

## **The Battle Against Apartheid** **Media Coverage of South Africa 1989-90**

How have the American media covered the struggle against apartheid in South Africa? To find out we analyzed nearly a thousand news items from July 1989 through June 1990, including 407 reports on the ABC, NBC, and CBS evening newscasts, and 559 news stories and editorials in the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*. We also compared the news during Nelson Mandela's U.S. and world tour with earlier patterns of coverage.

### **Major findings:**

*Media Monitor* (Copyright 1990) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues.

Editors:

*Dr. S. Robert Lichter*  
*Dr. Linda S. Lichter*

Research Director:

*Danlet Amundson*

Project Director

*Tim McLaughlin*

Research Assistants

*Chris Blanchard*  
*Scott Fernlund*

Production and Graphics

*Mary Carroll Gunning*  
*Allison Schaengold*

Public Affairs Director:

*Toni Mann*

\*\*\*

■ **Cheers & Jeers** - On TV news, Nelson Mandela's press was five-to-one positive; South African President F.W. de Klerk's was almost two-to-one negative. *Page 4*

■ **Victory Tour** - During Mandela's June tour, approval for sanctions rose, but his personal evaluations worsened. *Page 5*

■ **Video Violence** - On TV news, NBC aired the most reports on police violence and the fewest reports on opposition violence. *Page 3*

■ **Split Screen** - Most sources supported foreign sanctions and de Klerk's reforms; but majorities in the *Washington Times* opposed both. *Page 4*

■ **The Middle East** - The crisis consumed 73% of the network evening newscasts. Oil price rises got as much coverage as the plight of captive foreigners in Iraq and Kuwait. *Page 6*



## In the News

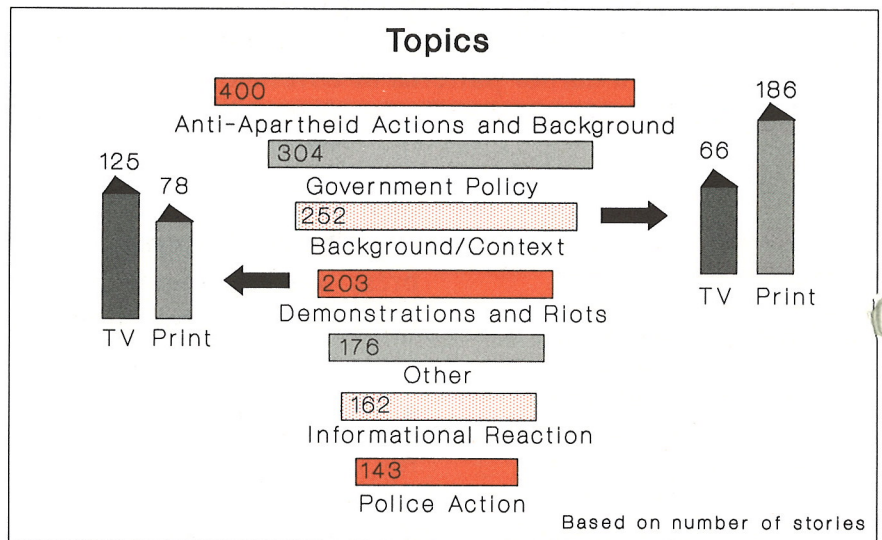
To examine how the American media portrayed the racial crisis in South Africa, we analyzed coverage of that country from July 1, 1989 through March 31, 1990. This period began with a worsening governmental crisis included the resignation of then-President P.W. Botha and the election of F.W. de Klerk, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and legalization of the African National Congress (ANC).

Researchers analyzed 341 stories broadcast on the three network evening newscasts, totalling 8 hours 20 minutes of airtime. NBC's 133 stories (3 hrs. 16 min.) topped both competitors, as ABC aired 111 (2 hrs. 44 min.) and CBS 97 (2 hrs. 20 min.). We also analyzed 213 articles (both news and editorials) in the *Washington Post* and 200 in the *Washington Times*.

We conducted a follow-up study of South African news during June 1990, to assess the impact of Mandela's heavily covered U.S. tour. The same five outlets ran 212 stories on South Africa in that one month alone. ABC aired 27 stories (32 min 12 sec.), followed by NBC with 22 (33 min. 54 sec.) and CBS with 17 (26 min. 54 sec.) for a total of 66 stories and one hour 33 minutes of airtime. The *Washington Post* ran 87 articles, while the *Washington Times* printed 59.

cluded church leaders such as Bishop Desmond Tutu and the Rev. Allan Boesak, African National Congress (ANC) leaders like Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, and ordinary demonstrators and protesters.

Opposition sources were seen and heard most frequently on television, where they accounted for 36 percent of all sources, compared to only 17 percent official government sources. The trend was the same at the *Washington Post*, which used 28 percent opposition and 18 percent government sources. Only the conservative *Washington Times* relied about equally on sources from the anti-apartheid opposition and the South African government (21% vs. 20% respectively).



## Sources

The media are frequently criticized for covering foreign affairs from an American perspective, and for relying primarily on government sources. Neither of these criticisms proved valid for the South Africa story. First, more than three out of four sources quoted (76%) were South African. Only one source in eleven (9%) came from the United States. Second, the media relied on the anti-apartheid opposition for information half again as often as government sources within South Africa. The opposition accounted for 28 percent of all sources compared to only 18 percent for the government. Prominent opposition voices in-

## Topics

News coverage of South Africa was driven by efforts to end or reform the system of apartheid. The coverage focused mainly on the anti-apartheid movement. The largest number of stories, 400 in all, dealt with the actions, statements, or background of anti-apartheid leaders or organizations. By contrast, all discussion of government policy together totalled only 304 stories. Another major element of the story was social unrest associated with the apartheid debate. More than 200 stories dealt with the demonstrations, protests, and riots against the government and its policies. Another 143 stories focused on police actions in response to



racial protest and unrest. Television's well-known preference for action over explanation was evident in its coverage. The networks devoted half again as many stories to demonstrations and riots as did the newspapers (125 vs. 78). By contrast, the print outlets devoted nearly three times as much coverage as television did to explaining the background and context of the current debate.

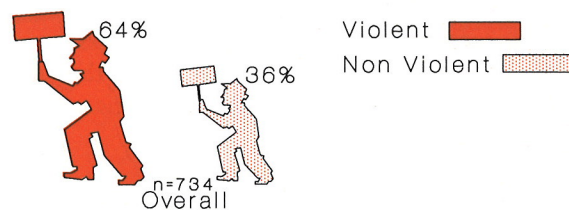
## Police vs. Protesters

The coverage drew heavily on the dynamic of protest and police response, especially the violence committed by both sides. We coded 734 mentions of protests or government reactions. Nearly two-thirds of these (64%) concerned violent behavior such as the police use of whips, tear gas, and attack dogs or demonstrators burning barricades and looting. News organizations differed sharply in the attention they devoted to violence committed by the police and the demonstrators respectively.

Among the television networks, NBC aired by far the most reports of police violence (67) and the fewest reports of violence by demonstrators (9). By contrast, CBS and ABC each reported 44 violent acts by police. CBS mentioned violence by protesters 16 times, ABC 11 times. NBC was also the only outlet to report non-violent protest more frequently than violent protest (23 vs. 9 mentions). All other outlets reported violent actions by both police and demonstrators more frequently than non-violent actions. At the newspapers, the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times* each reported the same number of violent actions by police (101). Surprisingly, however, the more liberal *Post* reported violence by demonstrators twice as often as the conservative *Times* (54 vs. 26).

Thus, NBC's audience heard reports of police violence mentioned more than seven times as often as reports of violence by protesters. At

## Descriptions of Protests

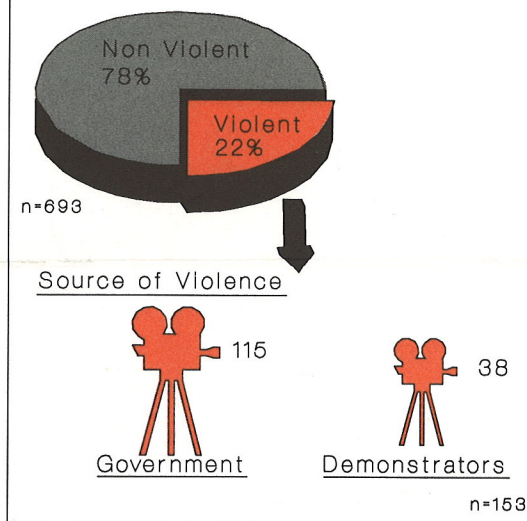


|                       | ABC | CBS | NBC | <i>Washington Post</i> | <i>Washington Times</i> |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|-----|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Police Violence       | 44  | 44  | 67  | 101                    | 101                     |
| Demonstrator Violence | 11  | 16  | 9   | 54                     | 26                      |

Based on number of mentions.

ABC, the ratio was four to one, at CBS three to one. The *Washington Times* reported on police violence 4 times as often as protestor violence, while the ratio at the *Washington Post* was only two to one.

## TV Protest Visuals



## Video Violence

Television's reports of protest and violence are visual as well as verbal. Indeed, pictures of violence may be the medium's most distinctive and emotionally compelling feature. Recognizing this, the South African government ordered police to remove reporters before dispersing protesters. Therefore, television frequently showed scenes of peaceful protest followed by reporters describing off-screen violence. Four out of five scenes of protest shown were non-violent. Despite these restrictions, the networks showed 153 scenes of violence. Of these, three out of four showed such police behavior as the use of whips and attack dogs to quell crowds. The remaining violent scenes showed protesters burning barricades, looting, or throwing stones. (Five visuals showed violence on both sides; these were not included in the above figures.) Overall, the preponderance of police violence over protester violence was slightly greater in verbal than in visual depictions on television.



## Mandela vs. de Klerk

Nelson Mandela received mostly accolades on American television, while F.W. de Klerk's media image was a mixed bag, despite his effort to reform the apartheid system. Overall, Mandela received 55 positive evaluations from sources and reporters, compared to only nine negative evaluations during the nine month study, for an overall 86 percent positive rating. For example, the *Washington Post* quoted the Rev. Allan Boesak, "He is a statesman. He is a man of real intelligence, a great political strategist, but also a very genial man, thoughtful and composed." (2/11/90) By contrast, de Klerk attracted balanced coverage, comprised of 69 positive and 60 negative judgments (53% positive). For example, ABC aired a white South African who berated de Klerk for his reforms, "He's selling everyone out, not just the white nation. He's gone bananas. Nobody is going to benefit from this except maybe the radicals and the communists." (2/5/90)

On the all-important television networks, Mandela gained a five to one positive ratio (84% positive), compared to almost two to one negative for the South African president (36% positive). Mandela fared even better in the *Washington Post*, which gave

him a 100 percent positive rating -- not a single criticism printed during the nine month study. De Klerk also fared somewhat better in the *Post*, with a 53 percent positive rating. Only the *Washington Times* presented similar levels of good press for both men -- 67 percent positive for Mandela and 63 percent positive for de Klerk.

Despite suffering by comparison with Mandela, de Klerk's media image improved substantially following his legalization of the African National Congress in February. His proportion of good press jumped from only 42 percent prior to his announcement of this and other reforms, to 62 percent thereafter. De Klerk's action also set

the stage for Mandela's release from prison. The change in Mandela's legal status produced little change in his media image. The slight drop overall (from 91 to 85% positive) was due to falling approval rating in the *Washington Times*, from 100 percent positive prior to February to only 60 percent thereafter.

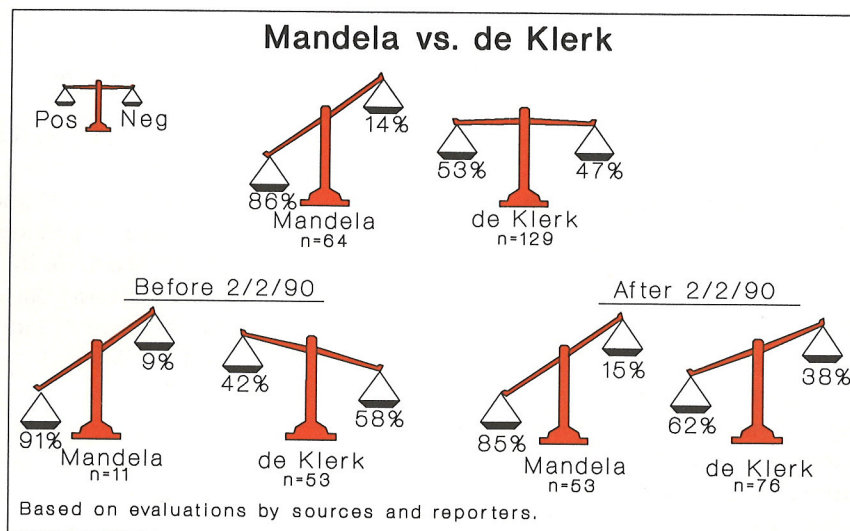
## Rating the Issues

The apartheid system of racial inequality is the centerpiece of the crisis in South Africa. An overwhelming 86 percent of all sources rejected apartheid. Sample criticism: "Every

South African has been defrauded by apartheid. Every family faces creeping poverty. Enough is enough." (South African Democratic Party Manifesto, *Washington Times*, 7/29/89). Another focus of debate was the actions of the police as they attempted to deal with the protest movement and enforce apartheid law. Their activities were received only slightly better than the apartheid system. More than three out of four sources criticized

the police. A typical evaluation came from a South African policeman of "mixed race," "They were just hitting people. They couldn't care if they were innocent bystanders or not. They were running after them even when they were fleeing, hitting them. It seemed to me that they were enjoying themselves, feasting on the people." (*Washington Times* 9/7/89).

By contrast, the political reforms proposed and implemented by the de Klerk government, such as allowing peaceful demonstrations and releasing Mandela from prison, were praised by nearly three out of five sources (59%). Television gave the reforms their highest ratings, at 67 percent positive. For example, on ABC a white South African responded to Mandela's release, "it's





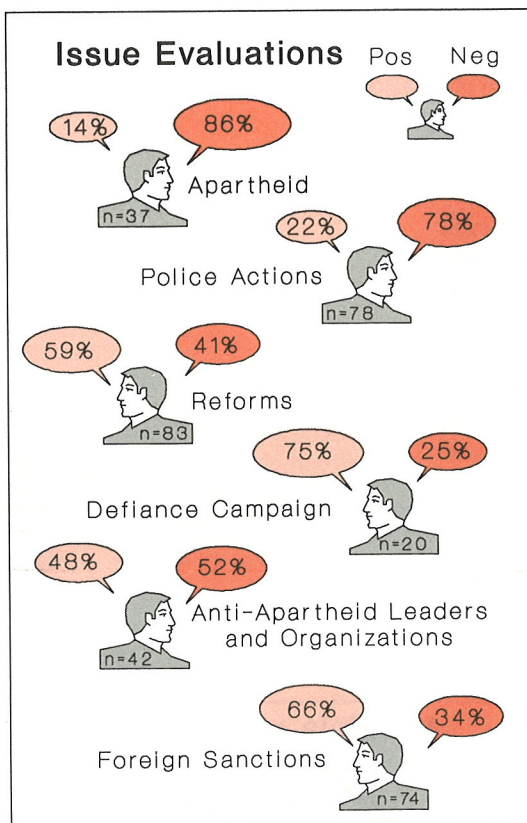
the greatest thing to ever happen to South Africa... let's hope that this country will go forward in great strides." (2/11/90). The positive reaction to reform was slightly more muted in the *Washington Post*, gaining approval from 58 percent of sources. But the *Washington Times* dissented from the national media consensus by printing nearly twice as much criticism as support for de Klerk's reforms, a 64 percent negative rating.

The actions of the anti-apartheid opposition were a major focus of the media's issue debate. The opposition's chief tactic, the defiance campaign, was praised by three out of four sources. Apart from Mandela, opposition leaders and organizations did not fare as well. Fewer than half the sources (48%) supported such leaders as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and organizations like the ANC.

Finally, the economic sanctions imposed against South Africa by most of the world community received the most evaluations (74) of any issue. Two out of three sources supported foreign sanctions. Both the networks and the *Washington Post* displayed mainly approval (78% and 69% positive ratings respectively). For example, CBS quoted Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), "Sanctions have proved their value in helping to bring the regime to the brink of meaningful negotiations. To insure good faith and further progress the sanctions should be maintained in full force." (2/2/90). Once again, however, the *Washington Times* provided a dissenting voice. The *Times* panned the policy of economic sanctions, giving them negative press by a four to three margin (56% to 44%).

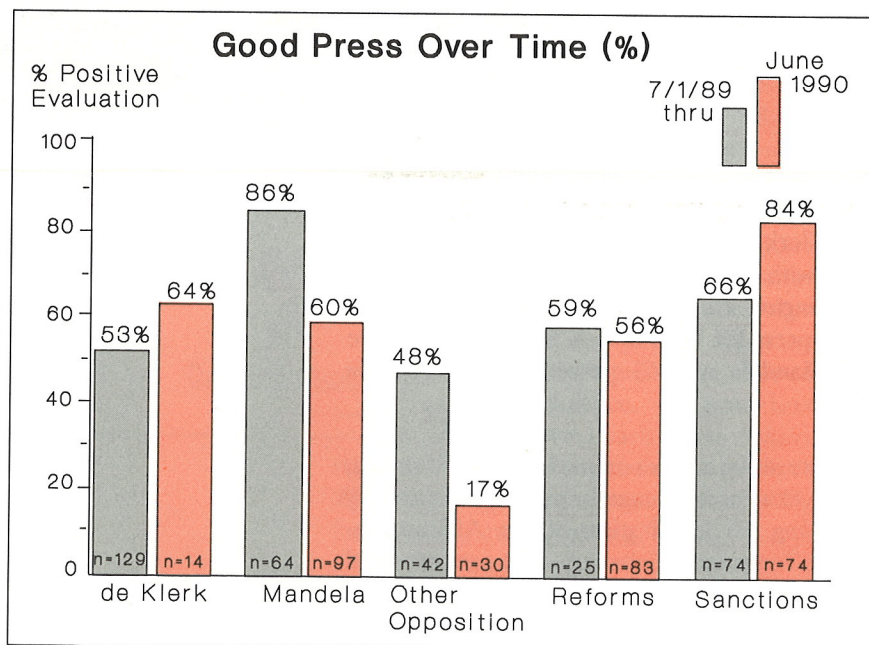
## Mandela Mania?

To gauge the effect Nelson Mandela's U.S. and World Tour had on the American media, we also analyzed news coverage of



South Africa during June 1990. The news diverged from previous patterns in several key areas. Heavy attention to Mandela's U.S. visit caused a dramatic jump in coverage. Discussions of the man and his policies became the central focus of South Africa news. From July 1989 through the end of March 1990 Mandela was evaluated by 64 sources. During June 1990 alone, this number rose to 97. Enthusiasm for the man remained high but was mixed with rejections of Mandela's support for Yasir Arafat, Fidel Castro, and Moammar Gadhafi. As a result, Mandela's approval rating dropped to only 52 percent of sources on television and 36 percent in the *Washington Times*. The *Washington Post* continued to serve as Mandela's staunchest source of support, giving him 85 percent positive evaluations to go with his 100 percent approval rating in our earlier study.

Typical of the adulation that accompanied Mandela's visit was the praise of New York Governor Mario Cuomo, who called him "a symbol of the indestructibility of the human spirit." (NBC 6/20/90) But naysayers also found their way onto the airwaves. Congressman William Dannemeyer (R-CA) charged, "Nelson Mandela's appearance before this





body (Congress) is a national disgrace. The invitation alone heaps shame on this body." (CBS 6/25/90) Other leaders and organizations of the South African opposition also fared poorly in June, receiving 83 percent negative assessments. Most of the criticism concerned the ANC's connection with the South African Communist Party.

As Mandela moved to center stage, de Klerk was relegated to the sidelines. He received a positive approval rating of 64 percent, but this was based on only 14 evaluations, compared to 129 in our previous nine month study. For the media, this was Mandela's moment, and it was not to be shared by his main adversary.

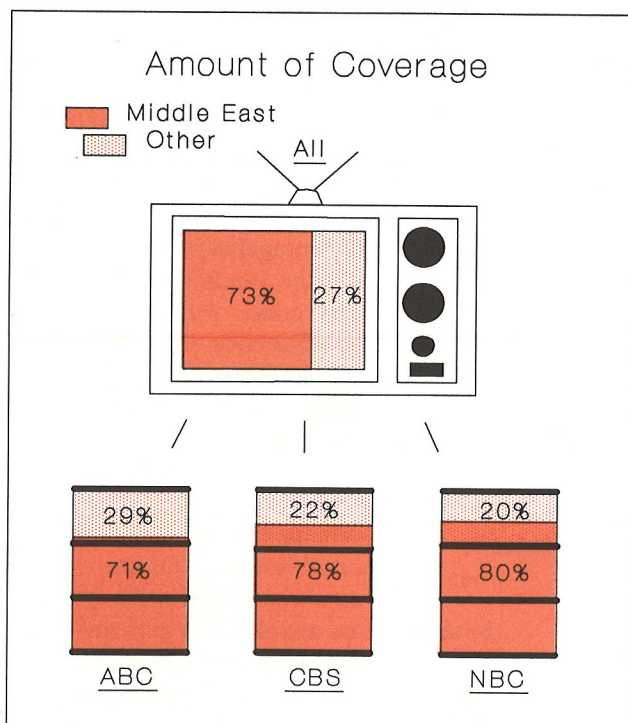
The premiere issue of South African news in June was foreign sanctions. In fact the stated purpose of the Mandela tour was to pressure

foreign governments to keep up the economic sanctions. The 74 assessments on this issue equalled the total we recorded during the entire previous study. Advocates of sanctions outweighed detractors by more than a five to one margin (84%). That represents a substantial boost from the already high 66 percent approval rating during the earlier period studied. Support was virtually unanimous (94% positive) at the networks and the *Post*. Even at the *Times*, where a majority of sources had previously opposed sanctions, two out of three now backed them. This illustrates the positive aura surrounding Mandela's visit, perhaps even more than his personal ratings.

Yearly corporate (\$50.00) and individual (\$25.00) subscriptions are available.

## The Guns of August

### TV News Coverage of the Middle East Crisis: Week 1 (August 2 to 8)



Major Topics

| Topic                           | Stories | Checkmark                           |
|---------------------------------|---------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. U.S. Government Actions      | 73      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Iraq Government Actions      | 47      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Arab Government Actions      | 40      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Other International Response | 32      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Captives/Hostages            | 23      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Oil Prices                   | 22      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Background/Analysis          | 28      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Economic Effects             | 16      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

Note: The television network evening newscasts aired 185 reports on the Middle East crisis and 70 reports on all other stories from August 2 to August 8. More than one topic could be listed per story.