

by Mondli Makhanya

normality

the South African story

It started off somewhat accidentally. Two of the country's English language newspaper giants, Johnnic and Nail, decided to launch **an upmarket newspaper** to take on Naspers' City Press.

Research showed there was a market for **a serious broadsheet** aimed at black readers. The owners recognised that the **revolution** that everybody could see – the phenomenal post-1994 rise in black spending **power** – was not being properly **exploited** by any one newspaper.

But as history has proven over and over, the newspaper reader is **a very cruel being** and often follows rules that not even the most adept researchers and market fundis will ever understand. It is now common cause that the market roundly rejected the broadsheet Sunday World, **a bitter pill to swallow** for many like myself who had invested a lot of faith and energy in that project.

A combination of warlike aggressive marketing on the part of Naspers and **insufficient firepower** on the part of Sunday World's owners saw to it that **the concept was short-lived**. Traditional black market readers remained loyal to City Press while many of the black bourgeoisie readers the new publication was targeting, stuck to a Sunday Times that had lost the white newspaper tag and whose appeal mirrored the blurred racial/class interest of a post-apartheid South Africa.

The Johnnic/Nail consortium responded to the setback by **taking the newspaper down-market, offering a tits, bums and salacious gossip medium that was an immediate hit with the readership. The re-launched Sowetan Sunday World was nothing like its parent, according politics the same passing importance that its predecessor would have accorded showbiz. The formula worked and thus was born South Africa's tabloid industry.**

The success of this retreat position spawned a whole new market that has shaken up newspapering in a way not seen since the emergence of the alternative press in the 1980s. Today the tabloid market, which has now at least four vibrant titles, has taken root and forced even the highbrow newspapers to adjust their appeal downwards.

What worked for this industry was that it coincided with another major societal revolution: the **boom** in celebrity culture and a growing disdain among the working classes (those who felt left behind by the black empowerment and employment equity train) for those who had left the ghetto and were living "white lives". So for them titbits about celebrity divorces, politicians with child maintenance problems and **flashy** tycoons who have properties repossessed, touch a

chord. **There is a great appetite for this**, as evidenced by the tabloid circulation figures.

So what does this tell us about South African journalism and the role it is playing in this society? **Does it tell us that our society is so dumbed-down that the best way to grab its attention is with pictures of semi-naked women and stories about which superstar is sleeping with which wannabe superstar?** Does it maybe tell us that serious journalism is boring readers to the point of making them uninterested in the issues that really affect their daily lives?

Many would indeed argue that it is an indictment on South Africa that a society undergoing such fundamental transformation is **so obsessed with things that have no relevance to the fiscus** and which do not touch their daily lives in any significant way.

This, however, would be a simplistic understanding of the changes in the South African psyche and the relevance and role of tabloids in the re-organisation of our society.

The tabloids are telling a critical part of the great South African story. The story they tell is that of a nation that no longer feels the need to be **bludgeoned with trauma and gore**, that no longer needs to be constantly reminded of **its tortuous journey** to normalcy. This nation, the story of the tabloids tells, wants to be entertained and titillated while being informed. It is also the story of a nation that is capable of producing instant celebrities and dumping them as soon as the next one is found. And a nation that is keeping close tabs on whether those who **preach moral rectitude** are themselves keeping to their teachings.

As far as fulfilling that mandate is concerned, it would be hard to argue that the tabloids have been remiss.

Fingers should rather be pointed at those who are playing in the higher leagues. While the tabloid boom has been good for South Africa and its media industry, it has also had the unfortunate effect of **dragging the rest of the press to a level they should not want to be at.**

During a brief spring in the late 1990s, there was visible effort on the part of South African newspapers to strive for greater quality and substance. Following a period of post-1994 adjustment, the South African press seemed to be moving towards adapting to a normal society and reporting that society in exciting ways.

Politics was being taken seriously, economic news was making it onto the front pages of generalist newspapers and often leading editions. Social issues were beginning to be reported in more in-depth

ways. There was innovative editorial experimentation and one could feel in the air that the outcome would be a media that would **rival** the best in the world. We did, after all, have a great story to tell.

That brief renaissance has now been **brought to a screeching halt**. Upmarket newspapers, wary of declining and static circulations in this age of hectic lives and all-day television, now also have the tabloids to fear. But instead of consolidating their own spheres of operation and strengthening their markets, **the broadsheets have chosen to fight the tabloids** down at the bottom end. Hence the return of the sensational court trials and British royalty to our front pages and the preponderance of Big Brother and Idols coverage.

Not that these should have been shoved aside in favour of grey, so-called quality journalism. The issue is that politics and the reporting of the business of government has been relegated to the backburner in many of our newspapers. In fact, the only political story that seems to excite the news desks is that of the inexplicable antics of Manto Tshabalala-Msimang.

The result is that South African journalism is not able to move forward. Advertisers shun the tabloids because they are working class and black. They are increasingly unenthusiastic about broadsheet newspapers because the platform is showing little innovation and the industry is not insisting and proving that it is special. Readers too, are asking for something extra and all they are offered is more of the same showbiz that the tabloids do so much more effectively.

This scramble for the bottom end of the market, combined with the lack of in-depth reporting, makes the media vulnerable to all sorts of (often) unsubstantiated **attacks that we are missing the great South African story**.

At the Sun City Indaba between government and the South African National Editors' Forum in 2001, the recurrent criticism was that the media were not covering government properly – that all we in **the Fourth Estate** were doing was projecting as negative a picture of the country as possible. Cabinet ministers contended that what passed as news to the media were **the triplets of crime, corruption and failed government projects**.

There were the usual accusations of the media being untransformed and unable to grapple with the realities of a transformed South Africa. Accusations were that the media were still grounded in a white South Africa that couldn't bring itself to accepting changed power relations in the country and still wanted to prove black ineptitude.

These accusations were of course **fallacious**. The media have undergone significant transformation since 1994, a transformation that is probably matched only by the transformation in the public sector itself. It has not been an easy transformation and has often involved **uncomfortable battles within the industry** itself, as well as confrontations between the industry and the new establishment. The process is by no means complete and will, like the ongoing transformation of other sectors of society, take time to consolidate.

What is totally unhelpful however, is **the blanket denial by the new establishment** that any transformation has taken place at all. **Like the legendary soldier who for years refused to come out of the bush and accept that the war was over**, many within the ANC still speak of "white-controlled" media and disregard the change in ownership and demographic change that has happened. They disregard the fundamental altering of power structures in media industries and the ideological re-orientation that has taken place in many newsrooms around the country.

In many ways the governing elite refuses to recognise its own effects on media, particularly the fact that most media institutions broadly reflect the ruling party's ideological standpoint. There may be differences in analysis around the pace of delivery and implementation of policy goals but one can hardly accuse the South African media of being among the

forces

opposed to the transformation of our society.

But convincing the government and the ruling elite seems futile, since defeatism and the constant need to feel under attack seems incurable in **the higher echelons of power**. The only way then for media to defend themselves from these types is to raise their own game. The only reason that those in power are able to make accusations stick is because we are found wanting in many respects.

The first stop on this journey of doing the South African story properly is for us in the media to learn to cover the basics of government. Away from the dramatic launch of the electrification project and far from the dishonest civil servant, is the story of a country that continues to grind forward. It is the story of public service machinery that wakes up every day and originates debates, refines and implements policy. This machine, peopled by hundreds of thousands of individuals, spends billions of our rands every

week as it keeps the country going forward. **In its bowels** – in all three tiers of government – reside countless tales waiting to be told by us in the media. These are tales of success and near success, tales of every day challenges and tales of incompetence and failure. On the surface the notion of a civil service conjures up images of dullness and sameness. This need not be, as many media practitioners have found.

It is for us in the media to turn that machinery into a story that excites, informs and infuriates our readers. They want to know what is going on in the bowels of the national government, in their city councils and in the provincial governments.

That is where the mainstream press needs to re-invent itself. That the tabloid market satisfies a certain appetite in many ways shows that we are a normal people. But in the entrenchment of our democracy there is another story that needs to be told. We as a society will get things **horribly wrong if we do not begin to report the story of normality**.

In the same way that the tabloids saw a market that nobody believed existed and began to feed it what it wanted, so the middle to upper income publications need to find creative ways of interesting South Africans in **non-conflictual politics**.

That is the next wave of transformation that should be taking place in South Africa – the creation of the informed journalist whose words and expertise can turn a public works official into a colourful being.

If those in the broadsheet market **fail to turn this corner** and do for serious journalism what the tabloids did for their segment of the industry, we would be complicit in the crime of turning South Africa into an ignorant nation. And there is no better present to give to demagogues and would-be dictators than a nation that does not know.

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Mundo Real is fond of saying: "Yes, I know you've been taught that at university/technikon but that's not the way it works in the real world." Only he has a grip on the realities of high finance, institutional organisation and the vagaries of human nature.

