

A ‘danger to journalism’

The widespread criticism of the SA tabloids, should be seen as ‘paradigm repair’ by a profession in trouble, says Herman Wasserman.

Since the introduction of the first tabloid to the South African market in 2001, and seemingly increasing with each subsequent entrant into this burgeoning market, debates about their role, the reasons for their success, their potential, and their ethics (or lack of it) have been raging in the popular press.

The debate has so far been conducted mostly – if not exclusively – in the popular press, even if, paradoxically, academics seem to have been the most vocal participants in those debates.

Without suggesting that popular debate is necessarily inferior to academic work, the choice of platform may suggest a number of things: perhaps that popular journalism (as opposed to “serious” journalism in the mainstream) is now considered worthy of intellectual attention; that the mills of academia – in terms of scholarly publication – move too slowly to keep track of the rapid developments in this area of the media; or significantly, that the questions thrown up by tabloids are of primary concern to producers and consumers of the media itself – in other words, that tabloids need to be dealt with within the domain of the popular press itself.

I’m going to focus on the latter of these possible explanations (or perhaps rather hunches) and assert that these debates have been taking place in the popular media because of the assumption that tabloids pose a danger to the image of journalism in the eyes of the public, and therefore have to be dealt with publicly.

Consider this statement by Herman Manson of Media Toolbox: “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?”

While these debates are seemingly set on evaluating the tabloid media, they also – and perhaps even more so – tell us what the dominant normative frameworks and professional ideologies in the *mainstream* media are. In other words, the debates about the tabloids reveal the dominant perspectives on the media in general.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that these norms and assumptions are manifested through a function that these debates fulfil, namely that of *paradigm repair*.

In debating and rejecting the journalistic excesses of the tabloids, a discourse is developed that serves to repair the image of an occupation (or “industry” or “profession” or “interpretive community”, depending on your perspective) in trouble.

Should the widespread criticism of tabloids be seen as part of journalistic *ritual*, namely the routine application of ethical guidelines and performance of professional standards, or do these debates go deeper to provide a structural critique of the media?

Bitter criticism

Since their inception, South African tabloids have been subjected to constant – and often bitter – criticism from media commentators in the mainstream

media.

In turn, publishers (Deon du Plessis, *Sun*) and editors (Ingo Capraro, *Son*; Raymond Joseph, *Daily Voice*) have used public platforms and newspaper columns to defend their publications and articulate their vision.

The bulk of the criticism can be grouped into two main categories, namely the perceived low quality of journalism practised by these publications, and concerns about the lack of ethical standards guiding the actions of tabloid journalists.

In the reactions to tabloid journalism, dichotomies can be seen between ethical and non-ethical journalism, information and entertainment, and high level and low-level journalism, with tabloids consistently being placed at the negative end of the binary.

Little attention is paid to the extent to which mainstream journalism also peddles entertainment, superficial analysis or biased news coverage.

Instead, the status quo of mainstream journalism is to a large degree taken as the defining standard of journalism.

Much of the debate around tabloids serves to police the boundaries of the profession by reiterating accepted definitions of what it is to be a journalist. When these boundaries are overstepped, this paradigm is threatened.

In order to re-establish the hegemony of the dominant professional value system, the culprit(s) are identified, castigated or ostracised from the community and the wrongdoing explained. Berkowitz (2000: 128) calls this “paradigm repair”.

At the recent Sanef AGM debate on tabloids several editors of mainstream publications spoke in support of tabloids, mostly on the grounds that tabloid journalism provides popular entertainment that should not be rejected on racist or classist grounds, or that tabloids have rekindled a relationship with communities that mainstream media has lost.

While this discussion indicated that rejection of tabloids is not unanimous throughout the professional community of South African journalists, it does serve to support the notion that the emergence of tabloids has served as an opportunity for debates about professionalism.

Mainstream lack

Significant in the tabloid discussion by Sanef, was the acknowledgement by certain members that the popularity of tabloids may partly be seen as a result of a lack on the part of the mainstream media. What are the points on which tabloids may compel a rethink of the dominant normative frames?

- The liberal democratic view of independence and neutrality currently underpins South African media ethical frameworks. Audience reaction against this limited (or even hypocritical and dishonest) understanding of independence might have been underestimated. Perhaps the tabloids’ highly personalised, overtly-subjective approach to news, can – as Larry Strelitz (see article by Strelitz and Steenveld on page 35) has pointed out – be seen as an “oppositional reading” against the mainstream rhetorical strategies of objectivism.
- Part of the success of tabloids might be related to their community orientation and developmental approach. The *Daily Sun* for instance has a regular

SA’s tabloids – some background

The print media landscape in post-1994 South Africa has been an increasingly commercialised one, with stiff competition between market players locally and globally.

The print media has continued to be aimed mostly at an elite that is predominantly white, with voices of the poor largely absent.

The print sector remains dominated by mainstream commercial papers, with community papers mostly following a similar commercial pattern on a smaller scale.

Ostensibly, the introduction in 2001 of tabloids aimed at a mass black (including the section of the black population called “coloured” in apartheid nomenclature) readership, altered this situation.

The first tabloid to hit the shelves in post-apartheid South Africa was the *Sunday Sun*, owned by the conglomerate Naspers and aimed at a mass black readership, it went on sale at the cheap cover price of R1, thereby undercutting its closest rival, the established paper *Sowetan* and its sister publication *Sunday World*, aimed at the black middle class.

This led to an accusation by Saki Macozoma, chairman of the black empowerment consortium Nail, who then controlled New Africa Publications, owners of *Sowetan*, that Naspers was engaging in “uncompetitive behaviour”.

The phenomenal commercial success of this tabloid was partly blamed for the huge circulation losses at *Sowetan* and seen as a reason for the appointment of a new editor, Thabo Leshilo, to take over from John Dlodlu, with the task of restructuring *Sowetan* and *Sunday World* and reversing their circulation losses.

The following year, the tabloid went daily (titled *Daily Sun*), again growing at an unprecedented pace and increasing its circulation by 228% within the following year.

Naspers sought to replicate this success by launching an Afrikaans-language weekly tabloid in the Western Cape in 2003, titled *Kaapse Son*.

Aimed at “coloured” and white Afrikaans working-class readers, 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*.

As far as content is concerned, the three tabloids have much in common. They focus on gossip, scandal (in the case of the *Daily Sun* this often takes the form of incidents relating to witchcraft, superstition and the like), sex (with semi-nude “page-three girls”). This feature is central to the *Son*’s approach and identity – its website offers more pictures on a pay-per-view basis, and its marketing campaign at an annual Afrikaner cultural festival consisted of a peepshow) and sports and entertainment (horse racing news and entertainment guide).

The tabloids’ commercial success does not mean that they were unanimously welcomed. On the contrary...

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feature “SunDefender” where a legal expert provides free legal advice; an advice page “Sun Solutions”; features on education and a regular page has news from the rest of the continent “Looking at Africa”. The publisher of the *Daily Sun*, Deon du Plessis, has indicated that the lack of community involvement by the mainstream media provided him with a marketing niche (made possible by democratisation) that wasn’t recognised by the Independent Group, to whom he first pitched his idea. Although Du Plessis claims to be committed to “the man in the blue over-all” and reporting about “people nobody ever heard of”, this stance does not necessarily reflect political or societal commitment outside of commercial interests.

- While the concept of the “public interest” is often invoked as a guiding principle for the media, this concept remains vague and has not been defined adequately in terms of the inequalities regarding access to the media. For instance, the impact of (mostly racially-defined) market segmentation and how this is linked to material inequalities and societal polarisations inherited from apartheid, is not considered when the “public” is described in vague



or homogenous terms. If claims are correct that tabloids have provided media access to sections of the community that have been excluded before (as opposed to luring them away from other publications), the tabloids might contribute to a broadening of what passes for “the public” in South African media.

- Ostensibly, tabloids do take an African cultural perspective – but on closer inspection it becomes clear that this remains limited to stories on witchcraft, superstition or miracle cures. While tabloids’ attempt to introduce African cultural meanings into a Western-dominated media discourse, these attempts seem to often be reductionist and essentialist.

Conclusion

The debate about tabloids should move beyond the professional ritual of paradigm repair. The emergence and unprecedented success of tabloids provides an opportunity to investigate not only transgressions of the current hegemonic standards of professionalism, but also to interrogate those standards themselves. It provides an occasion to critically examine the dominant normative frameworks of the media in an attempt to find out why they are not broadly accepted and how they may be revised. ■

The full text of this paper was delivered at the Sacomm Conference in Pretoria in September.

References

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