

Generating heat

Love them or hate them, the proliferation of tabloids in South Africa has set the cat among the pigeons in the world of media, says Ray Joseph.

In newsrooms and in the editorial columns of traditional broadsheets, around dinner tables, in pubs, over coffee – in fact, wherever journalists and other media people meet – the subject is the flavour of the month.

It is a debate that has generated more heat – and at times anger – than virtually any other issue for many years. Emotions are running high: there is no ambivalence, with both critics and supporters arguing their points of view with passion and vigour.

Yet what is being forgotten in the middle of this – at times, very elitist – debate are the readers of tabloids.

Editors, journalists, academics and media commentators all have something to say. But all too often their withering and cleverly written commentaries are more concerned with ripping the tabloids apart than trying to interrogate the reasons for their huge sales and ever-growing readerships. Or asking what lessons can be learned by the broadsheets, whose circulations have been stagnant or at best in some cases, risen moderately.

Earlier this year, I worked briefly as newseditor of the *Daily Voice*, a new Independent Newspapers-owned tabloid in the Western Cape.

With a career in the print media spanning over

30 years as a reporter, newseditor, editor, publisher and a teacher of journalism, I jumped at the offer of a short-term contract during the start-up and launch phase, seeing it as an opportunity to learn about the world of tabloids from the inside.

I do not put myself up as an apologist or champion of the tabloids. Nor do I propose to defend some of the excesses that I personally find hard to stomach and impossible to justify.

But, while some of the criticism of some of the tabloids is valid – like topless page three girls and the stereotyping that too often happens – there is far more to the overall package.

In particular, they resonate with millions of ordinary, working-class people. The reason for this, I believe, is simple: the tabloids are talking to ordinary people about their lives and their issues, about things that affect them, often with humour, in a language they understand and can relate to.

They are championing their readers' causes, dealing with things that are important to them, and taking on the authorities on their behalf.

Equally important is that the tabloids are telling these stories through the experiences of ordinary people and using simple devices, like the excellent use of pictures, infographics, boxes and sidebars to

break potentially complicated stories into easy-to-digest, bite-sized pieces.

The result is that millions of readers, blissfully unaware of "the great tabloid debate" are voting with their pockets and buying the "red tops" in their millions each week.

The majority of these readers are people who never bought newspapers before. Need proof? Check out the latest ABCs and it is plain to see that while established publications have either held or (generally) enjoyed modest growths in circulation, the new tabloids are booming.

Far from cannibalising readers from existing titles, the tabloids have found new readers, mainly blue-collar, working-class people who have found titles they can relate to and that reflect their worlds and realities.

So, in the middle of all the debate, the most important questions that need to be answered are: Why are people buying the tabloids in such large numbers and what are the secrets of their success?

And, are there lessons for more established media in this?

As newseditor at the *Voice*, the reporting rules were no different to those I applied as an editor and newseditor in previous jobs; like multiple sources,

Chris Kirchhoff



The GREAT tabloid

Liz Barratt, an executive editor of *The Star* in Johannesburg and Sanef deputy chair started the debate with these remarks: "There are several examples of tabloid publications in Africa. Is this where papers in Africa are going? Will other papers need to follow this business model to survive? There are many issues around tabloids ranging from their size and political stance, to reporting methods, style, values, voice, sensationalism and language. You even find them across radio and TV in different forms. What they have in common is a strong personalisation of stories. Could this be a new alternate journalism? Is this journalism? And, what makes a good tabloid?"



Phalane Motale, editor of the *Sunday Sun*: "To answer the two questions: 1. Yes, its journalism; and 2. A good example is the *Sunday Sun*! We are seen as pirate taxis. Yet all my staff have signed a journalistic code of conduct. The rules are the same for us (as for the mainstream). The *Sunday Sun* is the mother of current tabloids. It is four years old and has never lost a court case, which illustrates the care we take in checking stories. The difference between a publication like mine and other newspapers lies mainly in the fact that this newspaper is personality-driven. It cannot rely

on press releases, but instead has to dig out the stories that celebrities do not want to see being told. The tabloids report stories like 'Gorilla Raped Me' because people genuinely believe in superstition. Readers are the customers, the kings; we give them what they want. My concern is that tabloids are all getting painted with the same brush when they are in fact unique. *The Sun* has columns on woman abuse, man to man talk, a pastor giving advice, careers info, a business page, etc. Broadsheets are stuck in the way they work but tabloids respond to people's requests, for example readers didn't like the naked page three so she was covered up more. And what about [educational] institutions, are we preparing students for this journalism of the future? Getting more new readers can only be good for the media industry as a whole."

Thabo Leshilo, editor of the *Sowetan*: "The difference between my paper and the others is our respect for the Press Ombudsman's Code of Conduct. Sanef should draw the line at publications that do not subscribe to these standards. Not all tabloids should be tarred with the same brush.

Tabloid journalism often operates within a racist paradigm whereby black people are presented as primitive, lust-driven and credulous. I expected that such a negative image would catch up with circulations, and be manifest over time in de-



clining sales. Yet the opposite has happened. Clearly, the *Daily Sun* understands some of the black mind, but which black mind?"

Moegsien Williams, editor of *The Star*: "This is the revolution we have been waiting for. The *Daily Sun* should be praised for following up stories, something my own paper does not adequately do. New people are now reading newspapers, thanks to the *Daily Sun*'s success."



Paddi Clay, who runs training at media company Johncom: "The tabloids give people something to talk about and they are refreshingly not politically correct. Popular isn't necessarily progressive. There should be a 'popular choice story award' for journalists. But it's usually the bizarre and unusual story that gets people talking. Tabloids are in the storytelling tradition of comics and photo story books. And these are as valid as any [other media]. The development role is often accidental and comes after the need for the wow factor. There are great moments, eg: The *Daily Sun* had a wonderful graphic for 'Shark eats gogo'. Also a picture of the Battle of Trafalgar and the phrase 'U are reading this in English because the French lost' is another excellent example



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ensuring all sides of a story are canvassed and ensuring right of reply.

On a daily basis the tabloids are approached by people who have been badly let down, who often are victims of over-zealous authorities. The difference here, is that now someone is listening and telling their stories.

Tabloids, as a rule, will speak to the people first and officialdom last, an essential element of community journalism.

Another big difference is that, with the new audiences, the tabloids have been forced to trawl for news and build contacts in communities and areas previously ignored, setting new challenges for reporters far too used to sitting back and doing follow ups or waiting for stories to come to them.

It was a challenge for reporters at the *Voice* to change their mindset from reacting to news events – a court case, a robbery or a press conference, for example – to becoming proactive and thinking “out of the box”. A general refrain of mine to reporters at the *Voice* – and I’m sure it applies at other tabloids – was: “That’s a story the other papers will cover, how can

we tell it differently so it is relevant to our readers?”

So when communities all over Cape Town took to the streets to protest at a lack of service delivery – with the police responding with teargas, rubber bullet and baton charges – like the broadsheets, the *Voice* covered the on-day, hard news story.

But we also went into the communities where the protestors lived to hear their side of the story and see first hand the conditions they were so angry about. And when rivals for the leadership of the ANC in the Western Cape went on a hugely expensive advertising spending spree in a transparent attempt to raise their personal profiles – we reported on what was happening. Then we also highlighted the waste by showing how many houses, doses of anti-retrovirals and suchlike the wasted millions could have bought.

Tabloid journalism, is by nature very robust, taking pops at authority and at the high and mighty without fear or favour.

That means tabloids are perfectly placed to run campaigns based on particular issues – advocacy journalism – on behalf of readers. Taking on issues

important to readers doesn’t mean having to lose objectivity, as long as the research and reporting is properly done – and you don’t try to hide what you’re up to.

What I believe has happened with the tabloids is that a trust has built up between the papers and their readers – with readers becoming a major source of stories.

As a young cadet reporter on the *Rand Daily Mail*, *Sunday Express* and *Weekend Post*, I often experienced how readers regularly passed on great stories – with the documentary proof to back them up.

Today, at most papers, this source of stories has dried up to a large extent and one reason, I believe, is because of a lack of trust between readers and papers.

Well the good news is that I saw this happening once again at the *Voice*, great stories brought to us by, for example, municipal workers, disgruntled cops and traffic officers, court officials – all backed up with quality leaked documents.

An example was a call I took from a reader who offered us a copy of a videotape showing senior cops and known gangsters partying at a night club. The story resulted in a major investigation, with a police station being raided, several cops being suspended and now facing criminal charges.

Later I asked the source why he had given us the tape and why he had not gone to one of the established broadsheets. His answer was illuminating and holds a clue for how papers should be developing relationships and trust with their readers: “The Voice is on our side, I trusted you to do it properly, not to drop me.”

What is clear is that tabloids have resonated with a readership that has found a voice previously denied to them.

The tabloids are not going away. So rather than slag them off, maybe we should also be looking at the reasons for their success – there might just be something we can all learn from them. ■

debate

At its AGM in July the SA National Editors’ Forum held an open discussion about the rise of tabloidism, some comments...

[of this type of journalism]. Commercial radio news often verges on the tabloid format. The tabloids are listening to peoples’ stories out there and picking up stories which often mainstream papers aren’t. Their reporters see stories everywhere and don’t have to be told what a story looks like.”



Ann Donald, outgoing editor of *Fair Lady*: “The excitement around the tabloids contrasts with the subdued mood in mainstream newsrooms.”



Journalism educator **Arrie de Beer**: “Tabloid readers won’t ‘graduate’ or ‘migrate’ to the quality press, this has not happened in the British experience.”

Cape Times deputy editor **Tyrone August**: “Presentation is a secondary issue. The matter of factuality is critical to whether tabloidism still counts as journalism.”



The popularity of tabloid newspapering should not be at the expense of credible journalism, or of promoting values that are in line with the South African Constitution. ‘Progressive’ needs to be integrated with ‘popular’, or else an opportunity for meaningful print journalism catering to the masses will continue to be missed. Some people see tabloids as giving voice to the working class. It must be acknowledged that tabloid journalism is hard to do and it is building circulation. But to maintain that this is fine if it leads to more readers... is this popularity at any price? What about a moral compass?”



Mathatha Tsedu, *City Press* editor: “Many people with social problems call the *Daily Sun* before they call the police. Sanef shouldn’t start from a negative standpoint. But neither the staff on the *Daily Sun* nor the readers actually believe what is in much of their journalism.”



Mondli Makhanya of the *Sunday Times*: “I don’t believe that readers believe the *Daily Sun*. “

Joe Thloloe, Sanef chair: “Sanef is bound to respect freedom of expression and choice and therefore cannot reject the tabloids; yet it also stands for the quality and ethics of journalism. “



Media academic **Francois Nel**: “Tabloid readers are telling us what journalism is.”

Guy Berger, head of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University: “Is the selling of more than 400 000 copies of an ‘incredible’ *Daily Sun* as significant for South Africa as the 38 000 sales of the influential *Mail&Guardian*?”



Excerpt from the Sanef AGM press statement:
“Tabloids are a vibrant element of the changing media landscape but we reaffirm our commitment to journalistic integrity, tolerance and accountability.”