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Ethics, politics and agency in South African tabloids

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Introduction

In an era where newspapers in many regions of the world seem to expect their imminent death (Philip Meyer [2004] famously predicted that the last newspaper will be read and recycled in April 2040), a newspaper revolution has taken place in South Africa. As if from nowhere, tabloid newspapers have entered the newspaper market and conquered it convincingly. The *Daily Sun* is now the biggest newspaper in the country, with just below 500 000 copies sold and 3.8 million regular readers, according to Audit Bureau of Circulation and All Media Products Survey released in February 2007). Aimed at the black working class, or the ‘man in the blue overall’ as its publisher Deon du Plessis describes their typical reader (pers.comm 1 February 2007) – there are also two shopwindow dolls dressed in blue overalls in their Johannesburg offices – the newspaper created a mass readership out of the black majority of the country that had hitherto been largely ignored by the post-apartheid mainstream¹ press.

¹ The editor of the Cape Town daily tabloid *Daily Voice*, Karl Brophy (pers.comm, 31 January 2007), sees the term ‘mainstream media’ apply to tabloids rather than broadsheets: “Given that the *Daily Sun* is, quite clearly, the biggest selling newspaper in the country and accepting that the *Daily Voice* is, by far, the biggest selling newspaper in Cape Town how do we (i.e. us and the *Daily Sun*) not qualify as the ‘mainstream media’? Surely we are the mainstream media and the *Cape Times* et al are ‘niche media.’” In this paper I prefer to use the term ‘mainstream media’ to refer to broadsheet newspapers, commercial and public (not community) broadcasters, since these media preceded the entry of the tabloids on the market and still dominate the discourse about professional journalism, as was evident from the clash between

In the wake of its success other tabloid newspapers followed, with different measures of success. An Afrikaans-language weekly tabloid in the Western Cape province in 2003, titled *Kaapse Son*, published by the same media house, Naspers. Aimed at a “coloured” and white Afrikaans working class (Koopman, 2005a), its popularity soon became evident and it changed from a weekly to a daily (titled simply *Son*) in 2005. Naspers’ rival company, Independent, replied by launching an English-language tabloid in the same region in 2005, *The Daily Voice*. Providing the same fare (its tagline is “Sex, Scandal, Skinner [gossip], Sport”), it aims to challenge the *Son* head-on, inter alia by using colloquial language (Penstone, 2005) and publishing one of its three editions in a hybrid between Afrikaans and English (Brophy, pers.comm, 2007).

Over and above these daily tabloids, two Sunday tabloids, the *Sunday Sun* and *Sondag* appear weekly. *Sowetan*’s Sunday edition, *Sunday World*, also incorporates tabloid elements. It had been forced to restructure under a new editor, Thabo Leshilo, after the *Daily Sun* was responsible for huge circulation losses (*The Media Online*, 2004).

One could safely say that the arrival of the new tabloid newspapers have changed the media landscape in post-apartheid South Africa irrevocably. In a new democracy, they have given voice to the majority of the population who have hitherto remained on the margins of the mediated public sphere. But can one deduct from their phenomenal popularity that they also have a strong political influence in this new society? Is their popularity the result of ruthless commercialism, or have they also had a positive influence on post-apartheid

tabloid editors and other members of the South African National Editors’ Forum, notably at the 2005 Sanef Annual General Meeting in Cape Town (Barratt, 2006, p.57). Although the tone of debate at the latter was ‘exclusionary’ (F.Haffajee, personal communication, 10 February 2007), Sanef issued a statement in which the tabloids were welcomed as a ‘vibrant part of the changing landscape’ (Barratt, 2006, p.57). My choice to refer to broadsheets and the like as ‘mainstream’ is therefore informed by not circulation figures but the balance of power in journalistic discourse in the country, which might well change over time.

society? Do they exploit their readers as a market, or do they empower them to play their part in the new South African democracy?

This paper will examine these questions by looking at two main areas where the tabloids have received criticism for neglecting the perceived democratic role of media in post-apartheid South Africa, namely that of ethics and of failure to play a constructive political role. Subsequently, an alternative approach to the contribution of tabloids to post-apartheid society will be taken by examining the ways in which tabloids do provide agency to their readers to take their place as citizens in a democratic society. But let me first sketch the background against which these tabloids came into being.

Tabloids and the post-apartheid media landscape

What remains important for understanding the socio-political significance of the tabloids, is the background of recent media history in the country. When the reasons for the emergence of tabloids and their overwhelming popularity are seen against the background of the political economy of the newspaper industry in the country as well as the changed socio-cultural context, it becomes clear that the tabloids cannot but be seen as part of broader political and social shifts taking place in the country. (To an extent this process is similar to the confluence of commercialisation and democratisation in another transitional democracy, namely Mexico, as described by Hallin [2000]). In the South African context the salient factors can be summarised as follows:

1. A vacuum had been created by the demise of anti-apartheid alternative media, who used to cater for the concerns and interests of the black majority in their struggle against apartheid
2. The continued commercial logic of mainstream broadsheet newspapers, even as their editors and staff changed to reflect more racial diversity, continued to exclude the black majority from the construction of social reality through news

3. Growing frustration at the lack of social delivery, continued poverty and unemployment, crime and other socio-economic problems (including drug abuse, HIV/Aids etc.) created the need for a platform where these concerns could be voiced
4. The social changes occurring in South Africa after apartheid resulted in a process of social mobility for a young black working class, who needed information to navigate their social progress. News consumption also formed a part of their aspirations to a middle class lifestyle.

The structural and social environment in post-apartheid South Africa was clearly ready for the emergence of new tabloids. However, not everyone was in agreement that their emergence was good for this nascent democracy. Tabloids were criticised on two main counts – firstly, for not contributing to the development of a democratic culture in the country because they neglected ‘important’ political matters (including not only news about party politics and governmental affairs, but also issues like HIV/Aids) and secondly, for acting unethically by stereotyping black subjects, objectifying women, othering foreign nationals and invading people’s privacy. Through these unethical actions, it is argued, these tabloids contravene the spirit of a democracy based on the respect for human rights.

Let us briefly look at these two areas of criticism before considering an alternative perspective on the democratic role of tabloids.

Politics

The Afrikaans tabloid *Son* (who recently also introduced an English version) sums up its editorial mission as follows: “Drugs. Prostitution. Corruption. We don’t do politics – but we do politicians” (Son, 2004).

This motto reflects the celebrity approach to politics, where individual personalities are seen as more attractive than policy issues, and only surface on

the media radar when it can be sensationalised. This approach is usually seen as typical of tabloids elsewhere. Sparks (2000, p. 10) describes tabloid content as characteristically paying 'relatively little attention to politics, economics, and society and relatively much to diversions like sports, scandal and popular entertainment'. For this reason, tabloids are often seen as constituting a 'crisis for democracy' (Sparks, 2000, p.10-11). At first glance this orientation towards entertainment and diversion seems to also have influenced the stance of South African tabloid editors.

The publisher of the *Daily Sun*, Deon du Plessis, similarly sees politics as relatively unimportant to the success of his paper, even ascribing its popularity to the fact that the paper launched at a time 'when people were less political'. According to Du Plessis, they sensed they 'were talking to the sons and daughters of the revolution (...). They were off the barricades and into improving their lives' (quoted in Froneman, 2006, p.24).

However, this approach to politics was not welcomed in a society keenly aware of the importance to foster a new democratic culture. The overwhelming consensus opinion of the media's role in post-apartheid South African society was that it should serve the functionalist ideal of creating social cohesion, educate the citizenry about their democratic responsibility and act as a watchdog against government excesses. The huge market that the tabloids had at their disposal seemed to make them ideally positioned to play this political role, and by eschewing this role, they invited the rage of their critics. They were accused not only of neglecting their democratic responsibility by not paying enough – or proper – attention to politics, but also for infringing on democratic rights of the citizenry by peddling sensationalist news and perpetuating stereotypes.

One such critic (Froneman, 2006, p.24) refers to the *Daily Sun's* approach as 'sunny' and 'non-political'. He sees their shunning of 'hard politics' in favour of a personalised approach as one of the central characteristics of the South African tabloids (2006, p. 26). Harber (2003) is of the opinion that although these tabloids

claim to conform to some notion of social responsibility, and although they portray themselves as representing community issues, they display a “total absence of politics and most serious public issues like HIV/AIDS”.

In a subsequent article (Harber, 2005) he however expressed optimism that this situation will change:

Some would argue that the main function of the tabloids is to distract ordinary people from the bigger political and social issues — and that is why they contain almost no government or party-political reporting. But this, I suspect, will change in time, as with the British tabloids. These papers — with their influence on millions of voters — will become politically more important.

Harber might be referring to the important role that a tabloid like *The Sun* in the UK played to back Tony Blair and New Labour (after having opposed Labour in the 1992 election), and Labour’s strategy to appoint a former tabloid editor, Alastair Campbell, as their spin doctor (The Guardian, 13 June 2007)

Other critics of the South African tabloids, like Jacobs (2004, pp. 148-149), have pointed to the reactionary perspective underlying tabloid coverage, for instance their xenophobic reporting. This in turn also follows the pattern of tabloids elsewhere like in the UK, where nationalistic discourses, with their strategies of inclusion and exclusion, are typical (see Conboy, 2005)

Accusations regarding their lack of political coverage or their reactionary politics is not the only criticism that tabloids have had to weather since their introduction to the SA media market.

Ethics

The arrival of the tabloids in South Africa met with strong opposition and criticism from mainstream media, media commentators and journalism trainers (see Wasserman, 2006 for a detailed discussion of the responses). A barrage of criticism pointed at their sensational approach, lack of respect for privacy and lewd content that were seen as contraventions of the ethical norms of the media that have been drawn up as part of the media's shift from strict legalistic control to a system of self-regulation in the post-apartheid dispensation.

One commentator (Manson, 2005) compared the local tabloids to their British counterparts and suggested that the manner in which they report were contra the spirit of human rights in the new South African democracy:

We all accept that tabloids will continue to launch and grow in this country. But instead of copying and pasting from the sick British model, why aren't local tabloid owners brave enough to embrace the spirit of our democracy? Why not accept that you can publish a tabloid without sacrificing your sense of social responsibility or the humanity of those you report on, and dare I suggest that of your writers and editors?

Another critic (Froneman, 2005, translated from the Afrikaans by the author) saw the world created by tabloids as one where 'everything is allowed', where 'half truths are more than enough'. Froneman reiterated the point made by Berger (2005) who accused tabloids of not being 'really newspapers' because 'they play in the entertainment market rather than prosecute the business of information', pointing out that tabloids often ignore important political news, for instance the 2005 elections in Zimbabwe. Froneman's main argument, however, is a moral one, in which he deplores the long-term damage the tabloids might do to people's 'sense of decency'. This moralistic tone marked most of the debate about the tabloids, ranging from criticism of their use of explicit photographs, pandering to popular sentiments like xenophobia and lack of verification (Harber, 2005) to accusations that tabloids seem to have a 'license to kill' since they did

not operate under an ethical code (Rabe, 2005) and therefore their coverage could have extreme consequences (the latter reference being to a suicide by a source for a tabloid story on a gay minister in the Dutch Reformed Church).

This kind of 'moral panic' in reaction to the 'tabloidization' is by no means specific to the South African situation. Gripsrud (2000, p.287) points out that such alarmist responses have been voiced 'ever since the birth of the modern press', and sees the term 'tabloidization' in itself as 'a tabloid term, more of a journalistic buzzword than a scholarly concept' (2000, p. 285). Sparks (2000, p.2) has pointed to the 'heated, and often ill-informed' debate about the 'rise of the tabloid' in American journalism, although this phenomenon also occurs in other contexts around the world.

In response to the severe criticism they received for their perceived lack of ethics, the Cape Town-based *Son* adapted the ethical code of their broadsheet stablemate *Die Burger*, and both the *Daily Voice* and *Daily Sun* have never lost a case brought against them at the Press Ombudsman. (Sanef, 2007). Yet the debate continues seemingly unabated, with a panel discussion at the South African National Editors Forum council meeting in Cape Town in February 2007 with the title "Tabloids: Are we true to the public trust?" and a journal issue by the NGO Genderlinks in June 2007 among the most recent events where tabloids have been put on the agenda for debate.

Agency

Although tabloid editors claim not to 'do politics' and critics have chastised them for avoiding coverage of politics and contravening democratic principles, these claims have perhaps rested on a too narrow conception of what it might mean for tabloid media to play a democratic political role in post-apartheid society. Key to evaluating the political role that these tabloids could play, is the question of whether they provide their readers with the agency needed to participate fully in the new democracy. Do reading the tabloids add value and depth to their

readers' daily lived experience, or are tabloid readers merely another market segment created to be exploited commercially? The answers to these questions are not simple. From interviews with tabloid editors, journalists and readers, and a exploration of tabloid content, the picture that emerges is an ambivalent and contradictory one, fraught with paradox and irony.

The literature on tabloid media suggest that they could play a democratic role, provided that 'democracy' is seen more broadly than only in terms of formal politics (see Sparks, 2000 for a summary of these positions).

The salient point made in defense of tabloids is that they undermine the social hierarchy in which the elite dominate the mediated public sphere.

Gripsrud (2000, p. 285) in argueing for a nuanced understanding of tabloid journalism, sees tabloids as 'ritual forms of communication' that might not be as relevant for political discourse and action as other forms of journalism, but remains important for citizenship and democracy nonetheless. From the perspective of ritual, media communication 'reproduce and instill in all its members a sense of community and identity, of shared conditions, values, understandings and so on' (p.295). Tabloid journalism can therefore 'provide the audience with existential and moral help, and support in the daily struggles to cope with an everyday life marked by the uncertainties characteristic of modernity' (p.297). For Gripsrud (2000, p. 297), this role of tabloids should also be defined as a democratic one, since there is more to democratic citizenship than participation in formal democratic processes:

Democracy as a social form includes cultural life; various forms of reflection on existential matters or 'the human condition'; the formation, maintenance, deconstruction, and reformation of identities; and so on.

From this point of view, the tabloids' melodramatic approach to news provides a 'bottom-up' perspective (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 297) on daily life that helps audiences make sense of a world that often seems to defy the cool distance of rational

explanations or dominant value frameworks. Tabloids provide an 'alternative reality' to the official one supported by a social elite (Fiske 1989, p 103 ff.).

Against the background of these arguments in the international literature, I want to argue that South African tabloids do play an important political role in post-apartheid democracy, but that this role should be broadly defined.

1. Tabloids can provide an alternative public sphere
2. Tabloids can resist the exclusion of certain groups from mediated public discourse
3. Tabloids can assist their readers in coping with life in democratic society
4. Tabloids can foster democracy by keeping the powerful accountable
5. Tabloids can provide their readers with guidance in terms of participating in formal political processes
6. Tabloids can also play a negative political role by engaging in reactionary politics

Let us look briefly at how the South African tabloids address each of these areas.

Alternative public sphere

The South African tabloids focus on issues of importance to a section of the South African population – the majority, in fact – who have been neglected by mainstream commercial media because they had not been seen as a lucrative audience (Harber, 2005). The tabloid editors are explicit in identifying their audience as the working class, although they might be interested in this audience precisely because they do not think they are going to move out of this class very quickly. While Deon du Plessis, publisher of the *Daily Sun*, sees his audience as the 'man in the blue overall' he sees them as attractive *consumers* (Du Plessis, pers. comm., 1 February 2007):

It's a very desirable market, and we're dominating it by far. More and more big time advertisers ranging from cellphones to money loans to cars want to be there, because this is where the money is. So it's a very happy confluence.

According to him, these consumers are moving very quickly up the socio-economic ladder:

He's moving at lightning speed. (...) I have a view (...) that in 5 years time in large measure, township and suburb will be indistinguishable in many parts of the country. (...) So what happens is that this guy comes home from the factory, he takes off his overall, he puts on natty threads – very natty threads – he takes his missus, who works for Absa, they take the kid who is now 8 or 9, and they go to the mall, in a car, which they own! (There is a) boom in car ownership (...), a boom in cellphones...

The editor of the *Daily Voice*, Karl Brophy (pers.comm, 12 February 2007), clearly sees this tabloid's role as providing a media sphere for members of the working class that they cannot find elsewhere. He sees the paper as 'embedded' in the community, and refers to stories aimed at preventing child abuse as examples of their community orientation. For him, the key difference between them and the mainstream is the perspective from which stories are covered – not as a distant conflict that enters news discourse when the conflict spikes, but as an ongoing engagement with their readers' everyday lived reality:

One of the reasons we're accepted so readily in communities around CT, is that in the past newspapers would go into townships every now and again and then present it in a way as if they are writing for their *own* readership about how these people live. What we're doing is we're going in there every day and we say this is how you live, and they know it is how

they live because they see it every day. And that is why we are more trusted than Die Burger or Cape Times.

Stories on shack fires now and then, but these papers haven't been there for past couple of months while more people have died.

Our readers are massively loyal, because we are there every day, and we go out to them when we call.

We get a massive amount of phone calls.

This view is echoed by the editor of *Son*, Andrew Koopman (pers.comm., 29 January 2007, translated by the author from the Afrikaans):

What we try to do is write for the ordinary people – their suffering and their joys. We give people unique news, news that DB might not take seriously. We are a community paper, just on a bigger scale. We really try to tell ordinary people's story. People can come and sit here and tell us something happened, and we will pay attention to them. At DB they won't even give those people a hearing. We try to give them news that they won't find on television or another paper.

This community involvement for *Son* often goes beyond reporting to active and visible involvement in the community, almost like a form of public journalism. They sponsor a Klopse (Cape Carnival) troupe who campaign against drugs, provide placards for anti-drug protests, and publish the numbers of helplines for drug abuse, rape and child abuse with

“This is a service we can provide, that other newspapers won't do, but we can do that because we are not a conventional paper” (Koopman, pers.comm., 29 January 2007).

But – although the issues addressed (gangsterism, drug use, social ills) belong to the working class and are therefore alternative to those addressed by the mainstream, the value system and frame of reference within which these issues are presented, remains that of the middle class. For instance, a story on drug use on the Cape Flats will receive a lead report on the front and inside pages, with a sensational human interest angle in which members of the community get an opportunity to speak. However, the story will still be framed by a voice of authority from the middle class (usually white) establishment and helpline numbers are also provided so that deviant members of society can mend their ways. (An example of this can be found in *Son* of 23 March 2007, in which the focus fell on cellphone chat software about which a moral panic has developed. Family values underly the outrage against a woman leaving her husband after meeting someone on a chatline, and a white sexologists provides an expert opinion on compulsive sexual behaviour).

Inclusion and exclusion

Themba Khumalo (2007), editor of the *Daily Sun*, sees the entry of tabloids to the South African media landscape in liberal pluralist terms as beneficial for democracy, quoting Gill Scott Heron's well-known line to state his case:

More voices, more news platforms and more channels of opinion can only be good for our young democracy. The revolution, as they say, will not be televised - IT WILL BE PRINTED!

This inclusion pertains to issues of race – the black majority that have been marginalised, pathologised or ignored in mainstream news before democracy – but also in to cultural frameworks and indigenous knowledge systems.

The tabloid editors also point to their coverage of stories related to traditional belief systems as evidence of their inclusion of world views that are excluded from all other media.

Stories about the tokeloshe, about demons and about witchcraft are run regularly, and although the tabloids sometimes have a “bit of fun on stories like Jesus lives in my toilet” (Brophy, pers.comm. 12 February 2007), they take care not to dismiss or patronise them. From focus group interviews with readers of especially the *Daily Sun*, it seems that readers also often read witchcraft into stories where these supernatural explanations are implicit rather than upfront.

Du Plessis emphasises the need to take these beliefs seriously by comparing it to Christian beliefs that would also not be dismissed in mainstream newspaper. Similarly, Karl Brophy of the Daily Voice also refuses to go against the beliefs of his readers, again comparing it with Christian religion that is taken seriously in mainstream media.

Coping with life

Perhaps the most significant democratic role that the tabloids play in post-apartheid South Africa can be described as helping their readers cope with life. This reader is interpellated as an individual consumer, depoliticised and ambitious, needing guidance to make the right choices that would help him prosper.

This focus on the individual, positioned in neoliberal terms as a consumer in the marketplace, is cast into contrast when the *Daily Sun* is compared to the stalwart black newspaper *Sowetan*. Under a previous editor (the famous Aggrey Klaaste), the *Sowetan*'s slogan (printed on the masthead) was ‘building the nation’, a strong emphasis on the collective. It has since changed its slogan to ‘the soul truth’. The *Sowetan* was very adversely affected by the entrance of the *Daily Sun*.

Some of the results were that *Sowetan* showed a sharp decline in circulation, and consequently started to shift to a more popular approach ('dumbing down'). The influence that the Sun's individualistic, neoliberal approach has had on its content vis-a-vis a more collectivist and even nationalist (cf. their earlier slogan) approach, is evident from the coverage of the wife of the former ANC president, Adelaide Tambo. The day after Tambo died, *Sowetan* ran a full front page announcing 'Mama Tambo dies', with a super-headline 'A nation mourns' and a large photograph of Tambo against a black background. Apart from the front page story, a full page obituary is published on p.6

On the same day, the tabloid *Daily Sun* ran with a front page headline 'No Mercy!' on a hospital that barred patients from parking their cars, resulting in a car jacking (Daily Sun, 2007a). This story theme is continued on p.2 with other stories on 'Hospital horrors'. The other front page story of the day was on Oprah Winfrey's new school erected near Johannesburg. A 38-year old mother and seller of *Daily Sun*, Elizabeth Wanyane, tells how her 12-year old daughter as been accepted at a school Oprah Winfrey has just opened in South Africa. Elizabeth cried: 'I know that Mpho will come out tops and take us out of poverty' (Daily Sun, 2007b)

While part of the explanation for the Daily Sun having left out the Mama Tambo story (they did include a small snippet on p.3 in subsequent editions) had to do with their printing deadline (earlier than *Sowetan*), Du Plessis admits that they would 'never have it on the front page', claiming that their readers prefer stories that concern them directly, rather than big political issues. Du Plessis dismisses *Sowetan* saying that it 'just does not get it' and that 'the collective is dead' (pers.comm 1 February 2007):

(T)he *Sowetan*'s treatment of it, with the subheading 'A nation mourns' involuntarily takes you back to 1978. Exactly my point. 'A nation mourns'? Mmmmm. People are sad, maybe. Some people. But the guys on the

shop floor in Alberton this morning (for them) the Oprah story (, that's big stuff. Cause if he could get his kid in Oprah's school, wow...

Du Plessis' comments also suggest that what counts as political issues in the country have indeed shifted to issues that affect peoples daily lived experience, rather than the grand narratives of a shared political identity or imagined community. They cater for this individual aspiration by, inter alia, publishing a weekly supplement called *Sun Life*:

(The supplement) (...) says 'you're on your way baby', and it talks about things – coffees, wines, stuff like that. The (reader's) kid is also 8 or 9 now, so they are worrying about schools. Schools are a massive issue.

This is then also one of the ironies or paradoxes that complicate one's view of the political role the South African tabloids play. While they champion the cause of the 'man in the blue overall' in protesting against lack of service delivery, poor living conditions etc., they do so in neoliberal terms. The 'man in the blue overall' is positioned as an individual rather than the member of a group; his struggles are seen – as is neoliberalism's wont – in terms of the present rather than in terms of history and power relations. Ultimately, the tabloids form part of big conglomerates who are interested in their reader as a consumer.

Keeping the powerful accountable

Popular journalism often 'harbors a disrespect for authorities' (Gripsrud, 2000, p.298), and in this regard it can still be seen to play the role of watchdog usually associated with conventional journalism in the liberal democratic tradition. The difference is that the discourse is usually more directed at the person (the slogan of the *Kaapse Son* is 'we don't do politics, we do politicians'), and the perspective from which authorities are viewed is that of those members of society who feel

left out of political processes anyway, for whom politics is far removed from their daily struggles to make a living and to uphold a sense of personal dignity. The perspective is that of ordinariness, and through this perspective creates a foothold for tabloid audiences to engage with issues that are fundamentally political, but not framed in the way political stories about the powerful and rich are conventionally presented (cf. Lange quoted in Gripsrud, 2000, p.299).

The publisher of the *Daily Sun*, Deon du Plessis, relates for instance how this paper ran stories of dissatisfaction with local government, culminating in the protest actions at for instance Harrismith and Khutsong (pers. comm., 1 February 2007)

We don't joke about things. It's in collapse here (...). This is collapsing. We want to help them. We have jokes, but we want to help him, because things are just not right here. The hospitals are disastrous. Medical services are collapsing.

We're not totally serious, but we're irritable. The hopes of 1994 have been pissed on. So that's one of the other reason why we keep politicians in this country at an arms length. (pers. comm, 1 February 2007)

Formal democratic processes

While tabloids play a political role in the more broader sense as it pertains to their readers' daily lives and lived experience (as discussed above), they also cover formal political processes as their 'serious' counterparts in the broadsheet press do. During the last local elections, the Daily Sun aimed at focusing on "telling the people what is relevant to them", highlighting relevant issues and also doing voters' education. "We will be educating our readers about local councils and how they run, because we have realised that a lot of these people don't really know how the local government works," said Sicelo Ddladla, tasked with election reporting.

The *Daily Sun* hesitates to take a formal political position, even though Du Plessis (pers.comm., 1 Feb 2007) admits that they considered backing Jacob Zuma for a while, but realised that 'danger lurks there, a red light zone'. Before the last elections, only one came to see us – Patricia de Lille. But although the *Daily Sun* has until now cast a wide berth around mainstream politics, it has appointed someone to follow the succession race for ANC president. However, for the *Daily Sun* '(p)olitics had always been as it affected the guy in the blue overall (...) We invited people to write to us, daily, and tell us about the failings of local government in their area, ranging from no ambulance to no streetlight to shit in the streets to crime. We got - I never counted exactly – ten thousand letters a month. (...) We pioneered what in our view was real politics – the guys not feeling the benefits of the undoubted revolution in 1994. There has got to be some pluses apart from happy feelings. It's not a traditional journalistic position, but we certainly box very hard for the man in the blue overall."

What remains unquestionable is that the *Daily Sun* sits atop an unprecedented mass of support that could potentially be mustered for political ends.

What does their coverage look like? In a content analysis done of tabloid content during January to December 2006, the media analysis company Media Tenor found that party political issues rank high on tabloid agendas, but that crime, general interest and society still outrank politics.

Reactionary politics

Not all the political potential that the tabloids demonstrate is positive. They do engage in a fair amount of reactionary politics, by playing up populist calls for the death penalty to be reinstated or amplifying calls for revenge by outraged community members, often sensationalising incidents of mob justice. The tabloids also often re-articulate the xenophobia and homophobia among their

readers (although Brophy has admitted having made '1 or 2 mistakes' in homophobic reporting – Sanef, 2007)

Conclusion

1., From the above it becomes clear that South African tabloids display some of the characteristics of their counterparts in the UK and US that have earned tabloids both scorn and support in other contexts. However, **it is important that the South African tabloids should be viewed within their contextual specificity and display characteristics related to the particular historical, socio-economic and political conditions of their emergence. This means that theoretical points made about tabloids in the UK and US should be tested against the local manifestations, and the specifics of the local should be used to modify where necessary global notions of popular journalism.**

2. The emergence of tabloids play in SA is inextricably linked to the democratisation of the country, which impacted not only on the formal political processes and construction of citizenship, but also on social, cultural and economic shifts. The potential democratic role that tabloids could play in the country should therefore be understood more broadly than just in terms of formal politics.

Tabloids, as a part of popular culture in post-apartheid South Africa, force us to redefine our understanding of the public sphere and indeed of politics itself. As Hermes (2006, p. 40) states, taking the realm of popular culture seriously, is to 'divest governmental politics of its frightening grandeur': 'It is to make clear that politics is not something belonging to (informed) elite, that you need to qualify for – but is about who we are, and what we, all of us, want to make of the world we live in'.

3. Fraught with ironies and contradictions, and cannot be taken on face value. What is certain is that they, probably more than any other media in the country, play a significant role in the daily lives of their readers, including their political outlook. This form of media might make ethical mistakes or understand politics in a different way than the mainstream, but they do provide their readers with agency that hitherto was unknown to them.

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