



## Boon or bane? The rise of tabloidisation and implications for the quality press in South Africa

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### Abstract

There is growing concern the world over that serious and analytical or “quality” newspapers are becoming less and less serious in their treatment of day-to-day issues and taking on features that resemble the tabloids in a development that is known as “tabloidisation.” Some argue that the success of tabloid papers, which thrive on sensationalism, scandal, sport and infotainment, has forced the quality press to water down their content in order to suit commercial demands at the expense of serving the public interest. By first exploring the meanings and origins of the concepts of “quality press”, “tabloids” and “tabloidisation”, this paper seeks to address the question of whether tabloids can make a positive contribution to society.

### Key words

social responsibility, public interest, public sphere, democracy, quality press, tabloids, tabloidisation

There is growing concern that commercialisation of the press throughout the world has led to the decline of “quality” information that is supplied by the news media. Terms such as “dumbing down” and “soaping” have gained currency in reference to this decline. The struggle for survival in an increasingly competitive environment has forced the “quality” press to turn to the borrowing of content forms and presentation formats from the “tabloid” press – with the result that these media become more sensational and tabloid-like in outlook, derogatively known as “tabloidisation.” The hybridisation of both content and form is linked to the phenomenal success of tabloid newspapers in

terms of both readership figures and attraction of advertisers, which tends to suggest that readers increasingly prefer entertainment-oriented content to informative content.

These anxieties about the erosion of quality newspapers relate to a set of assumptions about the role of the media in a democracy. It has been argued, for example, that tabloidisation compromises the civic and democratic function of the media (Franklin 1998, 4). McManus (1994, 147) states that market journalism is contradictory to the normative role of the press. Normative theories of the media emphasise the importance of

“quality” information over entertainment content. This emphasises that “quality” information can facilitate democratic discourse, leading to discussions and debates that revive the ideal role of news media as platforms for public debate.

This ideal role includes the fact that the media are also important tools for educating people, interpreting events and offering analysis to the public. More importantly, in the case of fledgling democracies such as South Africa, the media needs to play a critical role in both nation building and the nurturing of democracy. The need to fulfil such a critical role therefore raises the question whether newly emerging nations such as South Africa can afford the luxury of a media that merely seeks to entertain.

In Africa, the chief enemy to press freedom is usually considered to be the state, with privatisation and opening up of markets seen as the answer. However, this ignores the problematic role of the market (Rønning 1994). While market liberals suggest that leaving journalism to the free market guarantees the freedom of the press from the apparatus of the state, that does not in return guarantee press freedom from the market (Curran 2002). Market forces hamper private media in fulfilling its ideal role.

### **The quality press: what quality?**

It is imperative that we start by defining what we mean by the quality press. Colin Sparks (cited in Malovic and Vilovic 2004), for example, defines the quality press thus: Quality newspapers are large format newspapers that report news in depth, often with serious tone and higher-level language. News is dominated by national and international events, politics, business, with less emphasis on celebrities and gossip.

The quality press seems to engage in stating facts of stories, so readers interpret the stories for themselves. Stories usually maintain objectivity and are not full of opinions. The quality press does not employ unconventional language to address its readers but uses formal language (Malovic and Vilovic 2004, 2). Focus is more on providing informative content and less

entertainment content (Park 1960). These newspapers focus on using texts more than visuals. Quality newspapers have long stories with “in-depth reportage,” and are known for being able to sustain investigative journalism, which has become a costly affair in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Investigative journalism is one of the most important features of the quality press. Malovic and Vilovic (2004, 1) state, “the quality press has never sought to attract buyers and readers by using huge photographs and sensational bold headlines.” The quality press is the closest in playing the normative role of the press, as it dwells on discussions of political events and democratic issues that are pivotal to democratic states.

### **The tabloids**

The Oxford Dictionary defines tabloid as “a newspaper having pages half the size of a broadsheet, written in a popular style,” and explains its origin as “first referring to a tablet of medicine: the current sense reflects the idea of information being presented in a form that is easily digested.” The tabloid press tends to be easier to read and includes opinions in articles (Joseph 2005, 30). Early usage of the term associated it with the physical dimension of newspapers and their easy portability, which enabled people to carry and read in confined spaces such as commuter transport (Langer 2003). More recently, the term tabloid has come to be associated with the debasement or vulgarisation of journalism.

Critics generally accuse tabloid newspapers of being obsessed with celebrities, gossip, and giving more space on scandal and sport at the expense of serious reporting (Merrill 2006, 1). Sensationalising, over-dramatisation, and personalisation are some of the recurrent accusations levelled against tabloids. Typically, tabloids are more entertaining than informative. They generously use pictures, they use casual and chatty style of writing, and they carry screaming, eye-catching headlines. Kurtz (1993), Franklin (1998) and Turner (1999) agree on the point that tabloid content is composed of sensational language and street talk (slang) which is associated with entertainment content as a way of attracting readers.

The aim of tabloids is to attract as many readers as

possible to sell large numbers of copies, in order to draw advertising revenue. The increasing competition among the leading South African tabloids for the same market can be seen as worsening the quality of newspapers as they struggle to “out-tabloid” one another.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental question that arises with the emergence of tabloids everywhere is whether, by making newspapers more accessible to the ordinary person through lowering the threshold of entry into public debate, these newspapers are contributing to the empowerment of citizenship or rather to the debasement of democracy.

Tabloids’ low copy price and use of graphics and simple language can be seen as elements that make them accessible to ordinary people, as compared to other newspapers. The South African tabloid, *The Daily Sun*, has the largest circulation figures at 504 850 copies a day (www.media24.co.za). *The Daily Sun* concentrates on celebrities as well as ordinary people who experience what one might call the “bizarre.” The newspaper produces short news stories and uses sensational headlines and large pictures as part of its reporting strategy.

Stories on *tokoloshes*, witchcraft and others from the world of make-belief are part of the diet from *The Daily Sun*, and ironically have a wide appeal among ordinary people. Some argue that by playing on people’s fantasies the tabloids promote a form of escapism that leads to political apathy in society. This could mean a missed opportunity to contribute to the noble ideals of democracy, particularly in countries such as South Africa where the nation-building project is still in its infancy.

The concern is that the tabloid press seems to disengage issues that interrogate state governance and the operations of business. As the presidential succession debate heats up, tabloids such as *The Daily Sun* often shy away from offering long analytical pieces. Veteran editor Joe Thloloe (cited in Kruger 2006) commented that *The Daily Sun* was a newspaper that embraced the old tendencies of the Bantu World of the fifties. He further mentioned

that the ruling whites employed such press to keep the black oppressed quiet as they discussed trivial issues of sex, sport and superstition at the expense of more serious political issues. While Deon du Plessis, the publisher of *The Daily Sun* argues that the newspaper is for working class men, others note that the newspaper is failing to raise issues that might empower workers (Berger 2005a, 3).

Given the record success of *The Sun* in recent years, it is difficult to imagine the owners (Media 24) sacrificing profits for “quality” if this means changing the presentation format and providing more serious and analytical content. Strelitz and Steenveld (2005, 267) point out that although publishers of tabloids claim to offer people what they want, these publishers are also largely driven by profits.

#### Arguments in defence of the tabloids

In a fast-moving world characterised by split-second television images and sound-bytes, tabloid-style news is becoming more and more fashionable with readers. Market studies are also suggesting that readers, especially younger and female ones – prefer “a quick, manageable read.”<sup>2</sup> As such, several scholars argue that tabloids and the consequent tabloidisation of the quality press are not wholly bad phenomena. For example, by making ordinary people the main subjects of their stories, tabloids tend to subvert the norm of having elite people as the natural newsmakers. In this vein, tabloids are “a more accessible, less elitist approach to communication” (Barnett 1998, 75). They have the capacity of “making difficult concepts or stories ‘come alive’ for people who lack either the ability or inclination to read long-winded articles on complex subjects” (Ibid, 77-78).

The tabloid strategy of “introducing stories through personal histories, real-life dramas or humour” (ibid) has also been successful in drawing sustained reader attention and interests. As such, entertainment formats that entice

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See for example, *Financial Mail*, 19 November 2004, ‘First shots in tabloid war’,  
<sup>2</sup>Time, 10 May 2004, “It’s a tabloid world.”

readers may be an effective strategy where people are generally becoming apathetic. Contrary to claims that tabloid newspapers, despite their success in copy sales, have not been successful in providing information that empowers the citizens, Raymond Joseph (among other scholars) argues that tabloids have resulted in more people reading newspapers (Joseph 2005, 30). Joseph (2005, 31) points out that the tabloids are talking to ordinary people about the issues that affect them on a daily basis. According to Joseph (2005, 30) tabloids use simple devices to depict stories such the use of pictures and sidebars to break complicated stories and make them much easier to read.

*Lumby* (1999, 62) has also argued that “any criticisms towards tabloids are hugely aimed at protecting traditional definitions of what matters in ‘public affairs’ such as business, parliamentary politics, economics, the law and so on.”

There is an argument that the tabloid trend has put “private issues” outside, from domestic violence and child abuse to relationship, addiction, eating disorders, parenting problems and sexuality (Turner 1999, 62). A further point is the contention that many of the concerns expressed about the influence of tabloids reflect a conventional and long – standing hostility towards popular culture. Some academic commentators have found sympathy with the tabloids, interpreting the tabloidisation of news as a cultural expression of democratic development and that they have reflected the interests (populist and trivial though they may be) of the contemporary mass public (McNair 1998, 116).

It is not easy to define what is important for society, but a great concern should be whether citizens understand their position in society. If one is to consider Marxism and look at the fact that tabloids are produced by the ruling elites for the working class, then one must probe whether tabloids are a way of marginalising the working class even further (Berger 2005a, 3).

There are claims that tabloids in South Africa have become a place where people come when they have been let down by the country’s authorities

(Joseph 2005, 30). The *South African Police Services (SAPS)* once opened a temporary bureau at the *Daily Sun’s* offices to deal with problems brought by the readers to the newspaper (Berger 2005a, 4). By so doing, the *Sun* has built a relationship of trust with its readers, which translates into growing reader interests. Estimates are that more than one person reads a copy of the *Daily Sun*, an indication that the paper has wider reach in society.

On the other hand, the simplicity of tabloids makes the newspapers more readable yet at the same time being less informative. Perhaps tabloids cultivate a culture of laziness among readers as they become less accustomed to reading long analytical pieces. The question is whether it is possible “to integrate the ‘progressive’ with the ‘popular’ elements of the quality and tabloid press” as Guy Berger (2005b) suggests.

### **Tabloidisation – the contamination of the quality press?**

The Media Monitoring Project (MMP) recently reported that tabloidisation of news is on the increase in South Africa. The MMP noted with concern that while tabloids had introduced newspapers to millions of new readers, with some providing quality content in their inside pages, the general trend is that of sensationalism, characterised by “lack of context and leading with shocking visuals and inflammatory headlines,” as well as “blatantly sexist and frequently xenophobic” content.<sup>3</sup> However, the MMP report does not go into details to explain what it means by tabloidisation, nor does it explain the full extent of the tabloidisation on the South African media landscape. Turner (1999, 59) explains tabloidisation as, ... a shift from politics and towards crime, away from the daily news agenda and editorially generated items promoted days in advance, away from information-based treatments of social issues and towards entertaining stories, lifestyles of celebrities, and an overwhelming investment in the power of the visual and the news becoming an entertainment spectacle.

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<sup>3</sup>See: MMP, Addressing the State of the Media: <http://www.mediamonitoring.org.za/Resources/MMPNewsletters/tabid/101/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/127/Addressing-the-state-of-the-media.aspx>

This trend is synonymous with the “soaping of politics” whereby there is an attempt to write political stories in a softer or exciting manner. Esser (1999, 292) suggests that tabloidisation appeared one hundred years ago when newspapers started adding sections emphasising sports and entertainment, illustrations and sensations that appealed to wider audiences. Supplements, according to Esser (1999) are another form of tabloidisation as newspapers feel pressured to carry them to cater for different audience tastes and preferences. The issue of attracting advertising revenue also appears as advertisers promote most supplements.

Respected South African quality newspapers such as the tabloid-sized *Mail & Guardian* and *The Star*, for example, have followed this trend of offering supplements that range from motoring, lifestyle, to general entertainment. While these newspapers still maintain their quality offering, ranging from well-written opinion/analysis pieces to investigative content, what needs to be established is whether this increase in entertainment-oriented content has displaced the serious informative content. What is clear, though, is that both newspapers increasingly borrow tabloid-style headlines and eye-catching front-page layouts that are typical of the tabloid tradition.

In particular, *The Mail & Guardian* has often provided attention-grabbing headlines that sometimes border on the sensational.<sup>4</sup> The newspaper has used titles of movies and various language techniques to attract readership. A good example of this is the headline “Mission Possible” used by the *Mail & Guardian* (May 12–18 2006) for a Jacob Zuma story just before he went to court to receive judgment on his alleged rape case. This was around the time cinemas released the movie *Mission Impossible 3* nationwide. This is a technique used by the *Mail & Guardian* to show that it is aware of what is popular with the readers out there.

*The Star* newspaper (November 13 2006) also pulled a catchy headline when Tony Yengeni allegedly went home for a weekend while he was still in prison. The headline was “Yengeni’s Prison Break.” The Fox series *Prison Break* was running at this same time on *M-net*. Generally, there seems to be growing pressure on the

part of newspapers to appeal to the popular in order to attract readers. The mode of presentation in this case is populist although the stories need not be of inferior quality (Malovic and Vilovic 2004, 2). Tabloidisation is therefore a consequence of commercialised media, most often promoted by the pressures of advertisers to reach large audiences (Esser 1999, 291).

Tabloidisation has also been defined as “as a spillover of tabloid news values from the popular to the quality press” and it implies a “contamination of the so-called serious media by adopting the tabloid agenda” (Esser 1999, 293). This hybridisation aims to appeal to readers of all shades by providing a “total” newspaper that addresses those looking for gossip, sport and serious topics alike. Quality newspapers such as the *Star* increasingly use various language techniques for their headlines – from sensationalism, street talk (slang), alliterations to puns, which have always been a common feature of tabloids (Kurtz 1993; Franklin 1998; Turner 1999). The use of large pictures on the front pages of quality newspapers such as the *Mail & Guardian* and *The Star* reflect tabloidisation, a strategy to lure readers with visuals.

With regard to the *Mail and Guardian*, the paper follows a growing international trend where quality newspapers are assuming tabloid size both for economic and convenience purposes. In the United Kingdom, *The Times* and the *Independent* witnessed dramatic gains in circulation after introducing compact tabloid editions in 2003. Newspapers are business enterprises, and they naturally tend to imitate successful innovations. When the *Independent* (UK) introduced the compact edition and saw sales shoot up 18% in a period of six months, this inspired many other European newspapers to go “compact.”<sup>5</sup> The successful transformation of the *Sowetan Sunday World* from a quality broadsheet that was struggling to get past a

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<sup>4</sup>The *Mail and Guardian* has once been accused of using tabloid tactics. See, for example, Sarah Henkeman’s letter to the Editor, *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 19 January 2006: “Stop these tabloid tactics”

<sup>5</sup>Time Magazine, 10 May 2004, “It’s a tabloid world.”

<sup>6</sup>Saturday Star, 10 May 2003, “‘Cheeky’ tabloid is driving hard.”

circulation of 30,000 into a popular tabloid in 2000 is an interesting case. Within a year, sales soared past 100,000.<sup>6</sup>

What distinguishes the *Mail & Guardian* from the trend described above is that the newspaper does not put stories on its front page. The front page is more like a contents menu. The *Mail & Guardian's* front page is thus similar to that of most tabloids in that it is used as a banner to announce the lead story of the issue. While the use of tabloid-style front-pages and magazine-like supplements may raise concern that the paper is being “tabloidised”, it is notable that *The Mail & Guardian*, to its credit, has maintained its seriousness and analytical approach to issues. It has played both an investigative and watchdog role in exposing government corruption from the Oil-gate Scandal to the Travel-gate Scandal, which are the hallmarks of the quality press.

### Concluding reflections

The arguments raised point to the need for focused empirical studies to investigate the claims of growing tabloidisation, namely that there is a progressive displacement of serious, challenging and informative content such as news and analysis by sub-standard content which focuses on entertainment, scandal, and showbusiness in the South African media landscape. Such research is necessary to validate the accusations of debasement levelled against the press. In recent years, most newspapers have expanded in size, as well as diversifying in terms of the supplements and “magazine” inserts. What needs to be verified is whether the increased number of pages has compromised existing content formats, and whether we are getting less of serious analytical content as a result.

Steven Barnett (1998) suggests three approaches to

ascertaining the presence and impact of tabloidisation. The first approach would be concerned with determining whether the “bad” is progressively chasing the “good”, and whether the volume of serious and challenging material is on the decline. The second approach would seek to ascertain whether packaging and presentational formats that make content more populist debases serious and challenging material. The final approach would be to explore the extent to which front pages give less prominence to serious stories in favour of entertainment and more “human interest” stories. The argument here is that serious stories may still be covered but relegated to the inside pages of the newspapers, with “important political debates, foreign stories or new policy initiatives” taking back seat while “quality” newspapers lead with “allegations of sleaze, ...or a major crime or tragedy story” – all of which belong to the tabloid tradition. Such research will enable us to tell the scale and impact of tabloidisation in the South African press.

The challenge we face today is that tabloids are here to stay, and we cannot afford to ignore them. In a world where respect for freedom of expression and choice have become key yardsticks in measuring democratic performance and tolerance of diversity of opinion, it is imperative that tabloids be considered an integral part of our expanding media landscape. It is therefore the duty of the citizens to demand quality and ethical journalism from all media, tabloids included. From the foregoing discussion, the conclusion is that the rise in any country of tabloids and the consequent tabloidisation of the quality press can be both a boon and a bane. There are different shades of tabloids, and that journalistic values of objectivity, fairness and balance can be upheld through the enforcement of professional ethical codes that bind the entire press sector – tabloids and broadsheets included.



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