute number of deaths resulting from those events, were expected to emerge as factors in this increased news coverage. Finally, external symbolic events were expected to account for the onset of increased coverage.

METHOD

The data in the present time series analysis consisted of 2,089 articles concerning South Africa and 643 deaths reported in those articles. These data were collected from the *New York Times Index*, a biweekly compilation of abstracts of all articles that have appeared in the daily *New York Times*. The tabulation of articles was based on the number of abstracts appearing in the *Index* under the heading "South Africa" within each two-week interval in the time series. The tabulation of reported deaths was based upon a count of the number of deaths reported in the abstracts. (Secondary reports and references to deaths reported in previous abstracts were excluded from tabulation.) This procedure provided data on the number of articles and deaths during two-week intervals beginning with January 1, 1979 and ending with October 30, 1985. This procedure allowed us to determine whether deaths or types of events were more important in triggering a rise in the number of articles. A scatterplot of each series (i.e., number of articles over time and number of deaths over time, respectively) was inspected and may be obtained by request from the authors of the present study.

Intervals at which the pattern of the series showed the most dramatic change were identified and these intervals were compared to the times at which the possible abrupt changes or interruptions occurred. Seven events (listed in Figure 1) corresponding to abrupt changes in the data patterns were retained for analysis. The seven-year time series was composed of 162 observations, with twenty-nine preceding the first interruption, and twenty-four following the last interruption. This procedure allowed us to test the premises that (1) a genuine increase in news coverage about South Africa had occurred, (2b) increases in the number of deaths over time led to increases in the number of news articles over time, and (3) geographic and sociopolitical events, both singly and together, were responsible for the rise in news coverage.

RESULTS

The data were analyzed with the ARIMA procedure on the Statistical Analysis System (SAS).²⁴ Unexplained error or "noise" associated with each time series analysis was identified, diagnosed, and

Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 16, No. 1

removed. A single model subsequently was generated with the major geographic and sociopolitical events (see Table 1) as predictors, the number-of-deaths time series as the covariate, and the number-of-articles time series as criterion. Results showed that not only did news coverage increase significantly over time, but one internal symbolic event (i.e., the series of township riots) and one external symbolic event (i.e., Tutu's Nobel Prize) were significant predictors of the increase (t 's with 160 degrees of freedom = 2.18 and 2.37, respectively; for both events, $p < .01$). The number-of-deaths time series, in contrast, did not emerge as a significant predictor of the increase in news coverage over time.

Although it is true that two symbolic events led to an increase in coverage, this does not necessarily mean that the impact of these events was independent or due to their symbolic nature. The fact that the two other symbolic events (i.e., the Soweto anniversary and the Reagan-Botha meeting) were not significant predictors suggests that symbolism is not sufficient in and of itself to account for the increase in news coverage. We also cannot conclude that the two significant symbolic events (the township riots and Tutu's Nobel Prize) independently accounted for the increase. As it turns out, the two significant events occurred in close temporal proximity to each other. These data raise the possibility that either (a) the temporal proximity of the events alone explain the increase in news coverage, or (b) both the symbolic nature of the events *and* the temporal proximity to the events combined to account for the increase in news coverage.

In order to provide a limited test of the importance of the temporal proximity and/or the symbolic nature of the two significant events, we contrasted the township riots and the awarding of Tutu's Nobel Prize against two other events (i.e., the United Nations' sanctions and the Reagan-Botha meeting) that occurred relatively close together in time. We reasoned that if both sets of events (i.e., the "sociopolitical/symbolic" set and the "geographic/external" set) were found to be statistically significant as predictors of the increase in news coverage, then the temporal proximity (rather than the symbolic nature) of the township riots and Tutu's Nobel Prize were responsible for the increase in news coverage.

Results indicated that, like the number-of-deaths time series, the "geographic/external" pair of events was not a statistically significant predictor of the increase in US news coverage of South Africa. However, the "sociopolitical/symbolic" pair of events achieved statistical significance at the .10 level and fell just short of statistical significance at the .05 level ($t(160) = 1.93$, $p < .06$). These results, together with those reported earlier in this paper, indicate that whether considered separately or together, the township riots and

Gaines, Roberts & Baumann—When All the World's A Stage

Bishop Tutu's Nobel Prize served to predict a substantial rise in American news coverage of South Africa from 1979 to 1985.

DISCUSSION

As we predicted, the number of news articles regarding South Africa increased significantly from 1979 to 1985. Furthermore, in keeping with our predictions, the nature of events (i.e. geographic and/or sociopolitical) rather than the absolute number of deaths resulting from the events, was responsible for the rise in news coverage. However, both internal and external symbolic events emerged as significant predictors of the increase in news coverage; we had expected that only external symbolic events would be significant as predictors. Interestingly, the temporal proximity of the two events (i.e., the township riots and Bishop Tutu's Nobel Prize) is key to the overall rise in US newspaper articles regarding South Africa.

The results of the time series analyses thus indicate a significant, gradual increase in the number of articles published during the time interval under consideration. These results might also be interpreted as evidence that the township riots (an internal symbolic event) may have been necessary for news reports to rise abruptly. Nevertheless, the township riots may not have been *sufficient* to account for a long-term increase in news coverage of South Africa. The initiating condition seems to have been the occurrence in close temporal proximity of a symbolic event played out on the world stage—Bishop Tutu's Nobel Prize. At the outset, we anticipated that knowledge about the nature of events concerning South Africa would yield insight into the forces that shape the news and social change. Some journalists, psychologists, and sociologists²⁵ have asserted that members of the news media and/or other powerful political and economic interest groups control the news. Ostensibly, this control would serve to regulate social change. Clearly though, social movements themselves can and do influence social change.²⁶ But can the events within these movements influence both the media *and* social change?

According to Phillips,²⁷ a two-stage process characterizes the relationship among events, media, and the audience: Events influence the media, and consequently the media influence the audience. Our results concerning the nature of those events suggest how (and hint at why) such a sequential process occurs. Perhaps influence begins with internal symbolic events—events that have meaning to the participants in a struggle. Even though reported duly by the media, however, internal symbolic events are in themselves insufficient because the struggle remains with the participants. In contrast, the struggle becomes universal with the reporting of an *external* symbolic event—an event that has shared meaning for participants

Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 16, No. 1

and onlookers alike. As Ichheiser once noted, "This means that the victims, even though not yet freed from their social bondage, in fact are freed at least psychologically from their moral isolation. For now there is somebody outside their own ranks who sees and understands the whole situation in the same way as it is immediately seen by themselves ."28

Is the process just described unique to post-1970s South Africa, or can the process also be identified as underlying other social change phenomena? Consider the way in which internal symbolic events, such as the Montgomery bus boycott or the march through Selma, Alabama, and an external symbolic event, the Nobel Peace prize, "drew national and world attention to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement"29 in the United States during the 1960s. Just as such symbolic events have been implicated in the generation of media attention and subsequent social change in the United States during the late 1960s, symbolic events relevant to South Africa may have set in motion inexorable forces that eventually will eradicate apartheid in South Africa altogether. Time, as well as future research, ultimately will determine whether or not media coverage of symbolic events, such as the Nobel Peace Prize, actually leads to significant social change in that country.

CONCLUSION

In the years that have passed since the time period that served as the focus for the present study, South Africa has undergone considerable internal change, primarily in terms of public policy. The once exiled leader of the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela, has been freed and subsequently has entered into negotiations with Prime Minister F.W. de Klerk regarding the transition of South Africa from white minority rule to democratic rule. One by one, the major legal pillars of apartheid have fallen as South Africa, isolated increasingly from the rest of the world economy, has found it necessary to confront the inevitable: Inclusion of the majority of its inhabitants in the political process. To be sure, the transition process has been uneven inconsistent and points toward a future fraught with uncertainty.30 Yet change surely has and will continue to occur within South Africa.

By the same token, much of the change related to South Africa since 1985 has been neither policy-oriented nor confined to the geographic boundaries of South Africa. An especially striking example of such external, symbolic change was Bishop Desmond Tutu's promotion to archbishop, thus lending further moral and social legitimacy to the struggle for equality that Tutu, Mandela, and other central figures in South Africa have championed for so long. At stake in South Africa is much more than political reform; indeed, the face

Gaines, Roberts & Baumann—When All the World's A Stage of South African culture and psyche currently is undergoing a fundamental makeover.³¹

While some observers have called attention to the media coverage of the violence and deaths that continue to grip South Africa,³² few have considered the ways in which the very nature of events has influenced media coverage. In turn, the potential role of the United States in framing the debate over South Africa's future has been underestimated.³³ As such, the question of US news coverage of South Africa takes on added significance as a possible mediator of the impact of current events on the actions of American politicians and civilians towards South Africa itself. It is our hope that theoreticians and researchers throughout the humanities and social sciences address the issue of South Africa and American news media during the years to come, as the social, cultural, political, and economic vacuum created in post-apartheid South Africa undoubtedly will be filled but gradually.

NOTES

¹Preparation of this manuscript was facilitated by a Graduate Opportunity Fellowship and by a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship to Stanley O. Gaines, Jr. The authors wish to thank Miguel Carranza, Maulana Karenga, Marc Lewis, and Steve Predmore for their insightful comments. Please address all correspondence to Stanley O. Gaines, Jr., who is currently at the Department of Psychology, Pomona College, P.O. Box 3003, Claremont, CA 91711.

²P. Lambley, *The Psychology of Apartheid* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980); C.F.J. Muller, *Five Hundred Years: A History of South Africa* (Pretoria: Academia, 1969); L. Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

³S. Iyengar, M.D. Peters, D.R. Kinder, and J.A. Krosnick, "The Evening News and Presidential Evaluations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46 (1984): 778-87; D.P. Phillips, "The Influencing of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review* 39 (1974): 340-354; D.P. Phillips, "Suicide, Motor Vehicle Fatalities, and the Mass Media: Evidence Towards a Theory of Suggestion," *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1979): 1150-1174; D.P. Phillips, "The Impact of Fictional Television Stories on U.S. Adult Fatalities: New Evidence on the Effect of Mass Media on Violence," *American Journal of Sociology* 87 (1982): 1340-1359.

⁴M. Horrell, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1981* (Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of Race Relations, 1982); J.

Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 16, No. 1

Ngubane, "South Africa's Race Crisis: A Conflict of Minds," in *South Africa: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. H. Adam (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1-23; Thompson.

⁵O. Findahl and B. Hoijer, "Some Characteristics of News Memory and Comprehension," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 29 (1985): 279-296.

⁶I. L. Janis, A. A. Lumsdaine, and A. I. Gladstone, "Effects of Preparatory Communications on Reactions to a Subsequent News Event," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15 (1951): 488-515.

⁷M. Horrell, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1962* (Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of Race Relations, 1963); Horrell, 1982; United Nations General Assembly, *Actions by National and Non Governmental Organizations in Implementation of United Nations Resolutions on the Problem of Apartheid and Assistance Provided by Them to the Oppressed People of South Africa* (New York: U.N. Department of Political and Security Council Affairs, 1978).

⁸U.N. General Assembly.

⁹J. Kapstein, "An Interview with Prime Minister P.W. Botha," *South Africa International* 13 (1985): 37-48.

¹⁰R. K. Heintz, "The Effects of Remote Anchoring Points Upon the Judgements of Lifted Weights," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 40 (1950): 584-591; H. Helson and T. Kozaki, "Effects of Duration of Series and Anchor-Stimuli on Judgements of Perceived Size," *American Journal of Psychology* 81 (1968): 292-302; M. Sherif, D. Taub, and C. Hovland, "Assimilation and Contrast Effects of Anchoring Stimuli on Judgements," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 55 (1958): 150-156.

¹¹D. T. Kenrick and S. E. Gutierrez, "Contrast Effects and Judgements of Physical Attractiveness: When Beauty Becomes a Social Problem," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38 (1980): 131-140; M. Manis, "Context Effects in Communication: Determinants of Verbal Output and Referential Decoding," in *Adaptation-Level Theory: A Symposium*, ed. M.H. Appley (New York: Academic Press, 1971).

¹²A. Pepitone and M. Dinuble, "Contrast Effects in Judgements of Crime Severity and the Punishment of Criminal Violators," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 33 (1976): 448-459.

Gaines, Roberts & Baumann—When All the World's A Stage

¹³C. I. Hovland, O. J. Harvey and M. Sherif, "Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Reactions to Communication and Attitude Change," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 55 (1957): 244-252.

¹⁴M Sherif and H. Cantril, *The Psychology of Ego-Involvements* (New York: Wiley, 1947); Kenrick and Gutierrez.

¹⁵T. Hopkinson, *Life World Library: South Africa* (New York: Time, Inc., 1964); Lambley.

¹⁶Hopkinson.

¹⁷F. C. Mish, ed. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1984): 1195; G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); R.A. Wicklund and P.M. Gollwitzer, *Symbolic Self-Completion* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1982).

¹⁸Lambley; South African Department of Foreign Affairs and Information, *South Africa 1982* (Johannesburg: van Rensburg, 1982).

¹⁹C. K. Atkin, J. K. Burgoon, and M. Burgoon, "How Journalists Perceive Their Reading Audience," *Newspaper Research Journal* 2 (1983): 51-63.

²⁰K. Danaher, "Government-Initiated Reform in South Africa and its Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy," *Politics and Society* 13 (1984): 177-202.

²¹C. S. Higgins and P. D. Moss, *Sounds Real: Radio in Everyday Life* (New York: University of Queensland Press, 1982).

²²Wicklund and Gollwitzer.

²³R. McCleary and R. A. Hay, *Applied Time Series Analysis for the Social Sciences* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980).

²⁴G.F.P. Box and G.M. Jenkins, *Time Series Analysis: Forecasting and Control* (San Francisco: Holden-Day, 1976); SAS Institute, Inc., *SAS User's Guide: Statistics* Version 5 ed. (Cary, NC: SAS Institute, 1985).

²⁵D. Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Dell, 1979); G. Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New

Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 16, No. 1

York: Free Press, 1978); J.W.C. Johnstone, "Review Essay: Who Controls the News?" *American Journal of Sociology* 87 (1982): 1174-1181; Iyengar, Peters, Kinder and Krosnick; H. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon, 1979); Johnstone.

²⁶L. Rosenthal, M. Fingrutd, N. Ethiob, R. Kavant, and D. McDonald, "Social Movements and Network Analysis: A Case Study of Nineteenth-Century Women's Reform in New York State," *American Journal of Sociology* 90 (1985): 1022-1054.

²⁷Phillips, 1974; 1979; 1982.

²⁸G. Ichheiser, *Appearances and Realities* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970), 210.

²⁹L.H. Pelton *The Psychology of Nonviolence* (New York: Pergamon, 1974).

³⁰W. de Klerk, "The Political Process in South Africa," *South Africa International* 23 (1992): 65-70; R. Schirre, "The Economic Debate and the Politics of Unreason," *South Africa International* 23 (1992): 71-77; F. van Zyl Slabbert, "Dilemmas for Democracy in South Africa," *South Africa International* 23 (1992): 4-10.

³¹de Klerk; Schirre; van Zyl Slabbert.

³²L. Schlemmer, "Violence—What Is To Be Done?" *South Africa International* 23 (1992): 60-64.

³³M.Christie, "The U.S. and Change in South Africa" *South Africa International* 23 (1992): 91-92.