You can't be serious

A popular view of tabloids is that they pander to the lowest common denominator of public taste and simplify complex issues, say **Larry Strelitz** *and* **Lynette Steenveld.**

Interviewer:
What do you think of the tabloidisation of the media?

André Brink:
Sickening

(Sunday Times Lifestyle June 19, 2005: 14)

As well as pandering to the lowest common denominator and simplifying complex issues, tabloids are also condemned for generally failing to provide information that citizens need in order to make informed political judgements – the latter being the *raison d'etre* of serious newspapers.

In summary, tabloids "lower the standards of public discourse" (Ornerbring and Jonson, 2004: 283).

A different view is taken by critical media scholars. Colin Sparks (1991: 64), for example, suggests that we need to treat tabloid newspapers as extremely important cultural phenomena, "as objects of study in their own right rather than exemplars of the lamentable debasement of popular taste compared with that shown by intellectuals" .

These views provide a useful starting point in our attempts to make sense of the rapid growth of tabloid newspapers in South Africa.

Our task as academics should therefore be to "transcend the futile moralism" (Grisprud, 1992: 84) that characterises much of the local debate, and to account historically and sociologically for their emergence.

An important aspect of this project is to investigate why South African readers with a particular LSM profile are drawn to these new tabloids which are characterised by a particular form and content.

Remaining sensitive to the specificity of the South African socio-political context, and given the current paucity of local theoretically-informed investigations into tabloid newspapers, we will briefly examine some of the issues emerging from international research as pointers to the kinds of issues we should be probing.

In explaining the popularity of the tabloids among the British working classes, Sparks (1988: 216-217) says political and economic power in a stable democracy is far removed from the real lives of the mass of the population.

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 not insignificant 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 ➡

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explosion has occurred just 10 years after the first democratic elections in South Africa. It is worth considering whether the growth of the tabloid press is a sign of the alienation felt among the working classes from the formal political processes in this country, or whether it is a sign of "struggle fatigue".

The 10 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 growth in literacy.

In similar vein, perhaps 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 an understanding of the role of journalism and other entertainment media in this process.

As Ornebring and Jonson (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 the ability to broaden the public, giving news access to groups that have not been previously targeted by the prestige press.

Sparks (1991: 63) notes that the British press consists of different kinds of print media that are 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 South Africa.

A textual approach

A textual approach will help us understand what constitutes "news" in tabloids, their sources, their linguistic style, the textual mix they favour, and the visual elements (photographs, graphics, typography, colour) they use in communication with their audience.
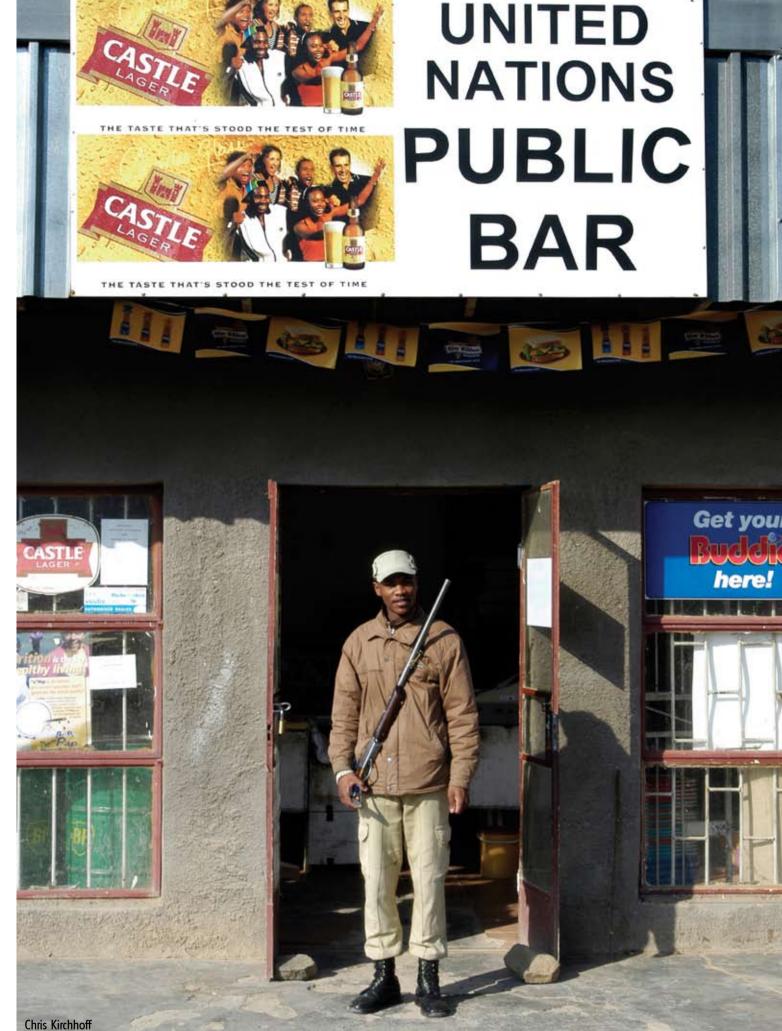
Jostein Grisprud (1992) says well-known features of the tabloid press, are sensationalism, personalisation, and the focus on private concerns. He argues that these elements are popular precisely because they provide ways of understanding the world which are different from the way the mainstream press works. However, the mainstream press are increasingly using these same techniques in order to deal with the challenge of television news, and so the lines are becoming increasingly blurred.

Cultural theorist John Fiske (1992: 46) takes a different tack. He says mainstream press in America present information as objective facts selected from an empiricist reality. The tone is serious, official, and impersonal, aimed at producing understanding and belief. In other words they address their readers from the position of one who knows, and is providing information for those who don't.

In contrast, the tone of tabloids is more conversational, using the language of its readers. In this way, they set up a more "egalitarian" relationship between themselves and their readers. They don't pontificate.

According to Fiske (48): "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. This popular pleasure of 'seeing through' them (whoever constitutes the powerful *them* of the moment) is the historical result of centuries of subordination which the people have not allowed to develop into subjection."

Do these claims hold true for South African tabloids and their readers? If they do, what does it tell us about the relationship of these readers to the broader political formation?

We would argue that this focus on 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. ■

The full paper will appear in the next edition of Ecquid Novi.

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