Reporting a "miracle": How The New York Times The Times of London and The Star of Johannesburg covered South Africa's founding democratic election

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by

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Master of Arts
The University of Montana
1997

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A comparison between the way in which The New York Times, The Times of London and The Star of Johannesburg reported on South Africa's first democratic general election in April 1994. This paper covers the different biases and emphasises of these three papers, as became evident through a close examination of every article published in each of the three papers in the month of April 1994. The paper also provides some background on South Africa's history — the reasons why the South African election became one of the most covered media events in history.
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Reporting a “miracle”


by

Tara Turkington
Living thousands of miles away from South Africa in the little town of Missoula, nestled in the Montanan Rockies, in April 1994, I experienced my country’s first democratic election and the demise of apartheid through the eyes of foreign correspondents.

What came across was a bewildering array of differences of opinion and perspective — a living example of how no two journalists look at the same event and draw the same conclusions.

South Africa’s transition to democracy was one of the greatest news events of the 20th century, and the fact that it was a “good news” story in a sea of bloody international stories like the Rwandan genocide and the war in Bosnia, both happening at roughly the same time, made it all the more remarkable.

News organizations around the world went all out to capture the event. Neil Behrmann, a reporter for South Africa’s premier daily The Star, on Friday April 29, 1994, wrote: “About 5,000 foreign journalists and TV crews are estimated to be in South Africa.”

Against this background, I set about finding exactly where the differences of opinion and style in covering this event lay between two world-renowned foreign papers — The New York Times and The Times of London — and South Africa’s 110-year-old, Johannesburg-based daily, The Star.

The New York Times and The Times both have proud and prestigious histories. Both are in a sense representative of countries that were (and are) important trading partners for South Africa, so the way in which they portray South Africa to their readers has a direct impact on South Africa’s future.

Both the United States and the United Kingdom had been involved in bringing about change in South Africa, through government-instituted measures such as sanctions, and through
the vociferous, civilian-led, anti-apartheid movements in both countries.

These pressure groups played no small part in pushing their countries into taking moral stands against apartheid, which systematically subjugated South Africa’s blacks (in the majority by far) in order to promote the welfare of the country’s minority whites.

Apartheid’s rise and demise

Apartheid had been a racist hallmark in South Africa since the strongly Afrikaner National Party (NP) came to power in 1948. Through the 1950s, the Nationalists promulgated a series of laws that enforced “grand apartheid.”

This comprised far-reaching laws such as the Group Areas Act of 1950 which outlawed blacks and whites from living in the same area, and the 1952 Population Registration Act, a cornerstone of apartheid that defined all South Africans at birth as “white,” “black” or “coloured,” through complicated legal and linguistic acrobatics.

“Petty apartheid,” which was also brought to life at this time, comprised more trivial laws such as the Separate Amenities Act of 1953 which ensured that whites and blacks could not share facilities ranging from public bathrooms and buses to park benches.

The National Party ruthlessly suppressed internal resistance to apartheid as it gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, not least by severely curtailing the freedom of the press.

Other state methods included detention without trial, and often torture and murder, as has continued to emerge in recent criminal trials within South Africa such as that of Eugene de Kock, a government-backed hit-squad commander, at the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This commission was set up in 1996 with powers to grant amnesty to those who admitted committing politically
motivated crimes within a defined time frame. It is still taking applications and hearing testimony from victims of apartheid and their families and friends.

Apartheid survived sanctions first instituted by the United Nations in 1963 (initially only against the shipment of equipment and materials for arms manufacture), and by a wide variety of trading partners, including the United States and Britain, which both imposed various trade sanctions in 1986, but only after years of international pressure. Apartheid also survived the pariah status enforced on South Africa in the arenas of international sport and theater.

The system looked as strong as ever in 1989 when Frederik Willem (FW) de Klerk took over as state president from the ailing Pieter Willem (PW) Botha (known for wagging his finger and making speeches such as his 1985 utterance quoted by the now defunct South African paper, the Rand Daily Mail: “I am going to keep law and order in this country and nobody in the world is going to stop me.”)

When, on February 2, 1992, during his opening of Parliament speech, De Klerk announced that he would release apartheid’s most famous prisoner, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, who had been imprisoned for 27 years for treason, the nation — and the world — gasped in surprise.

De Klerk kept his word, and nine days later Mandela walked free: the first step on a path which would see South Africa eschewing almost 40 years of racist history and embracing multi-party democracy, under the guidance of none other than Mandela himself, who became the first president of the “New South Africa.”

In this context, media organizations around the world — not least those within South Africa itself — began to plan their coverage of the watershed election, from both inside the country, and from various international viewpoints.

The Star mustered 75 writers, The Times of London had 14 reporters on the story (although three were based in the
United Kingdom), and The New York Times boasted eight bylines, although only five of those reporters actually wrote from South Africa (two reported from the United States and one from South Africa’s neighbor, Zimbabwe).

On most key issues, The Star, The Times and The New York Times differed considerably, as they did on levels of professionalism ranging from subtle skills such as the careful identification of sources to contextualizing issues and events.

Here’s where they differed — and converged — on the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and its leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi; the African National Congress (ANC) and its leader, Mandela; the NP and its leader, then President De Klerk; white extremists; politically related violence; and journalistic standards.

The Times

Thirty-five percent of The Times’ April 1994 editions carried stories about the South African election on their front pages.

Britain has closer historical ties with South Africa than does the United States. It twice governed South Africa in its early colonial history, and it fought the three-year Anglo-Boer War against white Afrikaners from 1899 to 1902. The war, which still evokes bitterness in some parts of South African society, was fought mostly over control of the country’s mineral riches. Britain won the war but granted South Africa independence in 1910.

Despite these ties with Britain, The New York Times’ editors considered the election story 20 percent more interesting and important to their readers than did The Times’ editors, if front-page placings are anything to go by.

South Africa appeared on the front page on 17 days out of the 30 The New York Times was published in April 1994 — or in 57 percent of the editions.
Predictably enough, the election made the front page of The Star every day of the 22 days that the paper was published in April. (The Star isn't published on a Saturday or Sunday, although there is a separately run, but affiliated paper called The Saturday Star — although this paper was called The Weekend Star at the time. Likewise, The Times is published Monday to Saturday, while The Sunday Times, a paper with a similar masthead but which is separately run, comes out on a Sunday in the United Kingdom. The New York Times is published every day of the week.)

The Times' average story length was 350 words — a third longer than the average 230-word story in The Star, but just half the length of the average New York Times story which ran at 700 words.

The Times' correspondents wrote approximately 37,500 words about the election. In comparison, The New York Times ran about 60,000 words, although the paper had fewer reporters working on the story and published fewer stories: 86 compared to The Times' 107. The Star had 75 different reporters, although only about half of these were full-time, but managed only about 200,000 words, just a little more than three times as many as The New York Times.

In an interview in London in September 1994, The Times' foreign editor at the time, Richard Owen, described how he had taken a personal interest in planning his paper's coverage of the election. "It was the major foreseeable media event in 1994," he said.

Owen travelled to South Africa before the election, where he interviewed De Klerk and Buthelezi. In our interview in 1994, he cast himself in the role of a general mobilizing an army of reporters positioned on different fronts: the enemy was the multifarious and organic event that was unveiling itself in a million separate incidents across the country. Capturing these incidents as coherently and completely as possible was the stuff of victory.
The Times' (almost all-male) team was led by Michael Hamlyn, an older reporter who ran The Times' bureau in Southern Africa and who brought to the story a lifetime of experience in journalism.

But he was rivalled closely by an up-and-coming correspondent in his mid-20s, Inigo Gilmore, whose most complete experience in journalism had until then been writing “diaries” — “what’s-on” columns full of gossip and inside information primarily for the Evening Standard, also based in London.

In an interview in Johannesburg in December 1996, Gilmore described how he had approached Owen in London a few months before the election, and on the advice of colleagues in the profession, had told him, with conviction: “I am going to South Africa.”

Owen told him about Hamlyn, who was based in Johannesburg, and suggested he file a few pieces “on spec” — The Times would use them if they were good enough.

Consequently, Gilmore, by his own acknowledgement, made his name in South Africa. Eighteen of his stories were published in April to Hamlyn’s 20, and the two men wrote roughly 9,000 words each. Gilmore is now bureau chief for The Times in Johannesburg.

Hamlyn, who according to Gilmore was fired by The Times in 1996, lives in Cape Town, and works for the Agence France Presse (AFP) news agency and Voice of America.

Apart from Hamlyn and Gilmore, The Times had — and still has — another correspondent based in South Africa, Ray Kennedy, who primarily covered South Africa’s most violent place — the area which is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

The Times' East Africa correspondent at the time, who was based in Nairobi, also came down to South Africa, and was the third most prolific of the paper’s writers in this period, writing almost 6,500 words in 12 stories. Kiley went on to
cover the Rwandan genocide and the war in Bosnia for The Times.

Foreign Editor Owen said specifically of Sam Kiley: "He's what I call a heat and dust correspondent. His strength is as a color writer ... We sat down and devised Kiley's tour." Kiley and a photographer, Simon Walker, hired a car and went off to remote places armed with a cellular telephone and a brief to hunt for unusual stories. "They went to places where guys in suits don't go," said Owen. "What I asked him to do was to dissect the mood of the country." Kiley, said Owen, was told to ignore the daily stories.

R.W. Johnson, who wrote three stories for The Times in April 1994, but far more for The Sunday Times, was employed especially to write analytical pieces, particularly about KwaZulu-Natal and the Zulus, the ethnic group which numerically dominates the province.

Although all the writers showed their own particular biases and interests, two things stood out as a whole about The Times' coverage: it was far more sympathetic to Buthelezi and the IFP than the other two papers were (and conversely, critical of Mandela and the ANC), and it concentrated far more on the threat white separatists — or the "white right" — posed to the election.

**The Times' pro IFP-Buthelezi stance**

This was manifested through the relatively high percentage of pro-IFP sources interviewed, and in the bias conveyed through individual sentences.

Of all the individuals interviewed by The Times' reporters that were clearly pro-ANC, pro-NP or pro-IFP, 30 percent — or just under a third — were pro-IFP.

In other words, it was clear through the stories that these sources were supportive of the IFP in one way or another —
they worked for the organization, for instance, or they openly said they would vote for it.

Thus, *The Times'* journalists perceived the IFP to be considerably more worthy of attention than did South Africa’s voters — which gave the party 10.5 percent of the national vote.

Compare *The Times'* 30 percent of pro-IFP sources to the corresponding figures from *The Star*. Only 21 percent of sources that fell into one of the three categories were pro-IFP, while only 17 percent of *The New York Times'* sources in these categories were pro-IFP — just slightly more than half *The Times'* percentage.

But the sources chosen to convey information were not the only way *The Times* favored the IFP. *The Times'* reporters also concentrated more on the IFP than it did on the other two parties. On average, the paper dedicated 2.9 sentences per story to Buthelezi and other IFP officials and supporters, compared to 2.5 sentences per story to Mandela, other ANC spokespeople and supporters, and 1.3 sentences per story to De Klerk, other NP officials and supporters.

In terms of bias, there were 595 sentences in *The Times'* stories which showed definite bias in one of the following six areas: the sentence was pro- or anti-Buthelezi and/or the IFP in general; was pro- or anti-De Klerk and/or the NP, was pro- or anti-Mandela and/or the ANC.

*The Times* came out with a few more sentences that were anti-Buthelezi and the IFP than were pro: 22 percent of sentences that showed strong bias cast him in a poor light, as opposed to 18 percent which portrayed him and/or his party favorably.

Thus, *The Times* was far kinder to the IFP than say, *The New York Times*, which portrayed it favorably in just four percent of its sentences showing strong bias, compared to 17 percent which threw it in a negative light.
Gilmore admitted in the December 1996 interview that *The Times'* ambiguous stance towards Buthelezi was a weak point in its election coverage, and that his paper should have been more critical.

But in the 1994 interview with Owen, who admittedly did not have the 20/20 vision of hindsight available to Gilmore in 1996, Owen denied any pro-Buthelezi bias: "I'm not aware of any bias, we tried to cover the whole spectrum ... We were as cold-eyed about Inkatha as we were about the ANC."

Perhaps somewhat arrogantly in the light of the statistics worked out for this project, Owen went on to say: "The American press is probably a little more heavy-handed about this (portraying political parties objectively) than we are."

The correspondent most ready to portray Buthelezi and the IFP in a favorable light was Johnson. In the interview, Gilmore dubbed Johnson "very conservative ... a federalist."

Madelaine Wackernagel, business editor of a well-respected Johannesburg-based weekly, the *Mail & Guardian*, who worked for *The Times* from 1986 to 1989 and as a freelancer until the end of 1992, said the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Times* — at least while she worked there — "was extremely Thatcherite."

Margaret Thatcher, who was Britain's Conservative prime minister from 1979 to 1990, was strongly "anti-terrorist," which meant also being against the ANC (which had employed an armed struggle against apartheid), Wackernagel argued.

"Thatcher was a Buthelezi fan," she said. Thatcher's government refused to entertain the thought that the ANC would ever come to power. *The Times* "swallowed that lock, stock and barrel ... It's an extremely right-wing paper."

Some of the writing that appeared in *The Times* bears up Wackernagel's criticisms. For example, one of the earliest issues in April picked up by all three papers was De Klerk's declaration of a state of emergency in Natal, where election-related violence was escalating. The declaration increased
police powers in the province and introduced a curfew, among other measures.

The Times ran a story on April 1 about De Klerk’s declaration implicating Mandela in the decision ("Mandela wins over De Klerk in war on Inkatha"), with little more evidence than reporter Johnson’s opinion to back it up in the story: “There is no doubt that the declaration of the emergency is a victory for the ANC, which has been pressing the government to take this action, as if it were intent on crushing its great enemy, before the election, and trying to involve President de Klerk in responsibility for this action,” Johnson wrote.

But Johnson wasn’t the only one to fill news pieces with his personal opinions. Hamlyn was also guilty of opinionated news reporting, infusing at least one story about Buthelezi and his following ("Zulu factor fires Nationalist hope") which ran on April 26, with an aura of romance, power and anachronistic primitiveness.

The story described the IFP’s late mobilization for the election in these terms: “Those who watched Zulu on BBC2 at the weekend will know the feeling: thousands of followers of Mangosuthu Buthelezi (who played King Ceteshawayo in the film) pouring over hastily constructed defenses carrying cowhide shields, stabbing spears and guns.

“The late entry of Chief Buthelezi, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, into the general election that begins today has come upon the other parties with something of the surprise the Welshmen defending Rorke’s Drift felt when the Zulu impis appeared over the horizon: they knew it was possible, but it seemed unlikely.” (The battle of Rorke’s Drift coincidentally, was fought between the British and the Zulus in 1879. A handful of British soldiers warded off thousands of Zulus to defend the British outpost at Rorke’s Drift.)

While The Times was comparatively sympathetic to Buthelezi, it was, on the other hand, much more skeptical of Mandela and the ANC than the other two papers — the negative
sentences (21 percent of those showing strong bias in the six areas mentioned above) just outnumbering the positive sentences (20 percent).

Also related to this was *The Times' treatment of De Klerk and his predominantly white NP, which was least critical compared to its positions on Mandela and Buthelezi and their respective, predominantly black parties.

Thirteen percent of stories that showed strong bias towards one of these politicians and/or their parties were pro-De Klerk and the NP, while just seven percent were anti.

This ties in with Wackernagel's allegation of racism levelled at *The Times*, whose editorial staff, she believes, think “the world is run by whites for whites.”

The opinion of Johnson, again in his April 26 story, "Mandela wins over De Klerk in war on Inkatha" (presented as a news story in the foreign pages), is not hard to discern: “As voters of all races become more panicky at the real prospect of a descent into chaos, so there is a natural tendency to cling to the authoritative and relatively reassuring figure of Mr de Klerk. No one has any faith in either Inkatha or the ANC to maintain law and order on their own and the sheer indispensability of the old white state seems, even in the eyes of many blacks, clearer than ever at just the point when the rule of that state has reached its dying days.”

*The Times* also wrote more stories specifically about South African whites than either *The New York Times* or *The Star*, with headlines like "Whites face change with dignified distress."

Eighteen percent of *The Times'* stories were specifically and clearly about whites (as opposed to nine percent of *The New York Times'* stories and seven percent of *The Star's*).

Twenty-one percent of *The Times'* stories were specifically and clearly about blacks, compared to 50 percent of *The New York Times'* stories, although this figure was higher than in
*The Star*, in which just 10 percent of stories were about blacks.

Even *The Times'* front-page story on Thursday April 28, the day after the majority of South Africans went to the polls for the first time, was a story primarily about a white woman (albeit with a proud history of anti-apartheid activism), Helen Suzman.

"Mama Suzman, apartheid's scourge" was the longest story — 960 words — that *The Times* ran about the election, and was written by former editor, Simon Jenkins, who jetted out especially for the election. Sending Jenkins to South Africa was "the final gun I fired," Owen said in the 1994 interview, continuing the military metaphor he used to describe *The Times'* election coverage.

But in the December 1996 interview, Gilmore acknowledged the irony and poor news judgement of a lead story about a white woman on the day black South Africans finally went to the polls, and put the story's positioning down to "office politics." The editor, Peter Stoddart (who is still the editor), had positioned the story on page one probably out of deference to the former editor, Gilmore explained.

The story was not an especially good one: Jenkins apparently did not do any in-depth research for the piece, and interviewed just three sources: Suzman, a woman civilian and Desmond Tutu's wife, identified just as "Mrs Tutu". *The Star* published the same story in 350 words on page six on the same day, under the headline "Aunty Helen checks up".

*The Times'* emphasis on white extremism

*The Times* was comparatively obsessed with the threat that the white right posed to the election, writing five times more often on the subject than *The New York Times* and about four times more often than *The Star*. (Fifteen percent of *The Times'* stories were predominantly about the white right, while only three percent of *The New York Times'*
stories and four percent of The Star’s stories focused on this topic.

The threat of severe disruption by white extremists in support of apartheid was by no means non-existent. Wackernagel contended: “It was certainly more of a threat than Mangosuthu Buthelezi (as far as disrupting the election went).” On Sunday April 24, two days before voting began, a massive car bomb planted by pro-apartheid extremists went off in downtown Johannesburg, killing nine people and injuring 92.

The Times went to town on this story, pushing up a page one headline on April 25 to 106 points (the biggest about South Africa during April) for a 680-word story that took up most of the page: “Bomb fuels fear of white backlash” accompanied by a strap that read: “Times man hurt in blast * Explosion kills nine * Security alert over Mandela,” three photographs, and a sidebar by Simon Walker, a Times photographer injured in the blast along with a picture of him bandaged about the head and looking dazed. The sidebar was titled: “I expected trouble on the frontline — not here.”

The next most extravagant point size of all the headlines that ran in April was also for a story about white extremists, a 60-pointer that read: “Bombs mark the final day of white rule.”

The most words on South Africa published on one day in April by The Times was not on the day that South Africans at last went to the polls (which came second), but on the day following the Johannesburg bomb, April 25, which saw approximately 4,800 words in 12 stories, 1,000 of which, encompassed in three stories, were about the bomb.

Gilmore practically made his name with The Times covering the white right at the time of the election. But when told of these statistics, he denied that he had sensationalized the issue. He said he thought it was important at the time to
get inside the minds of white extremists, and that he went to their rallies and simply reported what he saw.

In fairness to him, *The Times'* sensationalism of the white right (compared to the other papers' coverage) was as much in the design and layout of his articles as in the sheer number of words he wrote about the issue.

Headlines, for example, were at times exaggerated, both in point size (as in the case of the story previously mentioned), and in their relationship to the stories they were about.

For example, Gilmore wrote a story about an interview he had had with Ferdi Hartzenberg, the leader of the Conservative Party, a relatively small splinter group of the white right which vowed not to vote.

In the interview, Hartzenberg called on whites to boycott the vote. (The Freedom Front, however, an umbrella body which represented more white Afrikaners than Hartzenberg's Conservative Party, had long since decided to participate in the election.) But the copy-editor severely overstated the story in the headline: "White right plans mass action to thwart Mandela."

The headline of another story about the movements of the ultra-right Afrikaner Weerstands beweging (the Afrikaner Resistance Movement widely known by its acronym, the AWB) in small, rural towns, was again overwritten in the context of the story: "Neo-Nazis put Transvaal on war footing."

Richard Owen finished our 1994 interview with the satisfied comment "Although our team is small, the quality is high," but added, "There's nothing that can't be improved — perhaps we should have had more South Africans on the team (there weren't any)."
Suzanne Daley is the current thirty-something New York Times bureau chief in Johannesburg. Daley grew up professionally at The New York Times' headquarters in New York, where she “started making coffee for people,” at first working there during college vacations. Three weeks after graduating, she accepted a job at The New York Times, not sure whether or not she really wanted to be a journalist as her father and grandfather had been before her. After rising to deputy metropolitan editor (which she described in an interview in Johannesburg in December 1996 as being akin to city editor), she was posted to relieve Bill Keller — her first foreign assignment.

By all accounts, Keller was very good at writing about South Africa. He came to South Africa in 1991 in his late thirties, directly from covering the Soviet Union — for which he won a Pulitzer.

Allister Sparks, a highly respected South African journalist who heads up the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in Johannesburg, which runs mid-career training programs for journalists, said of Keller, whom he knows: “I think Bill Keller was a particularly good correspondent. That's why he's foreign editor now (of The New York Times).”

Steve Weissman, who was the deputy foreign editor at the time of the elections said in a telephonic interview in September 1994: "The best thing we can do for our readers is to provide them with the best writers."

"We have one of our best, if not our best man (Bill Keller) there and we considered it to be one of the best stories in the world. ... I consider Bill Keller to be one of the best I've ever seen."

He said that Keller was capable of sophisticated analysis, "but he also is a great storyteller and he has great empathy for people. What really makes his stories is the people."
"It was a very emotional story and every reporter poured his and her heart into it," said Weisman.

That Keller was enthusiastic and hard-working is apparent in the close on 25,000 words he wrote for The New York Times in April 1994 alone — almost half of the paper’s total election coverage in that month which stretched to 60,000 words.

Daley talked of the interesting dynamics that existed in The New York Times’ election team. Keller was backed up by an extremely experienced and reliable reporter, Francis X. Clines, who after years on the police beat in New York City had graduated into a “great” columnist. Clines had “seen it all,” said Daley. He played an important back-up role to Keller, writing about 16,000 words (almost 30 percent of the April total) and 14 stories to Keller’s 18.

Kenneth B. Noble was the third reporter in the team. Daley pointed out that the fact that he was black was strong motivation to send him to South Africa.

Fourthly, Donatella Lorch came down from Rwanda to write four stories in April.

Lorch, said Daley, was hired by The New York Times after a “spectacular” freelance debut when she managed to get behind the lines in Afghanistan. She went on from her short stint in South Africa to cover several major conflicts from the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, including Rwanda and Somalia. Her forte was “living in hellholes,” Daley said with admiration, having just returned from a spell in turbulent Zaire herself.

But Lorch was eventually transferred to New York, where Daley said she battled, newsroom skills and the skills required of a foreign correspondent being “quite different.” Not long after her transfer, she resigned from The New York Times, to take up a position with a new television news agency that was being set up.
The New York Times' South African election coverage was in many ways exemplary, and far superior to the news writing in either The Star or The Times of London. Balanced for the most part, with impressive attention to detail and an array of colorful imagery, the coverage was not, however, without its weak spots. In one story for example, Kenneth B. Noble transposed the name of the IFP's chief spokesman, calling him "Jiyane Ziba" instead of Ziba Jiyane.

In a more serious lapse, Noble wrote a story on April 26 about the IFP's late joining of the election ("In the Zulus' Heartland, Jubilation over Vote Role on April 26") — a huge step forward for a peaceful process — but interviewed three ANC officials and not a single IFP spokesperson or supporter.

(After the election, Noble was based in Abidjan, in West Africa, where, according to Daley "he was known for never leaving the hotel room." He failed to prove himself in South Africa, where he wrote only about a third — in terms of words — of Keller's output. He left The New York Times late in 1996.)

The outstanding characteristic of The New York Times' reporting from all its correspondents was that De Klerk and the NP and Buthelezi and the IFP were treated with disdain — quite the opposite of how they were portrayed in The Times' news pieces.

And where Mandela was regarded with utmost suspicion by British correspondents for The Times, The New York Times' South African team treated him with nothing short of reverence.

**The New York Times' pro-Mandela bias**

The New York Times unashamedly cast Mandela in a good light. He appeared in eight percent of The New York Times' headlines about South Africa in April — more than twice as often as in The Times' headlines on average, and more than seven times as often as in The Star. (Granted, The Star
published 10 times the number of stories than *The New York Times*, covering a much broader spread of topics.)

When it came to dissecting stories sentence by sentence for bias that cast either a positive or negative light over Mandela and the ANC, Buthelezi and the IFP or De Klerk and the NP, *The New York Times* emerged by far the most unequivocally in favor of Mandela. Sixteen percent of the obvious bias was pro-Mandela, compared to five percent that was anti-him — a difference of 11 percent.

(In the same exercise *The Times* was 20 percent pro-Mandela and 21 percent against him, while *The Star* was 26 percent pro and 19 percent anti — a difference of just seven percent which revealed a more ambivalent approach to South Africa's president-to-be.)

Conversely, *The New York Times* was far more critical of the NP (five percent of sentences were pro-De Klerk and/or the NP, while four percent were anti). *The New York Times* was also the most forthright of the three papers about the NP's dark past, as, for example, this quick description by Kenneth B. Noble: "The National Party, the inventors and enforcers of apartheid."

When questioned about this, Weisman answered: "The drama of the saga was so powerful ... He (Mandela) was obviously the popular leader." For *The New York Times*, there was not much getting away from the "overwhelming power of the Mandela odyssey."

In defending *The New York Times* when accused of being biased, Weisman said: "I think we assiduously tried to write stories that really tried to capture the dilemma of Buthelezi ... some of Bill's best stories were about him."

Coincidentally, *The New York Times* was far more likely to use the word "apartheid" — it appeared on average 1.4 times in a story — whereas only in one story in 10 in *The Star* (and in three stories in 10 in *The Times*). Perhaps this was
something to do with the fact that “apartheid” had become a household word in the United States, and a touchstone to describe South Africa.

*The Star*, on the other hand, was less likely to use a word that conjured up strong feelings in South Africa, and that strongly laid blame on one party more than another (that is, on the NP rather than the ANC which historically had been a broad liberation movement even when it had been banned by the NP as a political party).

*The New York Times* was also by far the most critical of the three papers of Buthelezi and the IFP, showing a 13 percent variance (four percent pro- versus 17 percent anti-) between sentences that were negative about him and/or his party and those that were positive.

*The Star’s* variance was just six percent (12 percent pro-, 18 percent anti-), and *The Times* was most lenient on Buthelezi, with just a four percent difference between pro-sentences (18 percent) and anti-sentences (22 percent).

In fact, of all issues, *The New York Times*’ reporters believed most strongly that Buthelezi should be cast in a negative light — even slightly more than coloring Mandela favorably.

Seventeen percent of all *The New York Times*’ sentences showing strong bias towards one of South Africa’s key politicians and/or their parties were anti-Buthelezi, compared to 16 percent that were pro-Mandela.

In keeping with the high degree of *The New York Times*’ pro-Mandela bias, the paper’s reporters employed far more pro-ANC sources (people who were ANC candidates, for example, or who were openly supporting the party in one way or another) on average, than either *The Star* or *The Times*.

Sixty-two percent of sources clearly pro-ANC, pro-IFP or pro-NP were in the ANC’s favor in *The New York Times*’ stories, compared to 55 percent of pro-ANC sources used by *The Star,*
and 44 percent — almost 20 percent less than *The New York Times* — of pro-ANC sources on the pages of *The Times*.

Conversely, *The New York Times* sported significantly fewer pro-IFP sources — just 17 percent, compared to 30 percent of pro-IFP sources in *The Times*.

Again, on average, *The New York Times* was far more prone to dedicate sentences in general to the ANC.

On average, every story in *The New York Times'* carried close on three sentences (2.8) about Mandela, compared to 1.6 about De Klerk and 1.7 about Buthelezi.

But this strong bias in Mandela's favor is not necessarily a major point of criticism about *The New York Times*. Although the paper was relatively uncritical of him, this was perhaps a fair reflection of South African society — the voters certainly thought Mandela was far more important than Buthelezi and De Klerk, giving the ANC 62 percent of the vote, compared to 20 percent for the NP and just 10 percent nationally for the IFP.

And as Daley pointed out in the December interview, Mandela hadn't had much time to go too far wrong. He had only been out of jail for two years — and hadn't yet been in the hotseat of the presidency with all its accompanying pressures. Daley argued that if one were to look closely now at her own coverage of Mandela, a lot would have changed: a much more complete picture of him with all his faults, foibles and fumbles would emerge.

**Imagery**

Because of *The New York Times'* luxury of space, its writers were able to be much more creative with language on the whole than were those of *The Star* and *The Times*.

Mandela is the saint and the savior in *The New York Times* while Buthelezi, his “bitterest black rival” according to one story, is rendered, along with his party, in monstrous imagery.

Some examples of the religious imagery that surrounds Mandela: early in April, he gives his “blessing” to De Klerk’s declaration of a state of emergency in Natal, while in the same story, by Keller, the ANC makes “converts” in Natal.

Also in the same story, King Goodwill Zwelithini (the Zulu king) and Buthelezi are “men who revel in their martial heritage.” Another metaphor in the piece describes how the IFP “extended its reach” to Zulu migrant workers and “colonized” their hostels (as opposed to converting them). In several stories, KwaZulu is Buthelezi’s “stronghold”; in one story a migrant workers’ hostel is an “Inkatha fortress.”

In another story, Keller portrays Mandela as a Jesus figure, writing of “Nelson Mandela’s soothing talk of forgiveness,” and in another, Mandela “devotes much of his time to reassuring worried whites.”

Clines describes in yet another piece how he earned “secular sainthood” as “the chief prisoner of apartheid”; in another piece by Clines, Mandela is a recipient of worship as “apartheid’s most revered political prisoner.”

This Christian imagery — mingled with connotations of slavery — is passed on briefly to the broader electorate in a voting story by Clines: “The nation’s long oppressed black majority ... patiently crowded polling booths and celebrated the power of the ballot in their ascension from the hard subjugation of apartheid.”

In contrast, one of the rare occasions that religious imagery is used in *The Times* of London, it is done to describe the future of King Zwelithini, as in this Kiley story: “News of the breakthrough, which enshrines King Goodwill Zwelithini of the Zulus in the national constitution, was spread around KwaZulu’s legislative assembly by the women ululating and dancing.”
The Times also evokes Christ-like imagery to describe a white soldier posted to Natal to curb the violence, in a story titled "Terrified villagers see the Falcon as saviour". The "Falcon" — and savior — is a commander called Deon Ferreira.

It would be highly unlikely to see any member of the South African police — notorious enforcers of apartheid — described in such terms in The New York Times.

And where in The New York Times the IFP supporters are the ones described in especially monstrous terms, in one story in The Times, ANC supporters are described as if they are mad bees: "Suddenly and without warning, dozens of heavily armed ANC ‘comrades’ swarmed through the maze of houses."

Slavery is also a recurring theme in The New York Times. Clines writes in one story: “The black majority is finally unmanacled at the ballot box.” In another piece, squatters are "the vast hidden underclass of apartheid's legacy," their lives "rutted with indentured routine."

If blacks are the slaves, the whites are the cruel, if sometimes effete, masters. In one Keller story, “the lame duck whites whose monopoly began seeping into history today” were also described as “oppressors,” and “fearful whites” who were “inflated with wealth.”

While the whites are evil in The New York Times, in The Times, they are more like frightened rabbits, for example one strap to a story about whites going to upmarket escapes in South Africa's wilderness areas read: “Archbishop hails democratic miracle as whites flee ballot battle.”

The use of water as a metaphor, especially to describe violence, was also common in The New York Times. Both Lorch and Keller used the phrase the "rising tide" of political violence in Natal; Noble wrote of the "storm of violence" that engulfed the region.
These water-based descriptions, unlike the religious imagery, were also commonly used in The Star to describe violence: a “spate of violence” in Natal, which is also a province “caught in a storm.”

But they were also used to describe the tasks facing the country’s leaders: Mandela and De Klerk’s relationship is “stormy,” and together they must sail “uncharted waters.”

Likewise, at a meeting between the old-guard South African Defence Force and the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (“Spear of the nation”) to decide on a future path, the generals from both sides faced a stark reality: “Sink the country into a mire of violence, or swim towards a new future.” (Fortunately for the country they chose what the reporter termed the “swim” option, and decided to merge into one national defence force.)

And on a positive note, there was a “tidal wave” of foreign investment going to flood South Africa after the election on more than one occasion in The Star's April 1994 editions.

One metaphor by Keller summed up The New York Times' stance on the white right which, as opposed to The Times, it mostly dismissed as a serious threat to the election. Most Afrikaners, Keller wrote, “support President FW de Klerk and regard the khaki-clad thugs of the white separatist fringe with a mix of familiarity and embarrassment, the way members of a Kiwanis motorcycle rally might see the Hells Angels.”

Standards and style

The standard of The New York Times' stories was generally very high. Reporters, for example, interviewed on average 2.8 sources per story (including even very short briefs), compared to The Times' average of 1.7 sources per story and The Star's 1.5 average of sources per story.
The New York Times' correspondents were also more dedicated to interviewing ordinary people — at a time when events that were daily unfolding had the power to affect the lives of people on the streets profoundly.

Thirty-eight percent of all sources were civilians, compared to 18 percent of civilian sources in The Times and just nine percent in The Star.

Across all three papers, significantly more male sources than female sources were interviewed. Of the sources where it was possible to tell whether they were male or female, the ratios were as follows: The New York Times: 81 percent male to 19 percent female; The Times: 85 percent male to 15 percent female; The Star: 86 percent male to 14 percent female.

As Daley and others interviewed pointed out, this probably reflected South African society relatively fairly. There are very few women in politics — or in any positions of power compared to the United States — in South Africa.

The biggest pool of sources for The New York Times' writers was in civilian life (which accounted for 38 percent of all sources), but almost as big a pool was in politics (which accounted for 36 percent of sources). In this field, the reporters had little choice but to speak to the people involved — which were (and still are) overwhelmingly men.

But even when drawing on civilians, where there was some freedom to interview more women, The New York Times' writers stuck mostly to interviewing men (10 percent of The New York Times' sources were female civilians, compared to 28 percent of male civilians).

Both Daley and Gilmore remarked that the high ratio of men to women in all three papers could also have been to an extent a reflection of life in South Africa — that newsworthy events were often initiated by men. Gilmore said that violence, especially, was for the most part perpetrated by
men, and that men were more likely to attend rallies — the sort of events that journalists covered — than were women.

Daley recounted a story of a rally she went to herself where the men and women were separated. It would have taken much more of an effort in that case, to go across the field and talk to women.

Nevertheless, the strong tendency to interview men rather than women — especially when they are being used as sources because they are ordinary civilians — surely presents a skewed picture of South African life, where, according to the A-Z of South African Politics by Barbara Ludman and Anton Harber, women make up 51 percent of the population compared to men who make up 49 percent.

While mentioning sources, The New York Times noticeably relied less heavily on people such as police and judges — loosely categorized as “law sources” for the purposes of this study.

“Law sources” made up six percent of The New York Times' sources compared to The Star, in which law sources made up 10 percent of all sources, and The Times, which relied on people connected in one way or another to the South African justice system 12 percent of the time as sources.

In South Africa, the police have had a long record of corruption and blurring facts to suit their own ends. In the days when apartheid was most overwhelmingly suppressed, and reporters were not allowed to go into black townships, police were often one of the few ways to get details — although often distorted.

Although this has now changed to a large extent, there is still the hangover that in the interests of accuracy, police sources ought to be double-checked against other sources where possible.
In what is also probably a reflection of good journalism, The New York Times' reporters wrote more issue-based stories compared to episodic pieces than either The Times' or The Star's writers (44 percent of stories were about issues in The New York Times, compared to 56 percent which centered around episodes or events.)

Allister Sparks felt strongly about this issue, saying it reflected a major weakness in South African journalism in general. “It’s hacks versus professionals” he said, comparing South African journalists to foreign correspondents covering South Africa.

The Star

The “softly softly approach” and “sunshine journalism”

In October 1993, The Star's editorial team had a three-day powwow to thrash out the way the newspaper would cover the upcoming election. At this meeting, according to Editor Peter Sullivan in an interview in December 1996, “We decided it (the election) had to succeed.”

And if it had to succeed, The Star, as South Africa’s most respected daily, had to play a part in promoting optimism around the process. “What is right for democracy, you have to ask yourself?” said Sullivan.

There was no doubt in his mind that The Star needed to do its bit for the “New South Africa” — it needed to be upbeat and positive in its reporting about what was happening in the country.

“We didn’t want (South Africa) to fall into Bosnia,” explained Johan de Villiers, one of several executive editors at The Star who fill in for Sullivan when he is away, in the same interview. Thus, mollification (although that is perhaps not the word The Star's editors would use) of all parties and politicians — for the good of the country — was an editorial policy.
But this was not a new tack for The Star. In a code of ethics dated April 1993 provided by Sullivan, but which predated his editorship (Richard Steyn was editor-in-chief at the time of the election), one of the points under the heading “responsibilities” read: “The Star should endeavour to be positive and constructive but not misleadingly optimistic or bland.”

Whether The Star managed to avoid being “misleadingly optimistic or bland” in April 1994 is subject to debate.

“There was a temptation to predict doom,” Sullivan argued, but because the country was going through such a volatile time, and The Star — far more than The New York Times or The Times — was widely read and influential in South Africa, it had to be more cautious with what it published.

“It was a very narrow precipice we were walking,” Sullivan said. “The results of our reporting at the time caused deaths.

“... We’re a very immature society and you treat the kindergarten a little bit differently than what you treat the master’s students. ... You have to be more tolerant. ... You have to be very, very careful.”

For reporters, it was especially difficult to remain detached, Sullivan said.

He talked of how journalists in South Africa had a proud history of fighting apartheid. You either joined an underground resistance movement, “or you became a journalist.”

“People who covered it (the election) here were extremely subjective, filled with emotion. They were the highest levels of emotion in the newsroom I have ever experienced. “Here they were seeing the battle (against apartheid) being won.”

Ironically, despite this widespread anti-apartheid sentiment in the newsroom, and perhaps because The Star had consciously
decided to tread softly during the election, it was least critical of the NP — the party that had enforced apartheid for close to 50 years.

The results of *The Star's* bias, as analyzed sentence by sentence, were as follows:
* 26 percent of sentences were pro-Mandela and/or the ANC, compared to 19 percent of sentences which were negative (a difference of seven percent in favor of portraying Mandela and the ANC in a positive light);
* 19 percent of sentences were pro-De Klerk and/or the NP, compared to six percent which were negative (a difference of 11 percent in favor of portraying De Klerk and the NP in a positive light);
* 12 percent were pro-Buthelezi and/or the IFP, compared to 18 percent which were negative (a difference of six percent in favor of portraying Buthelezi and the IFP in a negative light).

Thus, while *The Star* dedicated more positive sentences to Mandela and the ANC on the whole, the paper was more ambivalent about them — and about Buthelezi and the IFP — than about De Klerk and the NP.

Towards Buthelezi and the IFP in particular, *The Star's* reporters were considerably less critical than *The New York Times' journalists, but less sympathetic than *The Times'*. Of the sentences in *The Star* which showed bias to Buthelezi, 12 percent were pro- and 18 percent were anti-: in other words, a difference of six percent were anti-Buthelezi.

The correlating difference in *The New York Times* was four percent pro- to 17 percent anti-, almost four times as many sentences were negative as opposed to positive.

*The Times* on the other hand was considerably more sympathetic to Buthelezi and the IFP than *The Star*. 

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Almost as many sentences which showed strong bias in The Times were pro-Buthelezi and the IFP as were against them (18 percent were pro-, 22 percent were anti-).

When asked why long articles on Buthelezi, Mandela, De Klerk and others had just one source — the person they were about — and why more context had not been provided by speaking to other people about what they thought of these interviewees, Sullivan said this was an aspect of being “fair.”

“You must allow politicians to talk to the people,” with as little intervention as possible. He said The Star didn’t want to alienate the top politicians or make them feel they had been misrepresented, which is why the articles had been simple, one-person interviews (often conducted by more than one person in The Star’s political team, which consisted of five reporters).

On average, The Star interviewed 1.5 sources for every story — compared to The New York Times’ average of 2.8 — almost double. Sullivan said he thought it was “fine” that certain stories were informed by only one source.

Related to this relative dearth of sources in stories published by The Star, is the fact that The Star reported far more episodes than issues — even at this time which was particularly exciting and novel in South Africa.

Seventy-three percent of stories published by The Star in April 1994 were episodic, as opposed to issue-related — compared to 56 percent of episodic pieces in The New York Times to 44 percent that were more about issues, and 59 percent of stories that were episodic in The Times compared to 41 percent that were issue-based.

Sullivan said that this was because The Star had a duty to report the minutiae of daily events to its readers, who unlike the readers of The New York Times or The Times, had specific and important choices to make. “That’s probably about the right mix for a local newspaper,” he said, when told of these percentages ... We see ourselves as a
metropolitan paper — we report on the city to the city ... We’re not an academic institution that tries to explain to the nation what’s happening throughout the nation."

*The Star* has a circulation of about 170,000 copies per day and sells mostly to the greater Johannesburg area, although it is possible to buy copies of the paper in a variety of towns hundreds of miles from Johannesburg.

Sullivan claimed that *The New York Times*, for instance, would cover more episodes if it were writing about an election in the United States.

The average length of *The Star* article was in April 1994 230 words, as previously mentioned. Fifty-four percent of *The Star*’s stories during this time were brief — shorter than 200 words — compared to 32 percent of *The New York Times*’ stories and 38 percent of *The Times*’ stories.

That *The Star* did very few in-depth, penetrating stories — and even less investigative reporting — on any of the multitude of issues playing out in South Africa at the time did not pass Allister Sparks by.

“South Africa has never taken journalism seriously,” he said in the December interview at his Institute of Advanced Journalism. Journalism in South Africa “declined through the Eighties,” and is still in decline.

“The chemistry of transformation that is taking place in this country is not being reported by anyone,” Sparks said, listing a plethora of current issues that remain uncovered by the South African media — ranging from the country’s changing class structures to widescale electrification and how this has changed people’s lives.

The South African media “is locked in episodic or stenographic reporting,” he said. “It’s a commentary on the deteriorated standard of South African journalism.” This is in direct contrast to the standard which *The New York Times*
was setting for itself. Weisman said in the 1994 interview: Rather than try to concentrate on day-to-day events, "We try to write about situations in an analytical and interpretative way."

Sparks linked The Star's failure to do this with the fact that "in South Africa, newsrooms have become juniorized" and that "it's difficult to find anyone over the age of 30" in journalism in South Africa.

Journalism is not regarded as a career, but as a job, until reporters can find a better job, he said. "Here, reporters are paid like primary schoolteachers and post office clerks" (both notoriously poorly paid professions in South Africa).

South African reporters are "underpaid and undereducated ... their newsdesks don't think in terms of enterprise journalism."

He argued that there isn't a reporter of Bill Keller's calibre in South Africa, or an editor for that matter.

There was "a dramatically different caliber of people and status of the profession" in South Africa, compared, say, to the United States: "I think it's a continuing and ongoing difference."

Benjamin Pogrund is an ex-Rand Daily Mail deputy editor and international editor of the British Independent who has recently returned to South Africa after years of living in London. He wrote a chapter on how the South African press covered the election for a book published almost immediately after the event called Elections '94, and said of the coverage in South African newspapers as a whole: "I found it very inadequate — it was very confusing reporting. I found it very muddled. " ... There were a lot of words (written), but huge holes in them."

Pogrund spoke of the closure of the Rand Daily Mail in 1985, a paper considered by many to be the best in South Africa's history. "The press had been sagging right through under
Nationalist pressure,” Pogrund said. “When the Mail closed down it was like a pancake collapsing.”

A lot of journalists left the country, many “dropped out out of disgust.” The Mail “was the aggressive hunter of news ... it set the pace.” Its closure led to “an enormous erosion of journalistic skills, and an enormous diminution of news that was travelling around the country.”

Pogrund added that he didn’t think much had changed in South Africa in the last decade or so in terms of the “whiteness” of their newsrooms. He said the fact that most journalists in South Africa are white means that what happens in the lives of the majority of the country’s people goes neglected by their papers. He accused white editors (South Africa has very few black editors) past and present of “monumental ignorance.”

But Pogrund also expressed some sympathy with Sullivan’s stance to downplay the violence at the time of the election. He recounted a story about how the Rand Daily Mail had particularly gruesome pictures of what happened at Sharpeville in 1960, when police killed 72 people and wounded 200 at a peaceful anti-apartheid demonstration.

Realizing South Africa at that time was a “tinderbox,” the editor at the time, Laurie Gandar, decided — in a controversial decision that threw into relief questions of journalistic ethics in a country rocked by violence — to publish severely cropped versions of the photographs.

“The cry ‘publish and be damned’ is all very well, but you’ve got to think carefully. It doesn’t work like that, I don’t care what anyone says,” Pogrund said. “It’s (journalism is) subject to the mores of your society or you cease to exist (as a newspaper). “A newspaper doesn’t exist in a vacuum,” mores are continuously influential and changing, he added. Nevertheless, Pogrund said, the South African media at the time of the election were (and still are) timid “rabbits.”
One of the ways in which The Star played the role of pacifier — or practiced “sunshine journalism” as critics have dubbed the toned-down style of reporting South African issues — was in writing about stories to do with politically related violence in the country.

For example, the word “violence” appeared in 1.3 percent of The New York Times' headlines to do with South Africa, but in just 0.3 percent of The Star’s headlines.

Allister Sparks argued that the foreign media tended to sensationalize violence, and when relatively little occurred in the run-up to the election, most correspondents in South Africa packed up and left for Rwanda, where there really was a bloodbath happening.

But on the other end of the spectrum, there is no doubt that The Star deliberately glossed over violence, in what its editorial team thought was for the good of the country.

Senior Star Reporter Helen Grange said in an interview that it had been deliberate editorial policy not only to downplay violence at the time of the election, but also not to identify political parties where there was any doubt at all — or when the reporter hadn’t done enough research to find out, she admitted.

For example, much of the violence on the East Rand, near Johannesburg, was played out between men who lived in migrant-worker hostels who were mostly — but not all — Zulu IFP supporters, and township residents who were mostly — but not all — ANC supporters.

Where The New York Times would write a story about this sort of violence providing substantive background information and calling people “IFP supporters” and “ANC members,” The Star would simply write dry catalogues of how many people had died, such as these details in "Area tense as death toll rises," which ran on April 7 on page three: “Three more people died in attacks in Newcastle and seven others were injured in an attack at the Mfolozi Reserve.”
“A woman was burnt to death in Inanda, three houses were burnt down in the Drycott area of Estcourt and two were petrol bombed in Dundee.

“Two people were stoned to death at Eskihaweni, near Empangeni, and two others were shot dead at Ntuzuma, near Durban.

“Another man was shot dead when shacks were burnt down at Lindelani.”

Like Sullivan, Grange spoke of the importance of “bridge-building,” and the fact that The Star’s reporters felt they had a “moral obligation” to make sure South Africa’s dawn to democracy was peaceful. The fact that the election actually took place and South Africa’s transition was smooth was “a miracle,” she said.

The policy was formulated because what was happening was affecting people so personally and deeply, and the country was so volatile, that The Star’s reporters had a real fear of provoking bloodshed.

Thus, when reporting about violence, The Star’s reporters over and over again gave details about numbers of people who had died without giving any background or context about the circumstances they had died in.

Often the stories were extremely short — such as the 38-word, front-page brief on Monday 11 April: 20 more die in Natal. The terms used to describe the violence were also vague and non-judgmental, such as “KwaZulu/Natal violence” in this brief.

Or the 25-word brief on page five on April 6 that was headlined "Severely burnt bodies found," about two corpses, presumably burned to death for political reasons, discovered in Phola Park and Katlehong, two townships near Johannesburg.
Although violence was probably the greatest problem gripping the country, *The Star's* reporters used others to interpret trends, and did little analysis on the issue itself.

This is clear, for example, in another story on April 11, "Violence claims 552 in March," by a writer for the South African Press Association — or "Sapa" — a news agency *The Star* relied on heavily: “A total of 552 people died in politically related violence in March, reversing a seven-month trend, the latest Human Rights Commission report said yesterday.”

But all too often, when no reports were forthcoming, *The Star* would simply quote police reports and put the anonymous term “crime reporter” or “crime staff” at the top of the story.

This “non-partisanship” when it came to reporting violence must surely be put down to inept reporting also, in cases where *The Star’s* journalists obviously made little more effort than phoning their local police sources. The result, all too often, was a vague sense that violence was out of control in the country, but it remained woolly as to who was doing the killing and who the dying.

Surely these lists of statistics have the effect of numbing people to violence without understanding it adequately — which also has the effect of making them “switch off” rather than actively engaging readers in the country’s problems?

Sullivan explained: “We decided on accuracy ... when in doubt, we left it out ... What we did was we said we would report the people in it (violence) — but only if it would be constructive.”

Like *The Star’s* “softly-softly” approach to political violence between IFP and ANC members, the paper also downplayed racial tensions that often led to violence in the days running up to the election.
For example, *The Star's* Justice Malala described a horrific event which clearly showed that racial tensions in South Africa were not a thing of the past in a story which ran on Tuesday, April 5 under the headline "Drive-by gunman murders schoolgirl."

The story described how a black child had been shot and killed and a black woman shot and injured as they sat on the back of a trailer being pulled by a tractor, by white gunmen in a car.

The shooting happened near the tiny rural town of Wesselsbron in what was the Orange Free State (a province that was notorious for its ultra-conservative white population). The story made page one, but it was only 250 words long and barely examined the whites' racist motives and any reaction local blacks may have had towards the incident.

Ironically then, *The Star* markedly played down race in its reporting as a whole — in the country known around the world as obsessed with the issue of race.

*The Star's* stories were less often specifically about the plight, aspirations, fears or status of blacks or whites than were *The New York Times'* and *The Times'* stories: in other words, *The Star* was less likely to interpret events and issues unfolding in South Africa in "black and white" terms.

As has been mentioned, fifty percent of *The New York Times'* stories were clearly and mostly about blacks, while 21 percent of *The Times'* stories were about blacks — compared to just 10 percent of *The Star's* stories which were clearly and solely about blacks.

Nine percent of *The New York Times'* stories were about whites, compared to 18 percent of *The Times'* stories and just seven percent of *The Star's* stories.
A “source” of poor reporting?

While it was rare ever to see the words of an unidentified person in the stories in *The New York Times*, it was quite common to see nameless “sources” in *The Star* and *The Times*. While Sullivan said that this sort of reporting showed the “highest ethics” because it didn’t name people who didn’t want to be identified in a country where people could be killed for their words, there is no doubt that *The Star’s* reporters took more liberties with not identifying sources than *The New York Times’* reporters would.

Even in the blandest, run-of-the-mill stories reporters would refuse to identify their sources — even when they could probably get several sources to say the same thing — thus making their stories less authoritative and allowing their sources less accountability for their own words.

To give one example out of many, in a story "Plan to delay election in Natal denied," *Star* reporter Jo Anne Collinge described in vague terms several informants: “Sources denied there was a plan to place such a compromise proposal on the table ... Government and ANC sources made it clear that the recently declared state of emergency would not be treated as a bargaining chip in the talks ... A senior ANC source made it clear that the ANC was determined to see that the polls went ahead nationwide at the end of the month.”

This lack of identifying sources again has the effect of making stories woolly and vague.

Sullivan argued that there were strict rules regarding not naming sources, and said that reporters had to divulge to their editors who these people were.

Under the heading “accuracy” in *The Star’s* "Code of Ethics", one point reads: “Sources of news should be identified unless there is good reason not to.”
But *The New York Times'* interpretation of “good reason” appeared much more narrow in its stories than *The Star's* view of the same words.

Allister Sparks bemoaned how, despite the fact that *The Star* and South African newspapers in general were in the rut of “stenographic” reporting as he called it, the paper still had an unacceptably high rate of making straight-forward errors.

For example, in one story, "Kissinger, Carrington to mediate," Reporter Montshiwa Moroke wrote that seven international mediators were to visit South Africa before the election, including “US Supreme Court judge Justice Leon Higgin-Dotham,” who was certainly no such thing.

**“Sterling effort”?**

After the election, *The Star* employed an independent survey company to gauge what its readers thought of its election coverage. Despite the criticisms of people like Allister Sparks and Benjamin Pogrund, *The Star's* readers — whom the survey found to be 48 percent white and 48 percent black — were on the whole pleased with the coverage.

And, like *The Times* of London's Foreign Editor Richard Owen, Peter Sullivan expressed his satisfaction at the way his reporters had covered the South African election, in our interview in December 1996.

But Helen Grange, who has been at *The Star* for ten years, acknowledged many of the criticisms levelled against the paper to be valid, including its non-aggressive approach to stories, episodic reporting and its lack of directness and clarity in trying to please all South Africans all the time.

She said that the period building up to South Africa's election and its transformation to democracy was so multi-faceted and novel that it was difficult to define. The country had never been through anything like this before, and *The Star* was, to a large extent, unprepared.
The Star's approach was for reporters to write as much as possible — a scatter-gun approach — so that there would be a wide choice for what to include in each edition.

She estimated that just 30 percent of stories that were actually written in April 1994 were used. After the election, she said, there was much back-slapping in the office, and the reporters were commended all round for a “sterling effort.”

**Conclusion**

As became clearly evident through a careful examination of three newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Times* of London and *The Star* of Johannesburg, all newspapers reveal their own sets of values, perspectives and biases, not only through their opinion columns, but also in their news pages.

In the case of the South African election, which arguably was one of the biggest media events of this century in terms of the sheer number of correspondents sent from media organizations all over the globe sent to report on them and the amount of coverage they received internationally, the three newspapers showed distinct differences not only in bias but also in terms of journalistic professionalism.

*The Times* of London was the most conservative paper of the three, portraying Buthelezi and his Zulu-based IFP in the most positive light.

At the same time, the paper was most ambivalent of the three towards Mandela and the ANC — *The Times* cast them in a negative light slightly more often than in a positive light, as opposed to *The Star* and *The New York Times*, which were both clearly pro-Mandela, especially in the case of *The New York Times*.

*The Times* was also clearly more pro-white than the other two papers, and it concentrated far, far more on the threat
that white extremists posed to the poll than did *The Star* or *The New York Times*.

*The New York Times*, like *The Times*, invested considerable time, effort and resources into covering the election. For the most part, it was difficult to criticize the paper's journalists, led by Pulitzer Prize-winning Bill Keller, except perhaps, that they so overwhelmingly embraced Mandela as South Africa's future president, often using religious imagery to describe him.

*The New York Times'* correspondents were far more critical of De Klerk and the NP — the party that had governed South Africa for close to 40 years — than *The Times'* and *The Star's* writers.

*The New York Times* was also the most critical of Buthethelezi and the IFP of the three papers.

Veteran South African journalist Allister Sparks pointed out in an interview that the executive editor of *The New York Times*, Joseph Lelyveld, was a correspondent for the paper in South Africa in the 1980s, which may have had an impact on *The New York Times'* special interest in the South African election. (Lelyveld himself won a Pulitzer for his book, *Move Your Shadow*, about South Africa.)

*The New York Times* covered the election in a comprehensive manner, making sure that reporters covered South Africa's most important areas and issues, and that their pieces complemented one another in a cohesive manner.

*The New York Times'* journalists on average interviewed more people per story than either *The Times'* or *The Star's* reporters, and made a more concerted effort than the other two papers to gather the views of ordinary citizens.

Like the other papers, however, *The New York Times'* journalists interviewed far more men than women, even when talking to civilians where they had the opportunity to interview more women.
Unlike *The New York Times* and *The Times* which were reporting the events unfolding in South Africa in a more detached manner and for foreign audiences, the editorial staff at *The Star* felt integrally caught up in the birth of democracy in South Africa.

The paper's editors and reporters found it impossible for *The Star* to be coldly objective, and formulated a series of policies which deliberately tried to help the “miracle” of South Africa's transition from apartheid come to pass.

This meant that they continuously emphasized the positive aspects of society and events and downplayed issues such as political violence and racism which they perceived to be threatening to democracy.

*The Star*'s standards of professionalism were inferior compared to *The New York Times*'s. The paper's reporters interviewed on average half the people per story that *The New York Times*'s reporters interviewed. Reporters liberally failed to identify sources. Stories were kept short and very, very few in-depth or investigative pieces were published.

Unlike *The Times* and even more so *The New York Times*, *The Star* did not appear to have a comprehensive plan for covering the election on a national scale. It saw itself as a metropolitan paper that prioritized focusing on its readership area over portraying a balanced account of what was happening across the country.

While *The Star* had the advantage of being based in South Africa, its reporters were not as productive as either *The New York Times*' or *The Times*' correspondents, writing on average far fewer words.

But where *The Star* did shine was in providing readers with the logistical details of the election.

The paper was also in the position to run a headline on Wednesday 27 April, 1994 on page one: "Vote, the beloved
country." This was an ironic play on a classic South African novel by Alan Paton which highlighted the poverty and pain caused by racism, called "Cry, the Beloved Country."

And under this headline, The Star published a more poignant testimony to South Africa’s “miracle” than ever published by a foreign newspaper: “Apartheid dies today. Millions of South Africans of all races go together to the polls for the first time in the country’s history, to elect a government of national unity.”

**SIDEBARS**

**Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela**

Currently South Africa’s president, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born on July 18, 1918 in Umtata, in the rural Transkei, on South Africa’s south-eastern seaboard.

After attending missionary schools, he went on to study law at the University of Fort Hare, but was expelled in 1940 for his political activities. He later studied part-time at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He completed both his Bachelor of Arts and his post-graduate law degree at the University of South Africa, by correspondence.

He joined the African National Congress (ANC) in 1944, and founded the ANC Youth League together with Oliver Tambo. Also with Tambo, he established South Africa’s first black law practice in 1952.

Mandela had frequent run-ins with the police over his anti-apartheid activities. In 1952, for example, he was charged and banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, for his activity as “volunteer-in-chief” during the ANC’s Defiance Campaign against apartheid.

From 1953 to 1958 he was banned from holding any office in the ANC, but continued to work behind the scenes for the
organization, setting up a system of cells known as the “M-Plan.”

Mandela co-founded the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (“Spear of the Nation”) in 1961, and went to Algeria for military training. He was captured back in South Africa in 1962, and was serving a five-year jail sentence for incitement and leaving the country illegally when his fellow Umkhonto weSizwe commanders were arrested in Rivonia and he was put on trial with them for treason. At the culmination of the trial, in 1964, he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

During his 27 years in prison, the early years of which he lived on the harsh island-prison of Robben Island within sight of Cape Town, he became apartheid’s most famous prisoner. Anti-apartheid groups around the globe began a “Free Nelson Mandela” campaign.

He began talks with high-ranking government officials in secret in 1986, leading to his 1990 release and The Start of negotiations for a new Government of National Unity, which came into being after the April 1994 elections.

“Apartheid’s most revered political prisoner.” — The New York Times

“Nelson Mandela … played the debate … with a patrician air. His familiar woodenness seemed dignified and presidential. — The Times

“More like a concerned father than a power-dazzled president-to-be.” — The Star

Frederik Willem (FW) de Klerk

Born in Johannesburg on March 18 1936, Frederik Willem (FW) de Klerk is known as South Africa’s last white president, and is widely credited with the abolition of apartheid. He shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela in 1993.
Ironically, De Klerk came from a powerful Afrikaans family with a staunch Nationalist history — his father was a Cabinet member under Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, the South African president considered by many to be the real architect of apartheid. Former prime minister Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom — another notorious supporter of apartheid — was his uncle.

De Klerk was born in Johannesburg, grew up in nearby Krugersdorp and completed his law degree (cum laude) at the University of Potchefstroom — a Christian university which has produced many leading Afrikaners over the years. At university, he was editor of the campus newspaper and was deputy president of the Students' Representative Council (the student government).

After a stint practicing as an attorney, he had decided by the early 1970s on a political career. Apart from serving as the Minister of National Education in the 1980s, he maintained a low profile mostly, with stints as minister of lesser portfolios including Posts and Telecommunications and Sport and Recreation.

But in February 1989 he became leader of the National Party, and in August the same year, state president, succeeding the more conservative and ailing Pieter Willem (PW) Botha.

De Klerk's dramatic February 2 speech in 1990 in which he announced the release of Mandela and the unbanning of numerous political organizations including the ANC and the South African Communist Party opened the road to South Africa's multi-party democracy, achieved in April, 1994.

"... A clever debater." — The New York Times

"... De Klerk comes across as engaging, if not cunningly disarming." — The Star
Mangosuthu Buthelezi

Mangosuthu Buthelezi is leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and a Zulu — one of the largest and most vocal of South Africa's ethnic groups.

Buthelezi has long been a controversial figure in South African politics. In 1976 he became chief minister of the KwaZulu homeland in what is now the south-eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal. (After the 1994 elections the area was merged with Natal, a white province under apartheid, to form KwaZulu-Natal, one of South Africa’s nine new provinces.)

The creation of “homelands” was an apartheid policy — the Nationalist government created separate areas of land in far-flung rural areas in which blacks were forced to live.

In the cities, blacks were forced to stay in all-black areas called “townships”, but were only allowed to do so if they were employed.

Some homelands became “independent” — they were set up with their own governments and borders and their “citizens” were forced to carry separate passports.

From KwaZulu, Buthelezi built up a political power base, using ethnic nationalism as a political tool. The emerging Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s branded him a government collaborator, but he consistently refused to accept “independence” for KwaZulu.

Originally, Buthelezi had been involved in the ANC. Born in 1928, and after a traditional rural upbringing (including working as a herd boy), he joined the ANC Youth League at the University of Fort Hare in the 1940s, and, like Mandela, was expelled, after student boycotts. He finished his studies at the University of Natal.

He founded the Inkatha Yenkululeku Yesizwe cultural organization in 1975, named for a coil heirloom which
represents Zulu unity, and which Zulu women use to cushion loads they carry on their heads.

Inkatha was formed with the blessing of the ANC, of which Buthelezi was then a member (the ANC at that time was as yet unbanned by the government). But during the 1970s, the relationship between Inkatha and the ANC deteriorated, leading to ongoing bloodshed which has left thousands dead in South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal.

Inkatha became the Inkatha Freedom Party in 1990, when it transformed itself into a political party. In the 1994 election, the IFP won a narrow majority (50.3 percent) in KwaZulu-Natal, but only 10.5 percent of the national vote.

Buthelezi, like De Klerk, dabbled briefly in journalism, writing a bi-weekly column from 1974 to 1975 which was syndicated to several South African papers.

He has become known for his political “poker-playing” as senior Star journalist Helen Grange described his brinkmanship in an interview in December 1996.

He pulled the IFP out of the 1994 election, and despite pleas from inside and outside South Africa, refused to participate because his demands — which remained vague — had not been met.

The IFP’s exclusion from the voting would undoubtedly have caused more acrimony between it and the ANC after the election.

But just a few days before voting began Buthelezi changed his mind and the IFP was back on the ballot. The party’s late inclusion created logistical chaos — special stickers had to be printed bearing its logo and stuck onto the millions of ballot sheets.

“He is a proud, rather jealous politician running for the national parliament with a militant brand of ethno-centrism, having propped up the Zulu monarch he once opposed. His
future as party leader, as ever, is as a flamboyant, unpredictable personality with the power to spark civil unrest in his province.” — The New York Times

“What The Star Must Be”
A definition of The Star’s mission by Editor Peter Sullivan

“The Star will guide this country and its people to values which are good, sound, achievable, will last to the next century and beyond, and will help define Africa’s culture. Our country is in a state of flux, desperately seeking to invent a new national culture, one that unites our rainbow nation while allowing vibrant individual cultures to flourish. It is The Star’s task to be the guiding light of our nation, inspired by our leaders and readers.

We will be supportive of the good, teach tolerance of everyone’s best attempts, kindly in criticism but preaching intolerance of crime in communities or corruption in governance.

On our front page, in our centre pages, in sports columns, business reports and in our letters columns, we will promote the positive aspects of our society, guide ourselves and others towards a better nation built upon fundamental human rights. We will rail against racism and sexism wherever it occurs but we will try to change attitudes gently — not with brash and strident shrieking. We will be tolerant even of our rivals, turning away carping criticism by showing consistent quality in our journalism, sticking to the truth whatever the cost in popularity.

We favour a tolerant, democratic and open society that is utterly intolerant of crime, corruption, racism and sexism. On all issues we will give guidance. We trust our ability to involve readers, debate the country’s leaders, extract the best thinking from academics, stir in the thoughts of people on the streets, offices and houses of South Africa’s biggest city, mix in good ideas from our rainbow nation before offering
The Star as a clear and present guiding light to a better, prouder, united South African society.”

Note on research methods


During this time, The Star ran 892 news pieces compared to The New York Times' 86 stories and The Times' 107 stories.

For every piece, I asked a detailed set of questions, which I marked up first on a worksheet, and then entered into a spreadsheet program which did all the final arithmetic. Some of the questions were to do with simple things like how long a piece was and the point size of its headline, or whether it included one of a few “hot words” in the headline (the word “violence,” for example).

I also asked where the story was placed in the paper, where it was datelined, and who wrote it.

Other basic questions included how many sentences — and how many sentences including direct quotes — had been dedicated to various politicians and to their parties’ supporters.

I also detailed sources numerically, noting if they were male or female where possible, and whether they were civilians, politicians, experts on one aspect of South African life or another, or “law sources” — people who were either police officers or judges, or connected immediately to the South African justice system.

Also, I counted the recurrences of certain specific words, including for example, “democracy” and the word “apartheid,” without any specific end result in mind before doing so. Probably the only interesting word of those I selected to
count was “apartheid” — which occurred dramatically more often in *The New York Times* than in *The Star* (see the section on *The New York Times*).

On a slightly more interpretative level, I distinguished — but only where it appeared very obvious to me — between certain categories according to what the stories were about. Thus, if they were mostly about the Inkatha Freedom Party or Zulus, the African National Congress or Nelson Mandela, the National Party or FW de Klerk, whites — and even more specifically about white extremists — or blacks, I marked this down.

I also asked detailed questions about how often the various parties, their leaders and supporters were mentioned.

I distinguished between stories that were more in-depth and interpretative, and were about an ongoing subject or trend — “issue” stories — as opposed to straight reporting of events or incidents — “episode” stories.

Moving to a more subjective and interpretative level, I went through the stories sentence by sentence and noted whether each sentence strongly conveyed bias in one of the following areas which captured the three most important political players and their parties:
1. Sentences pro-Mandela/ANC
2. Sentences anti-Mandela/ANC
3. Sentences pro-De Klerk/NP
4. Sentences anti-De Klerk/NP
5. Sentences pro-Buthelezi/IFP
6. Sentences anti-Buthelezi/IFP

If a sentence did not show bias in one of these areas, I did not count it.
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY


A bit outdated, this coffee-table size book is a compilation of 50 different events in South African history, starting somewhat arbitrarily with the birth of the Transvaal Republic in 1852 and ending with the ANC's 1983 bombing of Church Street in Pretoria, which left 16 people dead. It republishes articles in different papers about the same events, allowing for comparison of bias and emphasis.


Similar to Alhadeff’s A Newspaper History of South Africa in idea, Crwys-Williams' South African Despatches: Two Centuries of the Best in South African Journalism is more contemporary, and republishes more articles from more correspondents and on a greater variety of issues. Also, while Alhadeff prefers to republish several articles carried by different South African papers on the same events, Crwys-Williams' approach is more international, including many reports from foreign papers. The variety of correspondents range from Winston Spencer Churchill as a young reporter covering the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902 for the Morning Post, to Joe Lelyveld, now executive editor of The New York Times, writing in 1983 about the arrest of Lt. Gen. Charles Sebe, a powerful, flamboyant black who co-operated with the apartheid regime and controlled the Ciskei "homeland's" police and army.


Also largely outdated now, Who Did What in South Africa? is nevertheless a useful abridged Who's Who type of reference, providing interesting details, for example, the early careers of Nelson Mandela, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and FW de Klerk.

Edited by the then-editor and assistant editor respectively of the outspoken independent South African weekly, the *Mail & Guardian*, this is a useful guide to South African politicians, their parties, and the country's new Constitution and Bill of Rights. The *A-Z of South African Politics* also gives an array of interesting national and provincial statistics, including 1994 election results.


Originally published by the University of Wisconsin Press (Hachten is a professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison), this book examines the mostly antagonistic relationship between the South African press and the government during apartheid. It also looks at how the apartheid government used the press, including the role of the state-run South African Broadcasting Corporation as a Nationalist propaganda machine, and "Muldergate", the story of how senior cabinet Minister Connie Mulder invested millions of dollars in a propaganda campaign to sell apartheid to the world. One of the products of his programme was a nation-wide conservative English-language newspaper, *The Citizen*, which is still published today. "Total onslaught" was the government's jargon for all the forces, real and perceived, against apartheid, including communism and anti-apartheid resistance. Ironically, the government itself exercised "total onslaught" against press freedom, in the fear that it would receive critical coverage from within the country for its apartheid policies. This study provides, among other things, precise details of how the press was silenced by legislation.


Similar to the *Who's Who* published in the United States and elsewhere, *Who's Who of Southern Africa* provides interesting biographical details to many of South Africa's foremost politicians. The 1994 edition does, however, still concentrate mostly on white...
businessmen, to the exclusion of newly powerful black politicians and businesspeople.


Herbstein points out in this article how President Ronald Reagan kowtowed to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's conservative approach to sanctions against South Africa until after the United Nations had formally imposed sanctions. This is an interesting article for background information on the economic and political implications for two of South Africa's major trading partners on taking a moral stand against apartheid.


Jackson provides an excellent, relatively contemporary review of the South African press since 1976, the year of the Soweto riots against apartheid. He examines the problems facing the press in South Africa, including the government-imposed State of Emergency from 1985 to 1990, which placed massive restrictions on the media. He also looks at the crucial role of the "alternative press" in opposing apartheid. Jackson is professor of communication studies at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. He spent time at Rhodes University's journalism school in South Africa's Eastern Cape province to research this impressive study.


This is a first-hand account by a British reporter of what it was like to be working as a foreign correspondent in South Africa as the country first encountered its age of transformation from apartheid. Keane was a witness to the highly publicised slayings of white Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging extremists in the "homeland" of Bophuthatswana by a black policeman, before the election. He went on to cover the genocide in Rwanda, and wrote another book about that experience, called Season of Fear. Keane is currently the Hong
Kong correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corp.'s World Service.


Lapping's *Apartheid: A History* is a good factual reference for exactly which apartheid legislation was passed and when. It describes the historical attitudes and legal precedents for apartheid from the first European colonial settlements over 300 years ago, as well as the bitter resistance to apartheid up to the middle of the turbulent 1980s.


This is an interesting work by a University of Montana history professor on the global politics and history of racial discrimination from the days of slavery to the present. The last chapter deals largely with South Africa. *Power and Prejudice* describes the rise of international moral standards and the development on a worldwide scale of the concept of human rights.


Lelyveld, now executive editor of *The New York Times*, draws on his experience as a reporter in South Africa for *The New York Times* on two separate tours, one in the mid-1960s and the other in the early '80s, for this Pulitzer-winning memoir (the book also won several other awards for journalism). It is full of stories about people Lelyveld met and describes well what it was like to live in South Africa at the time, for South Africans of different races, as well as for an American journalist.


Mandela's bestselling autobiography starts with his country childhood and ends with his release from prison in 1992. He began
writing it while imprisoned on Robben Island in the 1970s, and persisted despite the manuscript being confiscated by prison authorities. It is informative and entertaining to read, and details much of South Africa's apartheid era through the unusual perspective of one who was severely repressed but who went on to become president.


*Tomorrow is Another Country* is a behind the scenes account of South Africa's transformation from apartheid, and how the political system's demise was negotiated, often secretly, by the government and its opponents. Sparks is an award-winning and respected journalist of international repute. Once editor of the country's hard-hitting (but now defunct) daily, the *Rand Daily Mail*, and more recently known for his directorship of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in Johannesburg, he has recently been appointed head of the South African Broadcasting Corp.'s television news.


Tyson is a well-known South African journalist (now retired), who worked for several newspapers around the country during his 40 years or so in journalism, most notably for 16 years as editor-in-chief of *The Star*.

Tyson's career spanned the birth, life and incipient death of apartheid. *Editors Under Fire* is a personal account of how those he worked with as well as himself fought apartheid and the government's persistent gagging of the press. This book is largely autobiographical, and is full of entertaining anecdotes about how the largest daily in Southern Africa continued to be published through years of government harassment of journalists.

Woods was editor of the Daily Despatch, one of South Africa's oldest newspapers, published from the coastal city of East London, in the 1970s. He was for years an outspoken critic of the National Party and apartheid, and was a personal friend of Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko, and an open supporter of his movement. Biko died in police detention in 1977. In the same year, Woods was silenced by banning orders which prevented him from editing his newspaper and writing his widely syndicated column.

After Biko's death and several personal attacks on himself and his family, Woods and his wife and children fled the country in disguise to Britain, where he continued to work as a journalist. *Asking for Trouble* is an autobiographical account of Woods' life and career as a journalist in South Africa. It, and another of Woods' books, *Biko*, was the basis for Richard Attenborough's 1987 film *Cry Freedom*, which was also banned in South Africa for many years. Woods has recently returned to South Africa, where he is currently working for the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in South Africa.

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Professional project for Master’s degree in Journalism, University of Montana.

THE TIMES
Reporting a “miracle”


By Tara Turkington

Living thousands of miles away from South Africa in the little town of Missoula, nestled in the Montanan Rockies, in April 1994, I experienced my country’s first democratic election and the demise of apartheid through the eyes of foreign correspondents.

What came across was a bewildering array of differences of opinion and perspective — a living example of how no two journalists look at the same event and draw the same conclusions.

South Africa’s transition to democracy was one of the greatest news events of the 20th century, and the fact that it was a “good news” story in a sea of bloody international stories like the Rwandan genocide and the war in Bosnia, both happening at roughly the same time, made it all the more remarkable.

News organizations around the world went all out to capture the event. Neil Behrmann, a reporter for South Africa’s premier daily The Star, on Friday April 29, 1994, wrote: “About 5,000 foreign journalists and TV crews are estimated to be in South Africa.”

Against this background, I set about finding exactly where the differences of opinion and style in covering this event lay between two world-renowned foreign papers — The New York Times and The Times of London — and South Africa’s 110-year-old, Johannesburg-based The Star.
Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

Currently South Africa's president, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born on July 18 1918 in Umtata, in the rural Transkei, on South Africa's south-eastern seaboard. After attending missionary schools, he went on to study law at the University of Fort Hare, but was expelled in 1940 for his political activities. He later studied part-time at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He completed both his Bachelor of Arts and his post-graduate law degree at the University of South Africa, by correspondence.

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During his 27 years in prison, the early years of which he lived on the harsh island-prison of Robben Island within sight of Cape Town, he became apartheid's most famous prisoner. Anti-apartheid groups around the globe began a "Free Nelson Mandela" campaign.

He began talks with high-ranking government officials in secret in 1986, leading to his 1990 release and the start of negotiations for a new Government of National Unity, which came into being after the April 1994 elections.
REPORTING A "MIRACLE"  
TARA TURKINOTON  
January 1997  

Cross of a lifetime: An official helps an old woman to vote for the first time ever.  
PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE HILTON-BARBER / MAIL & GUARDIAN  

From PAGE 3  

Pieter Willem (PW) Botha (known for wagging his finger and making speeches such as his 1985 utterance quoted by the now defunct South African paper, the Rand Daily Mail: “I am going to keep law and order in this country and nobody in the world is going to stop me.”)

When, on February 2, 1992, during his opening of Parliament speech, De Klerk announced that he would release apartheid’s most famous prisoner, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, who had been imprisoned for 27 years for treason, the nation — and the world — gasped in surprise.

De Klerk kept his word, and nine days later Mandela walked free: the first step on a path which would see South Africa eschewing almost 40 years of racist history and embracing multi-party democracy, under the guidance of none other than Mandela himself, who became the first president of the "New South Africa."

In this context, media organizations around the world — not least those within South Africa itself — began to plan their coverage of the watershed election, from both inside the country, and from various international viewpoints.

Timers boasted eight bylines, although only five of those reporters actually wrote from South Africa (two reported from the United States and one from South Africa's neighbor, Zimbabwe).

On most key issues, The Star, The Times and The New York Times differed considerably, as they did on levels of professionalism ranging from subde skills such as the careful identification of sources to contextualizing issues and events.

Here’s where they differed — and converged — on the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and its leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi; the African National Congress (ANC) and its leader, Mandela; the NP and its leader, then President De Klerk; white extremists; politically related violence; and journalistic standards.

To PAGE 5

Frederik Willem (FW) de Klerk

Born in Johannesburg on March 18, 1936, Frederik Willem (FW) de Klerk is known as South Africa’s last white president, and is widely credited with the abolition of apartheid. He shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela in 1993.

Ironically, De Klerk came from a powerful Afrikaans family with a staunch Nationalist history — his father was a Cabinet member under Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, the South African president considered by many to be the real architect of apartheid. Former prime minister Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom — another notorious supporter of apartheid — was his uncle.

De Klerk was born in Johannesburg, grew up in nearby Krugersdorp and completed his law degree (cum laude) at the University of Potchefstroom — a Christian university which has produced many leading Afrikaners over the years. At university, he was editor of the campus newspaper and was deputy president of the Students’ Representative Council (the student government).

After a stint practicing as an attorney, he had decided by the early 1970s on a political career. Apart from serving as the Minister of National Education in the 1980s, he maintained a low profile mostly, with stints as minister of lesser portfolios including Posts and Telecommunications and Sport and Recreation.

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Mangosuthu Buthelezi

Mangosuthu Buthelezi is leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and a Zulu—one of the largest and most vocal of South Africa's ethnic groups.

Buthelezi has long been a controversial figure in South African politics. In 1976 he became chief minister of the KwaZulu homeland in what is now the south-eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal. (After the 1994 elections the area was merged with Natal, a white province under apartheid, to form KwaZulu-Natal, one of South Africa's nine new provinces.)

The creation of “homelands” was an apartheid policy—the Nationalist government created separate areas of land in far-flung rural areas in which blacks were forced to live. In the cities, blacks were forced to stay in all-black areas called “townships”, but were only allowed to do so if they were employed. Some homelands became “independent”—they were set up with their own governments and borders and their “citizens” were forced to carry separate passports.

From KwaZulu, Buthelezi built up a political power base, using ethnic nationalism as a political tool. The emerging Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s branded him a government collaborator, but he consistently refused to accept “independence” for KwaZulu.

Originally, Buthelezi had been involved in the ANC. Born in 1928, and after a traditional rural upbringing (including working as a herd boy), he joined the ANCYouth League at the University of Fort Hare in the 1940s, and, like Mandela, was expelled, after student boycotts. He finished his studies at the University of Natal.

He founded the Inkatha Yenkululeku Yesizwe cultural organization in 1975, named for a coil heirloom which represents Zulu unity, and which Zulu women use to cushion loads they carry on their heads.

Inkatha was formed with the blessing of the ANC, of which Buthelezi was then a member; the ANC at that time was as yet unbanned by the government. But during the 1970s, the relationship between Inkatha and the ANC deteriorated, leading to ongoing bloodshed which has left thousands dead in South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal.

Inkatha became the Inkatha Freedom Party in 1990, when it transformed itself into a political party. In the 1994 election, the IFP won a narrow majority (50,3 percent) in KwaZulu-Natal, but only 10,5 percent of the national vote.

Buthelezi, like De Klerk, dabbled briefly in journalism, writing a bi-weekly column from 1974 to 1975 which was syndicated to several South African papers.

He has become known for his political “poker-playing” as senior Star journalist Helen Grange described his brinkmanship in an interview in December 1996.

He pulled the IFP out of the 1994 election, and despite pleas from inside and outside South Africa, refused to participate because his demands—which remained vague—had not been met.

The IFP's exclusion from the voting would undoubtedly have caused more acrimony between it and the ANC after the election. But just a few days before voting began Buthelezi changed his mind and the IFP was back on the ballot. The party’s late inclusion created logistical chaos—special stickers had to be printed bearing its logo and stuck onto the millions of ballot sheets.

He is a proud, rather jealous politician running for the national parliament with a militant brand of ethnocentrism, having propped up the Zulu monarch he once opposed. His future as party leader, as ever, is as a flamboyant, unpredictable personality with the power to spark civil unrest in his province.

—The New York Times

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In an interview in London in September 1994, The Times' foreign editor at the time, Richard Owen, described how he had taken a personal interest in his paper's coverage of the election.

He travelled to South Africa before the election, where he interviewed De Klerk and Buthelezi. In the interview, he cast himself in the role of a general mobilizing an army of reporters positioned on different fronts: the enemy was the multitudinous and organic event that was unveiling itself in a million separate incidents across the country. Capturing these incidents as coherently and completely as possible was the stuff of victory.

The Times' (almost all-male) team was led by Michael Hamlyn, an older reporter who ran The Times' bureau in Southern Africa and who brought to the story a lifetime of experience in journalism.

But he was rivalled closely by an up-and-coming correspondent in his mid-20s, Inigo Gilmore, whose most complete experience in journalism had until then been writing "diaries" — "what's-on" columns full of gossip and inside information primarily for the Evening Standard, also based in London.

In an interview in Johannesburg in December 1996, Gilmore described how he had approached Owen in London a few months before the election, and on the advice of colleagues in the profession, had told him, with conviction: "I am going to South Africa."

Owen told him about Hamlyn, who was based in Johannesburg, and suggested he file a few pieces "on spec" — The Times would use them if they were good enough. Consequently, Gilmore, by his own acknowledgement, made his name in South Africa. Eighteen of his stories were published in April to Hamlyn's 20, and the two men wrote roughly 9,000 words each. Gilmore is now bureau chief for The Times in Johannesburg.

Hamlyn, who according to Gilmore was fired by The Times in 1996, lives in Cape Town, and works for the Agence France Presse (AFP) news agency and Isis of America.

Apart from Hamlyn and Gilmore, The Times had — and still has — another correspondent based in South Africa, Ray Kennedy, who primarily covered South Africa's most violent place — the area which is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

The Times' East Africa correspondent at the time, who was based in Nairobi, also came down to South Africa, and was the third most prolific of the

Note on research methods


During this time, The Star ran 892 news pieces compared to The New York Times' 86 stories and The Times' 107 stories.

For every piece, I asked a detailed set of questions, which I marked up first on a worksheet, and then entered into a spreadsheet program which did all the final arithmetic.

Some of the questions were to do with simple things like how long a piece was and the point size of its headline, or whether it included one of a few "hot words" in the headline (the word "violence," for example).

I also asked where the story was placed in the paper, where it was datelined, and who wrote it.

Other basic questions included how many sentences — and how many sentences including direct quotes — had been dedicated to various politicians and to their parties’ supporters.

I also detailed sources numerically, noting if they were male or female where possible, and whether they were civilians, politicians, experts on one aspect of South African life or another, or "law sources" — people who were either police officers or judges, or connected immediately to the South African justice system.

Also, I counted the recurrences of certain specific words, including for example, "democracy" and the word "apartheid," without any specific end result in mind before doing so. Probably the only interesting word of those I selected to count was "apartheid" — which occurred dramatically more often in The New York Times than in The Star (see the section on The New York Times).

On a slightly more interpretive level, I distinguished — but only where it appeared very obvious to me — between certain categories according to what the stories were about. Thus, if they were mostly about the Inkatha Freedom Party or Zulus, the African National Congress or Nelson Mandela, the National Party or FW de Klerk, whites — and even more specifically about white extremists — or blacks, I marked this down.

I also asked detailed questions about how often the various parties, their leaders and supporters were mentioned.

I distinguished between stories that were more in-depth and interpretative, and were about an ongoing subject or trend — "issue" stories — as opposed to straightforward reporting of events or incidents — "episode" stories.

Moving to a more subjective and interpretive level, I went through the stories sentence by sentence and noted whether each sentence strongly conveyed bias in one of the following areas which captured the three most important political players and their parties:

1. Sentences pro-Mandela/ANC
2. Sentences anti-Mandela/ANC
3. Sentences pro-De Klerk/FP
4. Sentences anti-De Klerk/FP
5. Sentences pro-Buthelezi/IFP
6. Sentences anti-Buthelezi/IFP

If a sentence did not show bias in one of these areas, I did not count it.
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dpaper's writers in this period, writing almost 6,500 words in 12 stories. Kiley went on to cover the Rwandan genocide and the war in Bosnia for The Times.

RW Johnson, who wrote three stories for The Times in April 1994, but far more for The Sunday Times, was employed especially to write analytical pieces, particularly about KwaZulu-Natal and the Zulus, the ethnic group which numerically dominates the province.

Although all the writers showed their own particular biases and interests, two things stood out as a whole about The Times' coverage: it was far more sympathetic to Buthelezi and the IFP than the other two papers were (and conversely, critical of Mandela and the ANC), and it concentrated far more on the threat white separatists — or the "white right" — posed to the election.

The Times' pro IFP-Buthelezi stance

This was manifested through the relatively high percentage of pro-IFP sources interviewed, and in the bias conveyed through individual sentences.

Of all the individuals interviewed by The Times' reporters that were clearly pro-ANC, pro-NP or pro-IFP, 30 percent — or just under a third — were pro-IFP.

In other words, it was clear through the stories that these sources were supportive of the IFP in one way or another — they worked for the organization, for instance, or they openly said they would vote for it.

Thus, The Times' journalists perceived the IFP to be considerably more worthy of attention than did South Africa's voters — which gave the party 10.5 percent of the national vote.

Compare The Times' 30 percent of pro-IFP sources to the corresponding figures from The Star: only 21 percent of sources that fell into one of the three categories were pro-IFP, while only 17 percent of The New York Times' sources in those categories were pro-IFP — just slightly more than half The Times' percentage.

But the sources chosen to convey information were not the only way The Times favored the IFP. The Times' reporters also concentrated more on the IFP than it did on the other two parties. On average, the paper dedicated 2.9 sentences per story to Buthelezi and other IFP officials and supporters, compared to 2.5 sentences per story to Mandela, other ANC spokespeople and supporters, and 1.3 sentences per story to De Klerk, other NP officials and supporters.

In terms of bias, there were 595 sentences in The Times' stories which showed definite bias in one of the following six areas: the sentence was pro- or anti-Buthelezi and/or the IFP in general; was pro- or anti-De Klerk and/or the NP; was pro- or anti-Mandela and/or the ANC.

The Times came out with a few more sentences that were anti-Buthelezi and the IFP than were pro: 22 percent of sentences that showed strong bias cast him in a poor light, as opposed to 18 percent which portrayed him and/or his party favorably.

Thus, The Times was far kinder to the IFP than say, The New York Times, which portrayed it favorably in just four percent of its sentences showing strong bias, compared to 17 percent which threw it in a negative light.

Gilmore admitted in the December 1996 interview that The Times' ambiguous stance towards Buthelezi was a weak point in its election coverage, and that his paper should have been more critical. The correspondent most ready to portray Buthelezi and the IFP in a favorable light was Johnson. In the interview, Gilmore dubbed Johnson "very conservative... a federalist."

Madelaine Wackernagel, business editor of a well-respected Johannesburg-based weekly, the Mail & Guardian, who worked for The Times from 1986 to 1989 and as a freelancer until the end of 1992, said the Rupert Murdoch-owned Times — at least while she worked there — "was extremely Thatcherite."

Margaret Thatcher, who was Britain's Conservative prime minister from 1979 to 1990, was strongly "anti-terrorist," which meant also being against the ANC (which had employed an armed struggle against apartheid), Wackernagel argued.

"Thatcher was a Buthelezi fan," she said. Thatcher's government refused to entertain the thought that the ANC would ever come to power. The Times "swallowed that lock, stock and barrel... It's an extremely right-wing paper."

Some of the writing that appeared in The Times bears up Wackernagel's criticisms.

For example, one of the earliest issues in April picked up by all three papers was De Klerk's declaration of a state of emergency in Natal, where election-related violence was escalating. The declaration increased police powers in the province and introduced a curfew, among other measures.

The Times ran a story on April 1 about De Klerk's declaration...
implicating Mandela in the decision (Mandela wins over De Klerk in war on Inkatha), with little more evidence than reporter Johnson’s opinion to back it up in the story: “There is no doubt that the declaration of the emergency is a victory for the ANC, which has been pressing the government to take this action, as if it were intent on crushing its great enemy, before the election, and trying to involve President de Klerk in responsibility for this action,” Johnson wrote.

But Johnson wasn’t the only one to fill news pieces with his personal opinions.

Hamlyn was also guilty of opinionated news reporting, infusing at least one story about Buthelezi and his following (Zulu factor fires Nationalist hope) which ran on April 26, with an aura of romance, power and anachronistic primitiveness.

The story described the IFP’s late mobilization for the election in these terms: “Those who watched Zulu on BBC2 at the weekend will know the feeling: thousands of followers of Mangosuthu Buthelezi (who played King Ceteshawayo in the film) pouring over hastily constructed defenses carrying cowhide shields, stabbing spears and guns.

“The late entry of Chief Buthelezi, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, into the general election that begins today has come upon the other parties with something of the surprise the Welshmen defending Rorke’s Drift felt when the Zulu impis appeared over the horizon: they knew it was possible, but it seemed unlikely.”

(The battle of Rorke’s Drift coincidentally, was fought between the British and the Zulus in 1879. A handful of British soldiers warded off thousands of Zulus to defend the British outpost at Rorke’s Drift.)

While The Times was comparatively sympathetic to Buthelezi, it was, on the other hand, much more skeptical of Mandela and the ANC than the other two papers — the negative sentences (21 percent of those showing strong bias in the six areas mentioned above) just outnumbering the positive sentences (20 percent).

Also related to this was The Times’ treatment of De Klerk and his predominantly white NP, which was least critical compared to its positions on Mandela and Buthelezi and their respective, predominantly black parties.

Thirteen percent of stories that showed strong bias towards one of these politicians and/or their parties were pro-De Klerk and the NP, while just seven percent were anti.

This ties in with Wackernagel’s allegation of racism levelled at The Times, whose editorial staff, she believes, think “the world is run by whites for whites.”

The opinion of Johnson, again in his April 26 story, Mandela wins over De Klerk in war on Inkatha (presented as a news story in the foreign pages), is not hard to discern: “As voters of all races become more panicky at the real prospect of a descent into chaos, so there is a natural tendency to cling to the authoritative and relatively reassuring figure of Mr de Klerk. No one has any faith in either Inkatha or the ANC to maintain law and order on their own and the sheer indispensability of the old white state seems, even in the eyes of many...
blocks, clearer than ever at just
the point when the rule of that
state has reached its dying days.”

*The Times* also wrote more sto-
ries specifically about South
African whites than either *The
New York Times* or *The Star*, with
headlines like Whites face change
with dignified distress.

Eighteen percent of *The Times’
stories were specifically and
clearly about whites (as opposed
to nine percent of *The New York
Times* stories and seven percent
of *The Star’s*).

Twenty-one percent of *The Times’
stories were specifically and
clearly about blacks, com-
pared to 50 percent of *The New
York Times* stories, although this
figure was higher than in *The
Star*, in which just 10 percent of
stories were about blacks.

Even *The Times*’ front-page
story on Thursday April 28, the
day after the majority of South
Africans went to the polls for the
election, was a story primarily
about a white woman (albeit with
a proud history of anti-apartheid
activism), Helen Suzman.

*Mama Suzman*, apartheid’s
scourge was the longest story —
960 words —that *The Times* ran
about the election, and was writ-
ten by former editor, Simon
Jenkins, who jetted out especially
for the election.

In the December 1996 inter-
view, Gilmore acknowledged the
irony and poor news judgement
of a lead story about a white
woman on the day black South
Africans finally went to the polls,
and put the story’s positioning
down to “office politics.” The edi-
tor, Peter Stoddart (who is still
the editor), had positioned the
story on page one probably out of
difference to the former editor,
Gilmore explained.

The story was not an especially
good one: Jenkins apparently did
not do any in-depth research for
the piece, and interviewed just
three sources: Suzman, a woman
civilian and Desmond Tutu’s wife,
identified just as “Mrs Tutu”. The
Star published the same story in
350 words on page six on the same
day, under the headline
Aunty Helen checks up.

**The Times’ emphasis
on white extremism**

*The Times* was comparatively
obsessed with the threat that the
white right posed to the election,
writing five times more often on
the subject than *The New York
Times* and about four times more
often than *The Star*.

(Fifteen percent of *The
Times*’ stories were pre-
dominantly about the white
right, while only three percent of
*The New York Times*’ stories
and four percent of *The
Star’s* stories focused on
this topic.)

The threat of severe disruption
by white extremists in support
of apartheid was by no means non-
existant. Wackemagel contended:
“It was certainly more of a threat
than Mangosuthu Buthelezi (as
far as disrupting the election
went).” On Sunday April 24, two
days before voting began, a mas-
Sive car bomb planted by pro-
apartheid extremists went off in
downtown Johannesburg, killing
nine people and injuring 92.

*The Times* went to town on this
story, pushing up a page one
headline on April 25 to 106 points
(the biggest about South Africa
during April) for a 680-word story
that took up most of the page:
Bomb fuels fear of white backlash
accompanied by a strap that read:
“Times man hurt in blast *Explo-
sion kills nine* Security alert over
Mandela,” three pho-
tographs, and a sidebar
along with a picture of
him bandaged about
the head and looking
dazed. The sidebar
was titled: “I expected
trouble on the
frontline — not here.”

*The Times* was the biggest
story on page six on the
*Star*, with
450 words on a story
about a white extremist
movement, the “Afrikaner
Weerstands beweging” (Afrikaner
Resistance Movement). *The Times*’ coverage of the white right was
more significant — and more sensationalized — than *The New York Times* or *The Star’s*.

**A point to make:** Eugene Terre’Blanche, leader of the white extremist movement, the “Afrikaner
Weerstandsbeweging” (Afrikaner Resistance Movement). *The Times*’ coverage of the white right was
more significant — and more sensationalized — than *The New York Times* or *The Star’s*.

PHOTOGRAPH: RODGER BOSCH / MAE & GUARDIAN

**REPORTING A “MIRACLE”**

Day and night, South Africa published on one day in
April by Simon Walker, a *Times* photographer
injured in the blast
along with a picture of
him bandaged about
the head and looking
dazed. The sidebar
titled: “I expected
trouble on the
frontline — not here.”

The next most extravagant
point size of all the headlines that
ran in April was also for a story
about white extremists, a 60-
point that read: Bombs mark the
final day of white rule.

The most words on South
Africa published on one day in
April by *The Times* was not on the
day that South Africans at last
went to the polls (which came
second), but on the day following
the Johannesburg bomb, April
25, which saw approximately
4,800 words in 12 stories, 1,000
of which, encompassed in three
stories, were about the bomb.

Gilmore practically made his
name with *The Times* covering the
white right at the time of the elec-
tion. But when told of these sta-
tistics, he denied that he had sen-
sationalized the issue. He said he
thought it was important at the
time to get inside the minds of
white extremists, and that he
got to their rallies and simply
reported what he saw.

In fairness to him, *The Times’
sensationalism of the white right
(compared to the other papers’
coverage) was as much in the
design and layout of his articles as
in the sheer number of words he
wrote about the issue.

Headlines, for example, were
at times exaggerated, both in
point size (as in the case of the
story previously mentioned),
and in their relationship to the
For example, Gilmore wrote a story about an interview he had had with Ferdi Hartzenberg, the leader of the Conservative Party, a relatively small splinter group of the white right which vowed not to vote.

In the interview, Hartzenberg called on whites to boycott the vote. (The Freedom Front, however, an umbrella body which represented more white Afrikaners than Hartzenberg’s Conservative Party, had long since decided to participate in the election.) But the copy-editor severely overstated the story in the headline: White right plans mass action to thwart Mandela.

The headline of another story about the movements of the ultra-right AfrikanerWiederstandsbeugung (the Afrikaner Resistance Movement widely known by its acronym, the AWB) in small, rural towns, was again overwritten in the context of the story: Neo-Nazis put Transvaal on war footing.
ration, having just returned from a spell in turbulent Zaire herself.

But Lorch was eventually transferred to New York, where Daley said she battled, newsroom skills and the skills required of a foreign correspondent being “quite different.” Not long after her transfer, she resigned from The New York Times, to take up a position with a new television news agency that was being set up.

The New York Times’ South African election coverage was in many ways exemplary, and far superior to the news writing in either The Star or The Times of London. Balanced for the most part, with impressive attention to detail and an array of colorful imagery, the coverage was not, however, without its weak spots. In one story for example, Kenneth B. Noble transposed the name of the IFP’s chief spokesman, calling him “Jiyane Ziba” instead of Ziba Jiyane.

In a more serious lapse, Noble wrote a story on April 26 about the IFP’s late joining of the election (In the Zulus’ Heartland, Jubilation over Vote Role on April 26) — a huge step forward for a peaceful process — but interviewed three ANC officials and not a single IFP spokesperson or supporter.

(After the election, Noble was based in Abidjan, in West Africa, where, according to Daley “he was known for never leaving the hotel room.” He failed to prove himself in South Africa, where he wrote only about a third — in terms of words — of Keller’s output. He left The New York Times late in 1996.)

The outstanding characteristic of The New York Times’ reporting from all its correspondents was that De Klerk and the NP and Buthelezi and the IFP were treated with disdain — quite the opposite of how they were portrayed in The Times’ news pieces.

And where Mandela was regarded with utmost suspicion by British correspondents for The Times, The New York Times’ South African team treated him with nothing short of reverence.

The New York Times’ pro-Mandela bias

The New York Times unashamedly cast Mandela in a good light. He appeared in eight percent of The New York Times’ headlines about South Africa in April — more than twice as often as in The Times’ headlines on average, and more than seven times as often as in The Star. (Granted, The Star published 10 times the number of stories than The New York Times, covering a much broader spread of topics.)

When it came to dissecting stories sentence by sentence for bias that cast either a positive or nega-
Effete oppressors? The New York Times' reporters described South African whites, such as this couple caught in the midst of a rally in March 1994 as "faine ducks," and were generally far more critical of them than either The Times' or The Star's correspondents.

PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE HEITON-BARBER / MAIL & GUARDIAN

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The New York Times emerged by far the most unequivocally in favor of Mandela. Sixteen percent of the obvious bias was pro-Mandela, compared to five percent that was anti-him — a difference of 11 percent.

(In the same exercise The Times was 20 percent pro-Mandela and 21 percent against him, while The Star was 26 percent pro and 19 percent anti — a difference of just seven percent which revealed a more ambivalent approach to South Africa's president-to-be.)

Conversely, The New York Times was far more critical of the NP (five percent of sentences were pro-De Klerk and/or the NP, while four percent were anti). The New York Times was also the most forthright of the three papers about the NP's dark past, as, for example, this quick description by Kenneth B. Noble: "The National Party, the inventors and enforcers of apartheid."

Coincidentally, The New York Times was far more likely to use the word "apartheid" — it appeared on average 1.4 times in a story — whereas only in one story in 10 in The Star (and in three stories in 10 in The Times). Perhaps this was something to do with the fact that "apartheid" had become a household word in the United States, and a touchstone to describe South Africa.

The Star, on the other hand, was less likely to use a word that conjured up strong feelings in South Africa, and that strongly laid blame on one party more than another (that is, on the NP rather than the ANC which historically had been a broad liberation movement even when it had been banned by the NP as a political party).

The New York Times was also by far the most critical of the three papers of Buthelezi and the IFP, showing a 13 percent variance (four percent pro- versus 17 percent anti-) between sentences that were negative about him and/or his party and those that were positive.

The Star's variance was just six percent (12 percent pro-, 18 percent anti-), and The Times was most lenient on Buthelezi, with just a four percent difference between pro- sentences (18 percent) and anti-sentences (22 percent).

In fact, of all issues, The New York Times' reporters believed most strongly that Buthelezi should be cast in a negative light — even slightly more than color- ing Mandela favorably.

Seventeen percent of all The New York Times' sentences show-
ing strong bias towards one of South Africa’s key politicians and/or their parties were anti-Buthelezi, compared to 16 percent that were pro-Mandela.

In keeping with the high degree of The New York Times’ pro-Mandela bias, the paper’s reporters employed far more pro-ANC sources (people who were ANC candidates, for example, or who who were openly supporting the party in one way or another) on average, than either The Star or The Times.

Sixty-two percent of sources clearly pro-ANC, pro-IFP or pro-NP were in the ANC’s favor in The New York Times' stories, compared to 55 percent of pro-ANC sources used by The Star, and 44 percent — almost 20 percent less than The New York Times — of pro-ANC sources on the pages of The Times.

Conversely, The New York Times sported significantly fewer pro-IFP sources — just 17 percent, compared to 30 percent of pro-IFP sources in The Times.

Again, on average, The New York Times was far more prone to dedicate sentences in general to the ANC.

On average, every story in The New York Times’ carried close on three sentences (2.8) about Mandela, compared to 1.6 about De Klerk and 1.7 about Buthelezi.

But this strong bias in Mandela’s favor is not necessarily a major point of criticism about The New York Times.

Although the paper was relatively uncritical of him, this was perhaps a fair reflection of South African society — the voters certainly thought Mandela was far more important than Buthelezi and De Klerk, giving the ANC 62 percent of the vote, compared to 20 percent for the NP and just 10 percent nationally for the IFP.

And as Daley pointed out in the December interview, Mandela hadn’t had much time to go too far wrong. He had only been out of jail for two years — and hadn’t yet been in the hotseat of the presidency with all its accompanying pressures.

Daley argued that if one were to look closely now at her own coverage of Mandela, a lot would have changed: a much more complete picture of him with all his faults, foibles and fumbles would emerge.

Imagery

Because of The New York Times’ luxury of space, its writers were able to be much more creative with language on the whole than were those of The Star and The Times.

Most noticeably, The New York Times employed religious — often Christian — imagery to propel its pro-Mandela bias.

Mandela is the saint and the savior in The New York Times while Buthelezi, his “bitterest black rival” according to one story, is rendered, along with his party, in monstrous imagery.

Some examples of the religious imagery that surrounds Mandela: early in April, he gives his “blessing” to De Klerk’s declaration of a state of emergency in Natal, while in the same story, by Keller, the ANC makes “converts” in Natal.

Also in the same story, King Goodwill Zwelithini (the Zulu king) and Buthelezi are “men who revel in their martial heritage.” Another metaphor in the piece describes how the IFP “extended its reach” to Zulu migrant workers and “colonized” their hostels (as opposed to converting them). In several stories, KwaZulu is Buthelezi’s “stronghold”; in one story a migrant workers’ hostel is an “Inkatha fortress.”

In another story, Keller portrays Mandela as a Jesus figure, writing of “Nelson Mandela’s soothing talk of forgiveness,” and in another, Mandela “devotes much of his time to reassuring worried whites.”

Clines describes in yet another piece how he earned “secular sainthood” as “the chief prisoner of apartheid”; in another piece by Clines, Mandela is a recipient of worship as “apartheid’s most revered political prisoner.”

This Christian imagery — mingled with connotations of slavery — is passed on briefly to the broader electorate in a voting story by Clines: “The nation’s long oppressed black majority ... patiently crowded polling booths and celebrated the power of the ballot in their ascension from the hard subjugation of apartheid.”

In contrast, one of the rare occasions that religious imagery is used in The Times of London, it is done to describe the future of King Zwelithini, as in this Kiley story: “News of the breakthrough, which enshrines King Goodwill Zwelithini of the Zulus in the national constitution, was spread around KwaZulu’s legislative assembly by the women ululating and dancing.”

The Times also evokes Christ-like imagery to describe a white soldier posted to Natal to curb the violence, in a story titled “Terrified villagers see the Falcon as saviour. The ‘Falcon’ — and savior — is a commander called Deon Ferreira.”

It would be highly unlikely to see any member of the South African police — notorious enforcers of apartheid — described in such terms in The New York Times.

And where in The New York Times the IFP supporters are the...
ones described in especially monstrous terms, in one story in The Times, ANC supporters are described as if they are mad bees: "Suddenly and without warning, dozens of heavily armed ANC 'comrades' swarmed through the maze of houses."

Slavery is also a recurring theme in The New York Times. Clines writes in one story: "The black majority is finally unmanacled at the ballot box." In another piece, squatters are "the vast hidden underclass of apartheid's legacy," their lives "ruined with indentured routine."

If blacks are the slaves, the whites are the cruel, if sometimes effete, masters. In one Keller story, "the lame duck whites whose monopoly began seeping into history today" were also described as "oppressors," and "fearful whites" who were "inflated with wealth."

While the whites are evil in The New York Times, in The Times, they are more like frightened rabbits, for example one strap to a story about whites going to upmarket escapes in South Africa's wilderness areas read: "Archbishop halls democratic miracle as whites flee ballot battle."

The use of water as a metaphor, especially to describe violence, was also common in The New York Times. Both Lorch and Keller used the phrase the "rising tide" of political violence in Natal; Noble wrote of the "storm of violence" that engulfed the region.

These water-based descriptions, unlike the religious imagery, were also commonly used in The Star to describe violence: a "spate of violence" in Natal, which is also a province "caught in a storm."

But they were also used to describe the tasks facing the country's leaders: Mandela and De Klerk's relationship is "stormy," and together they must sail "uncharted waters."

Likewise, at a meeting between the old-guard South African Defence Force and the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe ("Spear of the nation") to decide on a future path, the generals from both sides faced a stark reality: "Sink the country into a mire of violence, or swim towards a new future." (Fortunately for the country they chose what the reporter termed the "swim" option, and decided to merge into one national defence force.)

And on a positive note, there was a "tidal wave" of foreign investment going to flood South Africa after the election on more than one occasion in The Star's April 1994 editions.

One metaphor by Keller summed up The New York Times' stance on the white right which, as opposed to The Times, it mostly dismissed as a serious threat to the election. Most Afrikaners, Keller wrote, "support President FW de Klerk and regard the khaki-clad thugs of the white separatist fringe with a mix of familiarity and embarrassment, the way members of a Kiwanis motorcycle rally might see the Hells Angels."

### Standards and style

The standard of The New York Times' stories was generally very high. Reporters, for example, interviewed on average 2.8 sources per story (including even very short briefs), compared to The Times' average of 1.7 sources per story and The Star's 1.5 average of sources per story.

The New York Times' correspondents were also more dedicated to interviewing ordinary people — at a time when events that were daily unfolding had the power to affect the lives of people on the streets profoundly. Thirty-eight percent of all sources were civilians, compared to 18 percent of civilian sources in The Times and just nine percent in The Star.

Across all three papers, significantly more male sources than female sources were interviewed. Of the sources where it was possible to tell whether they were male or female, the ratios were as follows: The New York Times: 81 percent male to 19 percent female; The Times: 85 percent male to 15 percent female; The Star: 86 percent male to 14 percent female.

As Daley and others interviewed pointed out, this probably reflected South African society relatively fairly. There are very few women in politics — or in any positions of power compared to the United States — in South Africa.

The biggest pool of sources for The New York Times' writings was in civilian life (which accounted for 38 percent of all sources), but almost as big a pool was in politics (which accounted for 36 percent of sources). In this field, the reporters had little choice but to speak to the people involved — which were (and still are) overwhelmingly men.

But even when drawing on civilians, where there was some freedom to interview more women, The New York Times' writers stuck mostly to interviewing men (10 percent of The New York Times' sources were female civil...
The Star

The "softly softly approach" and "sunshine journalism"

In October 1993, The Star's editorial team had a three-day powwow to thrash out the way the newspaper would cover the upcoming election. At this meeting, according to Editor Peter Sullivan in an interview in December 1996, "We decided it (the election) had to succeed."

And if it had to succeed, The Star, as South Africa's most respected daily, had to play a part in promoting optimism around the process. "What is right for democracy, you have to ask yourself," said Sullivan.

There was no doubt in his mind that The Star needed to do its bit for the "New South Africa" — it needed to be upbeat and positive in its reporting about what was happening in the country.

"We didn't want (South Africa) to fall into Bosnia," explained Johan de Villiers, one of several executive editors at The Star who fill in for Sullivan when he is away, in the same interview. Thus, mollification (although that is perhaps not the word The Star's editors would use) of all parties and politicians — for the good of the country — was an editorial policy.

But this was not a new tack for The Star. In a code of ethics dated April 1993 provided by Sullivan, but which predated his editorship (Richard Steyn was editor-in-

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ians, compared to 28 percent of male civilians).

Both Daley and Gilmore remarked that the high ratio of men to women in all three papers could also have been to an extent a reflection of life in South Africa — that newsworthy events were often initiated by men. Gilmore said that violence, especially, was for the most part perpetrated by men, and that men were more likely to attend rallies — the sort of events that journalists covered — than were women.

Daley recounted a story of a rally she went to herself where the men and women were separated. It would have taken much more of an effort in that case, to go across the field and talk to women.

Nevertheless, the strong tendency to interview men rather than women — especially when they are being used as sources because they are ordinary civilians — surely presents a skewed picture of South African life, where, according to the A-Z of South African Politics by Barbara Ludman and Anton Harber, women make up 51 percent of the population compared to men who make up 49 percent.

While mentioning sources, The New York Times noticeably relied less heavily on people such as police and judges — loosely categorized as "law sources" for the purposes of this study.

"Law sources" made up 16 percent of The New York Times' sources compared to The Star, in which law sources made up 10 percent of all sources, and The Times, which relied on people connected in one way or another to the South African justice system 12 percent of the time as sources.

In South Africa, the police had a long record of corruption and blurring facts to suit their own ends. In the days when apartheid was most overwhelm-

In South Africa, women make up 51 percent of the population — yet they were hardly ever interviewed.

ers towards a better nation built upon fundamental human rights. We will rail against racism and sexism wherever it occurs but we will try to change attitudes gently — not with brash and strident shrieking. We will be tolerant even of our rivals, turning away carping criticism by showing consistent quality in our journalism, sticking to the truth whatever the cost in popularity.

We favour a tolerant, democratic and open society that is utterly intolerant of crime, corruption, racism and sexism. On all issues we will give guidance. We trust our ability to involve readers, debate the country's leaders, extract the best thinking from academics, stir in the thoughts of people on the streets, offices and houses of South Africa's biggest city, mix in good ideas from our rainbow nation before offering The Star as a clear and present guiding light to a better, prouder, united South African society."
was widely read and influential in the newsroom, and perhaps because the country was going through such a volatile time, and The Star — far more than The New York Times or The Times — was widely read and influential in South Africa, it had to be more cautious with what it published.

"It was a very narrow precipice we were walking," Sullivan said. "The results of our reporting at the time caused deaths."

"...We're a very immature society and you treat the kindergarten a little bit differently than what you treat the master's students. ... You have to be more tolerant. ... You have to be very, very careful."

For reporters, it was especially difficult to remain detached, Sullivan said.

He talked of how journalists in South Africa had a proud history of fighting apartheid. You either joined an underground resistance movement, "or you became a journalist."

"People who covered it (the election) here were extremely subjective, filled with emotion. They were the highest levels of emotion in the newsroom I have ever experienced."

"Here they were seeing the battle (against apartheid) being won."

Ironically, despite this widespread anti-apartheid sentiment in the newsroom, and perhaps because The Star had consciously decided to tread softly during the election, it was least critical of the NP — the party that had enforced apartheid for close to 50 years.

The results of The Star's bias, as analyzed sentence by sentence, were as follows:

- 26 percent of sentences were pro-Mandela and/or the ANC, compared to 19 percent of sentences which were negative (a difference of seven percent in favor of portraying Mandela and the ANC in a positive light);
- 19 percent of sentences were pro-De Klerk and/or the NP, compared to six percent which were negative (a difference of 11 percent in favor of portraying De Klerk and the NP in a positive light);
- 12 percent were pro-Buthelezi and/or the IFP, compared to 18 percent which were negative (a difference of six percent in favor of portraying Buthelezi and the IFP in a negative light).

Thus, while The Star dedicated more positive sentences to Mandela and the ANC on the whole, the paper was more ambivalent about them — and about Buthelezi and the IFP — than about De Klerk and the NP.

Towards Buthelezi and the IFP in particular, The Star's reporters were considerably less critical than The New York Times' journalists, but less sympathetic than The Times'. Of the sentences in The Star which showed bias to Buthelezi, 12 percent were pro- and 18 percent were anti; in other words, a difference of six percent were anti-Buthelezi.

The correlating difference in The New York Times was four percent pro- to 17 percent anti-, almost four times as many sentences were negative as opposed to positive.

The Times on the other hand was considerably more sympathetic to Buthelezi and the IFP than The Star.

Almost as many sentences which showed strong bias in The Times were pro-Buthelezi and the IFP as were against them (18 percent were pro-, 22 percent were anti-).

When asked why long articles on Buthelezi, Mandela, De Klerk and others had just one source — the person they were about — and why more context had not been provided by speaking to other people about what they thought of these interviewees, Sullivan said this was an aspect of being "fair."

"You must allow politicians to talk to the people," with as little intervention as possible. He said The Star didn't want to alienate the top politicians or make them feel they had been misrepresented, which is why the articles had been simple, one-person interviews (often conducted by more than one person in The Star's political team, which consisted of five reporters).

On average, The Star interviewed 1.5 sources for every story — compared to The New York Times' average of 2.8 — almost double. Sullivan said he thought it was "fine" that certain stories were informed by only one source.

Related to this relative deafth of sources in stories published by The Star, is the fact that The Star reported far more episodes than issues — even at this time which was particularly exciting and novel in South Africa.

Seventy-three percent of stories published by The Star in April 1994 were episodic, as opposed to issue-related — compared to 56 percent of episodic pieces in The New York Times to 44 percent that were more about issues, and 59 percent of stories that were episodic in The Times compared to 41 percent that were issue-based.

Sullivan said that this was because The Star had a duty to...
report the minutiae of daily events to its readers, who unlike the readers of The New York Times or The Times, had specific and important choices to make.

“That’s probably about the right mix for a local newspaper,” he said, when told of these percentages.

“We see ourselves as a metropolitan paper — we report on the city to the city ... We’re not an academic institution that tries to explain to the nation what’s happening throughout the nation.”

The Star has a circulation of about 170,000 copies per day and sells mostly to the greater Johannesburg area, although it is possible to buy copies of the paper in a variety of towns hundreds of miles from Johannesburg.

Sullivan claimed that The New York Times, for instance, would cover more episodes if it were writing about an election in the United States.

The average length of The Star article was in April 1994 230 words, as previously mentioned. Fifty-four percent of The Star’s stories during this time were brief — shorter than 200 words — compared to 32 percent of The New York Times’ stories and 38 percent of The Times’ stories.

That The Star did very few in-depth, penetrating stories — and even less investigative reporting — on any of the multitude of issues playing out in South Africa at the time did not pass Allister Sparks by.

“South Africa has never taken journalism seriously,” he said in the December interview at his Institute of Advanced Journalism. Journalism in South Africa “declined through the Eighties,” and is still in decline.

“The chemistry of transformation that is taking place in this country is not being reported by anyone,” Sparks said, listing a plethora of current issues that remain uncovered by the South African media — ranging from the country’s changing class structures to widescale electrification and how this has changed people’s lives.

The South African media “is locked in episodic or stenographic reporting,” he said. “It’s a commentary on the deteriorated standard of South African journalism.”

He linked this to the fact that “in South Africa, newsrooms have become juniorized” and that “it’s difficult to find anyone over the age of 30” in journalism in South Africa.

Journalism is not regarded as a career, but as a job, until reporters can find a better job, he said. “Here, reporters are paid like primary schoolteachers and post office clerks” (both notoriously paid professions in South Africa).

South African reporters are “underpaid and undereducated ... their newsdesks don’t think in terms of enterprise journalism.”

He argued that there isn’t a reporter of Bill Keller’s calibre in South Africa, or an editor for that matter.

There was “a dramatically different calibre of people and status of the profession” in South Africa, compared, say, to the United States: “I think it’s a continuing and ongoing difference.”

Benjamin Pogrund is an ex-Kand Daily Mail deputy editor who has recently returned to South Africa after years of living...
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in London. He wrote a chapter on how the South African press covered the election for a book published almost immediately after the event called *Elections '94*, and said of the coverage in South African newspapers as a whole: "I found it very inadequate — it was very confusing reporting. I found it very muddled.

"... There were a lot of words (written), but huge holes in them."

Pogrund spoke of the closure of the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1955, a paper considered by many to be the best in South Africa's history. "The press had been sagging right through under Nationalist pressure," Pogrund said. "When the Mail closed down it was like a pancake collapsing."

A lot of journalists left the country, many "dropped out out of disgust." The Mail "was the aggressive hunter of news ... it set the pace." Its closure led to "an enormous erosion of journalistic skills, and an enormous diminution of news that was travelling around the country."

Pogrund added that he didn't think much had changed in South Africa in the last decade or so in terms of the "whiteness" of their newsrooms. He said the fact that most journalists in South Africa are white means that what happens in the lives of the majority of the country's people goes neglected by their papers. He accused white editors (South Africa has very few black editors) past and present of "monumental ignorance."

But Pogrund also expressed some sympathy with Sullivan's stance to downplay the violence at the time of the election.

He recounted a story about how the *Rand Daily Mail* had particularly gruesome pictures of what happened at Sharpeville in 1960, when police killed 72 people and wounded 200 at a peaceful anti-apartheid demonstration.

Realizing South Africa at that time was a "tinderbox," the editor at the time, Laurie Gandar, decided — in a controversial decision that threw into relief questions of journalistic ethics in a country rocked by violence — to publish severely cropped versions of the photographs.

"The cry 'publish and be damned' is all very well, but you've got to think carefully. It doesn't work like that, I don't care what anyone says," Pogrund said. "It's (journalism is) subject to the mores of your society or you cease to exist (as a newspaper)."

"A newspaper doesn't exist in a vacuum," mores are continuously influential and changing, he added.

Nevertheless, Pogrund said, the South African media at the time of the election were (and still are) timid "rabbits."

One of the ways in which *The Star* played the role of pacifier — or practiced "sunshine journalism" as critics have dubbed the toned-down style of reporting South African issues — was in writing about stories to do with politically related violence in the country.

For example, the word "violence" appeared in 1.3 percent of *The New York Times* headlines to do with South Africa, but in just 0.3 percent of *The Star's* headlines.

Many cultures, one country: While South Africa is ethnically and racially diverse, as is shown by these two guests at Nelson Mandela's inauguration, *The Star's* editors chose to gloss over these divisions in an attempt to avoid animosity.

PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE HILTON-BARBER / MAIL & GUARDIAN
Allister Sparks argued that the foreign media tended to sensationalize violence, and when relatively little occurred in the run-up to the election, most correspondents in South Africa packed up and left for Rwanda, where there really was a bloodbath happening.

But on the other end of the spectrum, there is no doubt that The Star deliberately glossed over violence, in what its editorial team thought was for the good of the country.

Senior Star Reporter Helen Grange said in an interview that it had been deliberate editorial policy not only to downplay violence at the time of the election, but also not to identify political parties where there was any doubt at all — or when the reporter hadn’t done enough research to find out, she admitted.

For example, much of the violence on the East Rand, near Johannesburg, was played out between men who lived in migrant-worker hostels who were mostly — but not all — Zulu IFP supporters, and township residents who were mostly — but not all — ANC supporters.

Where The New York Times would write a story about this sort of violence providing substantive background information and calling people “IFP supporters” and “ANC members,” The Star would simply write dry catalogues of how many people had died, such as these details in Area tense as death toll rises, which ran on April 7 on page three: “Three more people died in attacks in Newcastle and seven others were injured in an attack at the Mfolozi Reserve.

“A woman was burnt to death in Inanda, three houses were burnt down in the Drycott area of Escom and two were petrol bombed in Dundee.

“Two people were stoned to death at Esikhaweni, near Empangeni, and two others were shot dead at Ntuzuma, near Durban.

“Another man was shot dead when shacks were burnt down at Lindelani.”

Like Sullivan, Grange spoke of the importance of “bridge-building,” and the fact that The Star’s reporters felt they had a “moral obligation” to make sure South Africa’s dawn to democracy was peaceful. The fact that the election actually took place and South Africa’s transition was smooth was “a miracle,” she said.

The policy was formulated because what was happening was affecting people so personally and deeply, and the country was so volatile, that The Star’s reporters had a real fear of provoking bloodshed.

Thus, when reporting about violence, The Star’s reporters over and over again gave details about numbers of people who had died without giving any background or context about the circumstances they had died in.

Often the stories were extremely short — such as the 38-word, front-page brief on Monday 11 April: 20 more die in Natal. The terms used to describe the violence were also vague and non-judgmental, such as “KwaZulu/Natal violence” in this brief.

Or the 25-word brief on page five on April 6 that was headlined Severely burnt bodies found, about two corpses, presumably burnt to death for political reasons, discovered in Phola Park and Katlehong, two townships near Johannesburg.

Although violence was probably the greatest problem gripping the country, The Star’s reporters used others to interpret trends, and did little analysis on the issue itself.

This is clear, for example, in another story on April 11, Violence claims 552 in March, by a writer for the South African Press Association — or “Sapa” — a news agency The Star relied on heavily: “A total of 552 people died in politically related violence in March, reversing a seven-month trend, the latest Human Rights Commission report said yesterday.”

But all too often, when no reports were forthcoming, The Star would simply quote police reports and put the anonymous term “crime reporter” or “crime staff” at the top of the story.

This “non-partisanship” when it came to reporting violence must surely be put down to inept reporting also, in cases where The Star’s journalists obviously made little more effort than phoning their local police sources. The result, all too often, was a vague sense that violence was out of control in the country, but it remained woolly as to who was doing the killing and who the dying.

Surely these lists of statistics have the effect of numbing people to violence without under-

Celebrating democracy: Residents of Alexandra township in Johannesburg celebrate news of the ANC’s victory. The Star’s reporters did not treat the ANC with as much skepticism as The Times of London or as much adulation as The New York Times.
standing it adequately — which also has the effect of making them “switch off” rather than actively engaging readers in the country’s problems?

Sullivan explained: “We decided on accuracy ... when in doubt, we left it out.

“What we did was we said we would report the people in it (violence) — but only if it would be constructive.”

Like The Star’s “softly-softly” approach to political violence between IFP and ANC members, the paper also downplayed racial tensions that often led to violence in the days running up to the election.

For example, the Star’s Justice Malala described a horrific event which clearly showed that racial tensions in South Africa were not a thing of the past in a story which ran on Tuesday, April 5 under the headline Drive-by gunman murders schoolgirl.

The story described how a black child had been shot and killed and a black woman shot and injured as they sat on the back of a trailer being pulled by a tractor, by white gunmen in a car.

The shooting happened near the tiny rural town of Wesselsbron in what was the Orange Free State (a province that was notorious for its ultra-conservative white population).

The story made page one, but it was only 250 words long and barely examined the whites’ racist motives and any reaction local blacks may have had towards the incident.

Ironically then, The Star marked down race in its reporting as a whole.

As has been mentioned, fifty percent of The New York Times’ stories were clearly and mostly about blacks, while 21 percent of The Times’ stories were about blacks — compared to just 10 percent of The Star’s stories which were clearly and solely about blacks.

Nine percent of The New York Times’ stories were about whites, compared to 18 percent of The Times’ stories and just seven percent of The Star’s stories.

A “source” of poor reporting?

While it was rare ever to see the words of an unidentified person in the stories in The New York Times, it was quite common to see nameless “sources” in The Star and The Times.

While Sullivan said that this sort of reporting showed the “highest ethics” because it didn’t name people who didn’t want to be identified in a country where people could be killed for their words, there is no doubt that The Star’s reporters took more liberties with not identifying sources than The New York Times’ reporters would.

Even in the blandest, run-of-the-mill stories reporters would refuse to identify their sources — even when they could probably get several sources to say the same
thing — thus making their stories less authoritative and allowing their sources less accountability for their own words. To give one example out of many, in a story that appeared in the Times of London, the Star reporter John Collinge described in vague terms several informants:

"Sources denied there was a plan to place such a compromise proposal on the table... Government and ANC sources made it clear that the ANC was not a bargaining chip in the negotiations. The Star's view of the same words. Allister Sparks bemoaned how, despite the fact that The Star and South African newspapers in general were in the rut of "steno-graphic" reporting as he called it, the paper still had an unacceptably high rate of making straightforward errors." For example, in one story, Kissing Carrington to mediate, reporter Montshiwa Moroke wrote that seven international mediators were to visit South Africa before the election, including "US Supreme Court judge Justice Leon Higgin-Dotham," who was certainly no such thing.

"Sterling effort"?

After the election, The Star employed an independent survey company to gauge what its readers thought of its election coverage. Despite the criticisms of people like Allister Sparks and Benjamin Pogrund, The Star's readers — whom the survey found to be 48 percent white and 48 percent black — were on the whole pleased with the coverage.

Helen Grange, who has been at The Star for ten years, acknowledged many of the criticisms leveled against the paper to be valid, including its non-aggressive approach to stories, episodic reporting and its lack of directness and clarity in trying to please all South Africans all the time.

She said that the period building up to South Africa's election and its transformation to democracy was so multifaceted and novel that it was difficult to define. The country had never been through anything like this before, and The Star was, to a large extent, unprepared.

The Star's approach was for reporters to write as much as possible — a scatter-gun approach — so that there would be a wide choice for what to include in each edition.

She estimated that just 30 percent of stories that were actually written in April 1994 were used. After the election, she said, there was much back-slapping in the office, and the reporters were commended all round for a "sterling effort."

Conclusion

As became clearly evident through a careful examination of three newspapers, The New York Times, The Times of London and The Star of Johannesburg, all newspapers reveal their own sets of values, perspectives and biases, not only through their opinion columns, but also in their news pages.

In the case of the South African election, which arguably was one of the biggest media events of this century in terms of the sheer number of correspondents sent from media organizations all over the globe to report on the event and the amount of coverage they received internationally, the three newspapers showed distinct differences not only in bias but also in terms of journalistic professionalism.

The Times of London was the most conservative paper of the three, portraying Buthelezi and his Zulu-based IFP in the most positive light. At the same time, the paper was most ambivalent of the three towards Mandela and the ANC — The Times cast them in a negative light slightly more often than in a positive light, as opposed to...
The Star and The New York Times, which were both clearly pro-Mandela, especially in the case of The New York Times.

The Times was also clearly more pro-white than the other two papers, and it concentrated far, far more on the threat that white extremists posed to the poll than did The Star or The New York Times.

The New York Times, like The Times, invested considerable time, effort and resources into covering the election. For the most part, it was difficult to criticize the paper’s journalists, led by Pulitzer Prize-winning Bill Keller, except perhaps, that they so overwhelmingly embraced Mandela as South Africa’s future president, often using religious imagery to describe him.

The New York Times’ correspondents were far more critical of De Klerk and the NP — the party that had governed South Africa for close to 40 years — than The Times’ and The Star’s writers.

The New York Times was also the most critical of Buthulezi and the IFP of the three papers.

Veteran South African journalist Allister Sparks pointed out in an interview that the executive editor of The New York Times, Joseph Lelyveld, was a correspondent for the paper in South Africa in the 1980s, which may have had an impact on The New York Times’ special interest in the South African election. (Lelyveld himself won a Pulitzer for his book, Move Your Shadow, about South Africa.)

The New York Times covered the election in a comprehensive manner, making sure that reporters covered South Africa’s most important areas and issues, and that their pieces complemented one another in a cohesive manner.

The New York Times’ journalists on average interviewed more people per story than either The Times’ or The Star’s reporters, and made a more concerted effort than the other two papers to gather the views of ordinary citizens.

Like the other papers, however, The New York Times’ journalists interviewed far more men than women, even when talking to civilians where they had the opportunity to interview more women.

Unlike The New York Times and The Times which were reporting the events unfolding in South Africa in a more detached manner and for foreign audiences, the editorial staff at The Star felt integrally caught up in the birth of democracy in South Africa.

The paper’s editors and reporters found it impossible for The Star to be coldly objective, and formulated a series of policies which deliberately tried to help the “miracle” of South Africa’s transition from apartheid come to pass.

This meant that they continuously emphasized the positive aspects of society and events and downplayed issues such as political violence and racism which they perceived to be threatening to democracy.

The Star’s standards of professionalism were inferior compared to The New York Times’. The paper’s reporters interviewed on average half the people per story that The New York Times’ reporters interviewed. Reporters liberally failed to identify sources. Stories were kept short and very, very few in-depth or investigative pieces were published.

Unlike The Times and even more so The New York Times, The Star did not appear to have a comprehensive plan for covering the election on a national scale. It saw itself as a metropolitan paper that prioritized focusing on its readership area over portraying a balanced account of what was happening across the country.

While The Star had the advantage of being based in South Africa, its reporters were not as productive as either The New York Times’ or The Times’ correspondents, writing on average far fewer words.

But where The Star did shine was in providing readers with the logistical details of the election. The paper was also in the position to run a headline on Wednesday 27 April, 1994 on page one: Vote, the beloved country. This was an ironic play on a classic South African novel by Alan Paton which highlighted the poverty and pain caused by racism, called Cry, the Beloved Country.

And under this headline, The Star published a more poignant testimony to South Africa’s “miracle” than ever published by a foreign newspaper: “Apartheid dies today. Millions of South Africans of all races go together to the polls for the first time in the country’s history, to elect a government of national unity.”