



### Tabloids and visual trends

By Trevor Davies

#### Abstract

The increasing “tabloidisation,” of both print and electronic media brings with it a shift to the more visual aspects of journalism. While photojournalism offers significant capacity for presenting news and current affairs, the current shift rather focuses on the more sensational aspects of the visual image, displacing content. There is a need for research on the topic, to better understand the attraction and role of visuality in journalism.

#### Key words

tabloids, photojournalism, television

The South African consumer walks, works, drives or relaxes 24/7 in an inescapable landscape of visual imagery: television, video, film, billboards, newspapers and magazines. This semiotic landscape found in both the public sphere and the private world of television viewing, tabloid reading, cinema going, street gossip, and rumour, constructs an illusory image of South Africa. It may be the picture of a local “soap star” or fashion model on the front cover of a magazine sold by a vendor on the street, or the billboard representation of available “foreign babes” in a local sex-bar in Rivonia or Cape Town. Nevertheless, visuality in contemporary South Africa sups from a cup of transnational, cross-cultural politics of visual representation, and fashions, and re-fashions, images of itself and the “other” on a map of globally gendered cultural geography.

It has been suggested that one of the striking features of globalising and localising media is a

shift in the relative salience of semiotic modalities from verbal to visual semiosis. Others propose it might it just be because younger people are indeed the visual generation – more easily confounded by the apparent truth of the visual image, which is seen as somehow transparent, obvious, unmediated?



Billboards are everywhere

*Credit: Trevor Davies*

Perhaps the “realness” of a set of phenomena is more tied up with the impact of its image, rather than its correlation to any outside reality? Worrying if true, as we go deeper into a post-modern era where digital technology makes image manipulation easier and more sophisticated, and where manufactured images and documentary images become more seamlessly intertwined when presented through the convergence of advertising and editorial content confusion and mix in a disturbing relativism.

The term “tabloidisation” sums up a series of perceived negative processes that stand accused of transforming supposedly rationalist discourses into sensationalist or “fabulous” discourses. Tabloids combine the following two principles: attractive and large format photographs and appealing text graphics, as well as sensationalist word choice and a concentrated discourse. Features of its approach and style also merge with the increasing number of “talk”, “soap opera” and “reality” shows on African TV these days.

Even so called “serious” investigative journalism such as *Carte Blanche*, watched by people who would cringe at the suggestion they are consuming tabloid journalism, show markedly similar approaches in tabloidisation to their comparative American and European counterpart programmes within their genre. From their roots, tabloid television shows have never been constrained by what actual video or sound footage might exist. Instead, they developed the art of the re-enactment, or dramatisation, in which actors recreate actual events for the cameras. In the following decade, the technique became a stock feature of reality shows and syndicated news magazines, and is widely cited as one of the key elements in tabloidisation.

For a while, it seemed that re-enactment was one of the few features separating tabloid news from serious news. However, dramatisations have started to creep into investigative magazines such as *Carte Blanche*, as well as in local investigative news stories, particularly in crime re-enactments. Gradually the dramatisation is beginning to become as just

another way to enhance the story, to bring it to life.

There is also an accompanying trend in the “image economy” that is transforming the media landscape whereby, for example, photographers are leaving established broadsheet newspapers like *The Star* in droves for the more lucrative “local celebrity” beats offered by *The Sun* and others. This is causing major problems for the broadsheets.

There is, of course, quantitatively also a greater use of pictorial material by broadsheet newspapers, and consequently fewer words. Second, we see the increasing predominance of the visual image over analysis and rational description, a trend remarked upon by countless cultural and media critics, and certainly not confined to the genre of news (see, for example, Ewen 1988<sup>1</sup>; Jhally 1987<sup>2</sup>). Related to both points is the growing use of dramatic techniques, such as photo enhancement and re-enactments.

However, the increasing shift to the visual in newspapers is not necessarily a good thing from the perspectives of the creators of photographic meaning – the photojournalists and photo editors themselves. They argue for important perspectives in visual content analysis of the “tabloidisation” process and its impact upon photojournalistic discourses from two competing perspectives: the polarisation perspective attributes to tabloidisation a sharpening differentiation and polarisation between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers uses of celebrity and “ordinary people” photography with little context or meaning to a socially conditioned narrative and storyline in tabloids. In contrast, in the broadsheets there is still a place for “serious photojournalism.”

However, according to the homogenising view, sensational photojournalism, which once seemed to be confined to the lowbrow media, now spreads

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ewen, Stuart. 1988. *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>2</sup>Jhally, Sut. 1987. *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

to all media and photojournalists feel a disappearing space editorially for well thought out and provocative photo-essays. As one photo-journalist put it, "the money fills your pockets but the photography empties out your soul."<sup>3</sup>

The debate over exactly what images are appropriate continues. Proceeding from the assumption that misogynistic pornographic elements confirm the ideological values and gender identities of the authoritarian patriarchy, a study by Ivana Kronja on East European tabloids shows that two forms of representation – tabloid journalism and pornography – emerge in a common misogynistic, patriarchal, hyper-masculine and politically radical tone. In the contemporary world, pornography is above all represented through "mass-marketed heterosexual pornography."<sup>4</sup>

One often-cited symptom of tabloidisation is the

way the image has crowded out rational analysis while increasing gendered stereotyping. Examples of misogyny on tabloid cover pages in the previous sampling of newspapers and TV output in the SADC region by organisations such as Gender Links are numerous.

Whilst wary of drawing conclusions without much more research on our southern African context it is fair to say that visual analysis through semiotic and other tools such as feminist visual ethnographic studies has been lacking in the panoply of analysis techniques on media and advertising. Funding remains an issue for this and a willingness to place it on "serious" academic research programming is needed. Perhaps this can start to happen now that we are appreciating the tabloids are not a nuisance that will disappear with media maturity but a serious and long standing audience desire for this type of storytelling will continue to be satisfied by the media houses.

**Writer Bio**

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**Notes**

<sup>3</sup>Author interview with Tsvangirayi Mukwazi, (CNN African Photographer of the Year Winner, 2004) carried out in June, 2007.

<sup>4</sup>Jensen, Robert "Introduction: Pornographic Dodges and Distortions", in: Gail Dines et. al. *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality*, Routledge, New York and London, 1998, p.7.