



**Making sense of tabloid newspapers:
some key considerations**

By Lynette Steenveld and Larry Strelitz



Abstract

Many journalists and media critics question whether tabloid journalism is real journalism. While some propose that tabloids do not contribute to social and political development, others argue that they deal with social issues that impact on people’s daily lives, and in so doing, contribute to a broader understanding of what is regarded as “political.” One aspect of this is campaign journalism, where the tabloid acts as a “helper” in the community. The growing popularity of tabloids points to a need for research to understand their role and function in society.

Key words

tabloids, journalism, politics

Many mainstream journalists question whether headline-grabbing tabloids can be considered real journalism. For critics, one of the key definers of what constitutes journalism is that it provides information about the social world that its readers can use to make informed social and political decisions.

In contrast, tabloids privilege melodramatic tales of everyday personal experience. In so doing, arguably, they draw attention away from the wider political and economic processes that shape readers’ lives. From this perspective, tabloids contribute little to the social processes that help build democratic societies – the defining rationale of journalism – and for this reason many dismiss them as worthless.

This particular critique foregrounds one aspect of the

normative view of journalism: its provision of information that is useful for citizens in their political participation in democratic processes. Two points are noteworthy in this regard. First, the “crisis in journalism” that concerns both media producers and commentators is the declining interest in mainstream journalism (evidenced by declining audiences), and its impact on the political culture in societies that describe themselves as democracies. Second, the liberal view of journalism is wider than its information-providing role.

Ronning, for example, identifies three key purposes of journalism. First, it provides information that citizen’s need “to know and exercise their civil rights.” Second, it provides information that enables people to participate in the political sphere of their lives. Finally, it offers citizens representations of themselves that they can identify with

– and (ideally) propose a wide range of identities that people can inhabit (1994,15; see also Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, 17-18).



Women take a critical look at media Credit: Trevor Davies

While the mainstream press are at their strongest in serving the first two functions, they are perhaps less successful in their execution of the third. It is this last aspect of journalism – its identity-constituting capacity – that may account for the decline in ordinary people's interest in the mainstream media, and the popularity of tabloids.

The two features that distinguish tabloids from the mainstream media are their mode of address, and focus on the politics of everyday issues and problems confronting their readership. This difference begs questions about how these aspects of journalism relate to the conventional understanding of its political role expressed in the first two functions of journalism identified above, and challenges us to think about tabloids as a particular form of journalism and how they address the issue of being both popular and politically engaging.

“Defining” tabloids

The current explosion of tabloids in South Africa and across Africa can be seen as part of a global and historical process that has been referred to as the “tabloidisation” of the news media (Eide 1997). This has resulted in a media form with three defining textual characteristics: *range*, *form*, and *style* (Uribe and Gunter 2004, 390).

The term *range* refers to a decreasing proportion of page space allocated to information compared to entertainment; to foreign as compared to local news; and to “hard” compared to “soft” news (sport, crime, celebrities, entertainment). *Form* refers to the privileging of visual representations (colourful photographs, headlines, graphics) as opposed to traditional dense text. Finally, *style* refers to the increased personalised angle of coverage – both in the highlighting of stories of ordinary people as well as the focus on the private lives of public figures (Uribe and Gunter 2004, 390). Another aspect of this style is their conversational tone, which often mirrors the colloquial language of readers. In this way, they set up a more “egalitarian” relationship between themselves and their audience, rather than pontificating from on high (Fiske 1992). This feature, together with more local stories and a personalised approach, creates a more intimate relationship between the paper and its readers.

Some aspects of these formal qualities of tabloids – their “sensationalism”, personalisation, and focus on private concerns – have been described by Jostein Gripsrud (1992) as akin to the main components of melodrama which emerged in Europe in the 18th century. The French revolution marked a change in consciousness from a belief in the sacred to the secular ordering of the world. This meant that the social conflicts and upheavals people experienced could no longer be attributed to spiritual forces, but rather the battle between the primal forces of good and evil embodied in individuals.

In this new context, he argues, we can understand the melodramatic as “an expressionist aesthetic, striving to *externalise* what is underneath the chaotic and uncertain surface of modern existence” (1992, 87). Melodrama’s use of the spectacular and the sensational aimed, according to Gripsrud, “to demonstrate the *strength* of the forces at play, their pervasiveness, the impossibility of getting around them” (1992, 87). In drama, these elements would have the effect of moving the audience, thus increasing the plays’ pedagogical effect. As Gripsrud (1992, 87) notes, melodrama meant to teach the audience a lesson and in that, it had a didactic function. He notes:

Today's popular press also teaches the audience a lesson, every day. It says that what the world (the news) is really about, is emotions, fundamental and strong: love, hate, grief, joy, lust and disgust. Such emotions are shared by all human beings, regardless of social positions, and so is "general morality" – crime does not pay, betrayal is betrayal, doing to others... etc. Sex and death are the two aspects of life that create the most intense emotions, so naturally they are the most heavily focused themes. (1992, 87-88)

This privileging of the emotional and the moral – as opposed to "the rational" that the mainstream media are premised on – may also go some way to explaining their popularity.

Another feature of tabloids is stories that deal with phenomena and situations that rupture our empirically based understandings of the world: alien abductions, impregnations by ghosts and so on. Cultural theorist John Fiske addresses this feature of tabloids arguing that they produce subjectivities that are different from those produced by the mainstream press (1992, 46). The latter present information as objective facts selected from an empiricist reality. Good "objective" investigation produces the truth. Their tone is serious, official, and impersonal, aimed at producing a rational understanding of social life. They address their readers from the position of one who knows, providing information for those who do not.

In contrast, the stories of the extraordinary in tabloids are appealing because they play with this common-sense understanding of the real. Fiske writes, "One of its most characteristic tones of voice is that of a sceptical laughter which offers the pleasures of disbelief, the pleasures of not being taken in" (1992, 48). He argues that ordinary people get pleasure from this kind of story because their tongue-in-cheek appreciation of it is a way of signaling approval for versions of reality that are scorned by the powers that be. This response, he asserts, is "the historical result of centuries of subordination which the people have not allowed to develop into subjection" (1992, 48). In some countries, stories of witchcraft may fall into

this category, but they could also express a different set of cultural myths for explaining certain kinds of social situations or events. For example, in a study of the Zimbabwean tabloid, *uMthunywa*, Mabweazara (2006) found that most readers believed that the paranormal occurrences reported in the paper were factual descriptions of real experiences in people's lives.

Similarly, Deon Du Plessis, publisher and part-owner of the *Daily Sun*, defends his paper carrying stories about magic and ancestral spirits:

I'm not going to slag off these beliefs. We once carried a picture of a bed on the roof in the township of Mangaung. The owner insisted that he woke up there. His neighbour told our reporter that there was a white horse hanging around, and that the horse and the removal of the bed were connected by magic. Are we supposed to go to Mangaung and tell people they're talking shit? I'm not going to do any such thing. We'll report it as it was told to us. (*Noseweek*, February 2006, 27)

Du Plessis's comments accord with those of journalists working on the American supermarket tabloid, the *National Enquirer*. According to Bird (1990, 378), a standard constantly invoked by these journalists is the mainstream journalistic tenet of objectivity and that they deem a story "accurate" if it faithfully reports what sources said or wrote. As Bird concludes, "by this standard, much of what is written in tabloids can be claimed to be exceptionally accurate" (1990, 378).⁸

The popularity of tabloids

While remaining sensitive to the specificity of national socio-political contexts, it is possible to discern generic reasons for the popularity of tabloid journalism. In explaining the popularity of these media amongst the British working classes, Sparks (1988, 216-217) postulates that political and economic power in a stable democracy is so far removed from the real lives of the mass of the population that they have no interest

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⁸As Roschco, points out, "Giving sources the responsibility for supplying content [has] freed reporters from the need for extensive knowledge about subject matter" (1975: 42).

in monitoring its disposal. In other words, he argues, in a stable democracy the popularity of the tabloids says more about the relationship of ordinary working people to the social and political processes that govern their lives, than about the press.

It is significant that during the 1980s, when popular political activity was at its height in South Africa, we witnessed the emergence of the “alternative” press. This media had an explicitly political purpose, expressed in their aim to “popularise, educate, and organise,” and thus focused on social and political issues – traditionally defined in relation to the anti-apartheid struggle. It is noteworthy that the current tabloid explosion in South Africa occurred just 10 years after the first democratic elections.

While our democracy is still in its infancy, it is worth considering whether the growth of the tabloid press in this country is a sign of the alienation felt amongst the working classes from the formal political processes, or whether it is a sign of “struggle fatigue.” As Gripsrud notes with regard to the popular press in Norway, “[I]t still remains a pervasive fact that most people prefer pleasure to politics, and this may be understood as a choice made on the basis of some sort of recognition of their social conditions” (1992, 92).

The ten years of democracy may be significant in another way. The rise of the mass circulation popular press in both America and Europe coincided with the growth of a new reading public, a result of the introduction of mass education and the resulting growth in literacy. In similar vein, perhaps in Africa we are witnessing the growth of new reading publics with their own “specific socio-cultural traits and contingencies” (Dahlgren 1991, 16). If this is so, we need a sociological understanding of how such publics are constituted, and of the role of journalism and other media in this process.

As Ornebring and Jonsson (2004, 285) observe, while there is arguably a mainstream mediated public sphere dominated by elite sources, the structural elitism (who is quoted, what kinds of stories are covered) of this

sphere in turn creates a need for one, or several, *alternative* public spheres. Tabloid journalism has, according to these authors, the ability to broaden the public, giving news-access to groups not previously targeted by the prestige press. Similarly, Sparks (1991, 63) notes that the British press consists of different kinds of print media produced for different social classes and that they have to be understood as part of the differing cultural lives of those classes.

The place and content of a newspaper in working-class culture is quite different from that in middle-class or ruling-class culture. The press, he argues, is not, and never has been, a single self-evident and undifferentiated category. What we need to investigate, then, is the role played by tabloids in the social, cultural, and political life of different classes in the particular countries in which they have emerged.

Service or campaign journalism: A different kind of popular journalism

Eide argues that tabloid journalism does not have a unitary identity, but is a differentiated form. On the one hand there are tabloids solely preoccupied with moral disorder and threats to everyday life, and on the other there are those which incorporate what he calls “service and campaign journalism” (1997, 180). This kind of journalism addresses readers as consumers rather than citizens, and its purpose is “to provide the readers with guidance” (Eide 1997, 177) in their quest for obtaining goods and services that improve their daily lives. It is a “manual for everyday life” (1997, 177), “providing guidance in conducting a good life” (1997, 180). Eide writes:

They [journalists] address a *lifeworld* where information *does* matter for the reader, not a *system* world where readers’ possibilities for action are limited. This is “news-you-can-use” – the newspaper becomes a “use-paper” (1997, 177).

In service journalism, according to Eide (1997), the role of the journalist is as advocate and campaigner on behalf of consumers. The journalist is an advisor, “the hero or good-helper” (1997, 178) and in the process, the newspaper builds an alliance or makes a contract

with the reader. While the journalist is the hero, the civil servant, the government bureaucrat or local councillor plays the role of the antagonist.

This description of a form of popular journalism exemplifies aspects of some of South Africa's tabloid press. Deon Du Plessis, in commenting on the *Daily Sun*, notes:

We don't do traditional politics. We do real politics. Real politics is shit flowing past your front door because the municipality won't fix the sewerage. It's workmen leaving open holes for kids to fall into. It's police ignoring calls for help. Last year [2005], we did a thing called the Hall of Shame. Every day, we invited people to send us details of government failing them, then published the names and addresses of those responsible. I think that campaign contributed more to the emphasis Mbeki's government is now placing on local government delivery. That's where the rubber hits the proverbial road. Don't say we're not political. (*Noseweek*, February 2006, 26)

Other editors concur with this service role of tabloid journalism. For example, Ingo Capraro, editor of *Die Son*, has noted: "We have a weekly 'campaign' of sorts going, aimed at the empowerment of women to help combat AIDS" (*Mail & Guardian online* 8 December 2004). *City Press* editor, Mthatha Tsedu, pointed out that "many people with social problems call the *Daily Sun* before they call the police". (*Mail & Guardian online*, 2 July 2005)

Critique of tabloid journalism: political journalism?

Understanding the reasons behind the popularity of the tabloids should not be confused with the commercial agenda that drives the publishing companies. While their rhetoric may be of "serving the people," and "giving them what they want," this happily coincides with their drive for profits – gained precisely from those very people who formerly were not regarded as significant enough to constitute a viable "market segment." In South Africa, it is significant that the main producer of the tabloid press is Media24, a subsidiary of Naspers, former supporter of the Apartheid state.

In this context, Wasserman (2006, 180-181) points out that Deon Du Plessis's description of their tabloids' black readership in purely economic terms – as a "niche market" – obscures its political and economic construction during the apartheid era. Furthermore, he reminds us that the South African explosion of tabloids coincided with the heightened drive for profits within the industry – achieved by "the reduction of staff, privileging commercial imperatives, the erosion of specialised reporting and the juniorisation of the newsroom" (2006, 179). As part of this commercial imperative, tabloids need to connect with the "structure of feeling" of their readers. This may, in part, explain the xenophobia of South African tabloids identified by critics such as Sean Jacobs (2004, 148-149, cited in Wasserman 2006, 181).

One of the most challenging critiques of tabloids is that their focus on personal experience and local stories offers an inadequate or simplistic understanding of social and political processes. Sparks argues that this approach "offer[s] the experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding the social totality" (1992, 41). This leads to a popular misconception that personal experience is a means of "grounding" or validating what is regarded as "real". Instead, as Sparks argues, we need to understand the ways in which structural forces such as the economy, politics, and prevailing ideologies shape the kinds of experiences we have as individuals. As he writes, "The simple reality is that the nature of the social totality is neither constituted through immediate individual experience nor entirely comprehensible in its terms. Between the individual and the social totality are the complex mediations of institutional structures, economic relations and so on" (1992, 41). This matrix of mediations is ostensibly what the mainstream media are supposed to inform its citizens of.

It is by providing this kind of information that they function as one of the institutional supports to creating or sustaining a democracy. By intervening in this terrain, mainstream journalism performs its critical role and potentially contributes to social change. In Sparks' words, "Any attempt to transform

that totality must necessarily understand these mediations in order to reshape them. Critical thought must, therefore, necessarily involve the processes of abstraction even if the critical impulse itself is ultimately grounded in immediate experience” (Sparks 1992, 41).

In sum, the critique of tabloid media is that by focussing on the experiential and the emotive, they do not offer their readers the opportunity to reflect critically on the social world that shapes their own experiences. Such critical reflection involves the ability to move from the concrete to the abstract, and from the experience of the particular to the general.

Conclusion

Tabloids are a complex phenomenon, which need to be understood economically, politically, and socially. There is a need for qualitative research to deepen understanding of the relationship between the textual strategies of the tabloids and their reader popularity. However, the ethnographic emphasis on meaning making at the point of consumption can often result in the downplaying of the ways in which experience is structured by objective conditions. In addition to this, political economists remind us that the production and distribution of culture (such as tabloids) take place within a specific economic system and this places constraints on the range of textual meanings made available by the producing institutions. Therefore, such an investigation does not imply an uncritical celebration of popular preferences, but rather points to the need to understand how they have come about, and what dimension of the social structure they either challenge or help hold in place.

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