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**Tabloid newspapers and the post-apartheid South African  
public sphere**

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## ***1. Introduction***

A common criticism against tabloids newspapers is that they peddle sensationalism and entertainment rather than providing the type of information that could contribute to democratic citizenship. By effectively depoliticizing their readers to the role of consumers, they prevent them from being citizens. An alternative perspective has been offered by cultural studies scholars who argue that tabloid media articulate the politics of the everyday for those readers for whom formal politics are often far removed from their lived experience. When a range of new tabloid newspapers emerged almost a decade into post-apartheid South Africa, aimed at the poor and working class Black and Coloured<sup>1</sup>, they were subjected to similar criticism. Although they have enjoyed unprecedented popularity (the *Daily Sun* is now the biggest newspaper in the country, with around 4 million readers; other titles are *Daily Voice*, *Son and Sunday Sun*), these tabloids have been accused of undermining the country's new democratic human rights culture by explicit depictions of crime victims and sexual content, and for lack of constructive coverage of formal politics that could contribute to the deepening of the fledgling democracy.

This paper wants to examine the way in which the coverage of routine and seemingly mundane news stories in these tabloids construct an alternative political discourse to that of mainstream newspapers by highlighting the plight of the working class and unemployed whose stories are either ignored by the mainstream or covered from an 'objective' distance. The paper will also look at instances where formal political processes, like the election of the new ANC president Jacob Zuma, were covered by tabloids to assess how their approach differed from the mainstream. By drawing on a selection of focus group interviews conducted with tabloid readers, the paper will explore how these papers contribute to the construction of a civic identity for these readers through the articulation of their everyday lived experience.

## ***2. A 'crisis for democracy'? Advocates and opponents of the democratic role of tabloids***

The arrival of the tabloids in South Africa was met with strong opposition and criticism from mainstream media, media commentators and journalism trainers (see Wasserman 2006 for a detailed discussion of the responses).

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is acknowledged that the racial nomenclature of apartheid was socially constructed and imposed rather than natural, these designations continue to be used in official South African policies aimed at redress of the past and in the segmentation of media markets. They also still largely correlate with the enormous material inequalities in that society. For these reasons these terms remain analytically relevant, even if problematically so.

Although much of the barrage of criticism was based on moral grounds (the tabloids' sensational approach, lack of respect for privacy, lewd content etc.), it was also suggested that the tabloids were not good for the fledgling South African democratic society. One commentator (Manson 2005) expressed this sentiment as follows:

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) saw the world created by tabloids as one where 'everything is allowed', where 'half truths are more than enough'. Yet another Berger (2005) 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.

This kind of 'moral panic' in reaction to 'tabloidization' is by no means specific to the South African situation. Although such alarmist responses against have been voiced 'ever since the birth of the modern press' (Gripsrud 2000: 287), the news media have since the 1990s been seen as being especially prone to what Franklin (1997; cf. Franklin et al. 2005:175) termed 'newszak' (Bonner & McKay 2007; Glynn 2000).

Tabloids are often seen as constituting a 'crisis for democracy' because of their focus on what is seen as diversions, namely sports, scandal and entertainment, rather than what is perceived to be serious issues pertaining to the well-being of democratic society, like politics, economics and social issues (Sparks, 2000, p.10-11). But tabloids have also had their defenders, who have pointed out that tabloids contribute to a democratic public sphere by undermining the social hierarchy which allows the elite to dominate mediated debate (see Fiske 1989: 103 ff.; also Sparks 2000, p.25). Tabloids provide an alternative view of reality that that found in official, "quality" news. Through sensation and excess, popular texts like tabloids question the dominant social standards and points to the "excessive failure of the normal" (Fiske 1989: 116). For Fiske, the existence of tabloids should be read as an index of the 'extent of dissatisfaction in a society, particularly among those who feel powerless to

change their situation' (1989: 117). As such tabloids can be read as containing a political message, even if not in the form associated by the rational public sphere of official media.

As 'ritual forms of communication' tabloids 'reproduce and instill in all its members a sense of community and identity, of shared conditions, values, understandings and so on' (Gripsrud 2000: 285, 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' (Gripsrud 2000: 297):

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: 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. This is especially the case in contemporary media-saturated societies, where '(p)opular culture is becoming ever more important to political communication and political understanding' (Van Zoonen 2000: 6).

An important perspective on tabloids in the South African context, is the view that popular culture 'functions as a practice of politics when groups or individuals that are excluded from traditional social and political channels use it as a means of political expression' (Van Zoonen, 2000:13). The South African tabloids speak to the section of the population bearing the brunt of the legacies of apartheid, which impact adversely on the extent to which they can actively participate in political debate in the public sphere. Popular media broadens the bourgeois public sphere by validating a more diverse spectrum of topics and styles considered worthy of public discussion (Van Zoonen 2000).

This paper wants to explore the extent to which the new tabloid media in South Africa can be seen to fulfil a political role in this broader sense – not only by providing information of the formal political kind, but also through their contribution to social and cultural shifts that have implications for post-apartheid democracy. This will be done by (briefly) looking at the role tabloids can play in the following areas:

- Providing an alternative public sphere
- Involving excluded of marginalized sections of the population in mediated public sphere

- Assisting their readers to cope with life in a newly democratic society
- Keeping the powerful accountable
- Providing their readers with guidance in formal political processes
- Engaging in reactionary politics

### *2.1 Alternative public sphere*

It has been argued that popular journalism can contribute to an alternative public sphere even while engaging in a sensationalist and emotional mode of address when they provide ordinary people with the opportunity to tell their story and bring the struggles of their everyday life into the public arena (Örnebring & Jönsson 2004; Örnebring 2006:862). This view is in line with a ‘more cultural understanding’ of the public sphere than the dominant view of the news media as ‘democracy’s watchdog’ (Hermes 2006: 29).

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 this has the effect of drawing a neglected section of society into the mediated public sphere, it is done with commercial rather than political objectives in mind. Deon du Plessis, publisher of the *Daily Sun*, is forthright about the reason for this tabloid’s focus on the ‘man in the blue overall’ as he somewhat patronizingly calls their typical reader (pers. comm., 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.

The editor of the *Daily Voice*, Karl Brophy (pers.comm, February 2007), outlines the socio-political dimension of this market. He 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, covering stories from a different perspective than the elite mainstream – 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 (the mainstream papers) *Die Burger* or *Cape Times*. They do 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.

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

What we try to do is write for the ordinary people – their suffering and their joys. We give people unique news, news that (mainstream daily) *Die Burger* 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 *Die Burger* 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. Their involvement in anti-drug campaigns in the communities is reminiscent of public journalism, and they make a point of publishing the telephone number of a helpline in stories about drug abuse, rape or child abuse: "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., transl. author, January 2007). A critical question can be asked whether these stories about social ills are not still framed within the value system and frame of reference of the middle class. Even though community members get the opportunity to comment, the expert advice provided routinely comes from a member of middle class (often white) establishment.

## 2.2 Inclusion and exclusion

Cultural studies approaches to journalism have argued for the notion of "media citizenship" that seeks to undo the divide between the 'knowledge class' and ordinary people by focusing

on people's relationship to media rather than on conventional knowledge production (Hermes 2006:33; Hartley 1998:58-59). The disjuncture between the everyday lives of tabloid readers and mainstream discourses of science, politics and culture explains the popular demand for this type of publication (Fiske 1989).

This disjuncture leads to a pleasurable skepticism which in turn serves to include the formerly oppressed in a public contestation over meaning, as Strelitz and Steenveld (2005:267, citing Fiske 1991:48) remarks on the South African tabloids:

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.

.Although the extent to which tabloids provide the information needed for readers to participate in active citizenship has been debated (Gripsrud 2000: 287; Sparks 2000), tabloids could be seen as 'one of the ways that the news can be rescued from irrelevance to the lives of the mass of people who would otherwise reject it entirely' (Sparks 2000:9).

While democratization in South Africa meant the achievement of "first generation" rights (freedom from discrimination, equality on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion etc.), the socio-economic rights that citizens in a democracy are entitled to has failed to materialize for the majority of South Africans (Robins 2005:2). Rights to food, water, housing, health care and social security remain ideals which have not been realized for huge swathes of the population. Even if socio-economic rights are enshrined in the Constitution, they remain ideals rather than reality for many (Robins 2005:2).

For these "people who are still not in count" (as the editor of the *Kaapse Son*, Andrew Koopman [pers.comm], refers to them), the tabloids provide recourse to a media outlet who seems to listen to them and take them seriously seems like a more viable recourse than a government who seems aloof and distant.

The inclusion of new readers into the mediated public sphere from which they have been excluded before, leads the editor of the *Daily Sun*, Themba Khumalo (2007) to invoke Gill Scott Heron:

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!

However, only from a liberal-pluralist perspective would the establishment of more media outlets in and of themselves contribute to a bigger diversity of voices and a deepening of democratic debate. A more critical perspective would lead one to ask questions about how these new voices will contribute to democratic politics in a media landscape marked by unequal power relations, especially if they seem to eschew formal political news. To understand this contribution, we have to examine the political dimension of tabloid readers' everyday life.

### 2.3 *Coping with life*

The tabloid preference for what can be termed the “politics of the everyday” above formal political news of the kind found in mainstream newspapers can best be introduced by an example in which the *Daily Sun* is contrasted to the stalwart Black newspaper *Sowetan*. Under a previous editor, Aggrey Klaaste, the *Sowetan*'s had a slogan printed on the masthead: ‘building the nation’. Even though the *Sowetan* was adversely affected by the entrance of the *Daily Sun* and had to “dumb down” in an attempt to reverse a sharp decline in circulation, the contrast between this view of its readers as part of a collective and that of the *Daily Sun*'s individualistic, neoliberal approach became evident in its coverage of the wife of a 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 was 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 hijacking (‘No Mercy! Hospital bars family – then they’re hijacked!’, *Daily Sun*, 1 February 2007, p.1). 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 has 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’ (‘My Oprah angels!’, *Daily Sun* 1 February 2007, p.1).

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 admitted 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. For Du Plessis, the *Sowetan* ‘just does not get it’: ‘The collective is dead’ (pers.comm 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...

While the popular press internationally is often associated with “laughter and the lighter side of life” (which can also be subversive - Conboy 2008: 113), South African tabloids are for the most part taken very seriously by their readers. In speaking to tabloid readers in focus groups (in urban and rural settings in different provinces), the overwhelming response from South African tabloid readers was that they trusted the tabloids to bring them reliable information, up-to-date news that enables them to negotiate the sometimes harsh and precarious conditions of everyday life. Readers of the Cape Town tabloids *Daily Voice* and *Son* said the following:

We read (in the tabloids) about murders, drugs, baby rapes – things that happen every day. The other newspapers don’t give enough attention to those problems. Drugs are a big problem here on the Cape Flats. The small newspapers (tabloids - HW) spell it out for you: this is the problem, what is the government doing about it? The big newspapers don’t have many stories about it.

These are things that happen to us, man. (These are) people that live our type of lives)

Readers trusted the tabloids to provide them with information that kept them informed, but also made them feel connected to larger society and enabled them to perform their roles as citizens in the social compact. Readers of the *Son* in the Western Cape said the following:

My boyfriend was kidnapped a while ago. The detectives told him to approach the *Son* so that everyone can become aware of the danger – they had to be on the lookout for a red car that came from Mitchells Plain. He phoned *Son* and they came to his house personally, they reported on it and took his photo. So he was very happy

If there was something that happened in my community, something that I wanted the world to know – something like child molestation – I would phone *Son*.

These responses indicate a level of trust invested in the tabloids could be expected to be reserved for public institutions like the police, the courts and the government. The claims by readers that they would phone the tabloids with matters concerning crime or social problems, confirms the remarks by tabloid editors (Koopman, pers.comm February 2007; Brophy, pers. comm. February 2007) that readers would call them before they would call the police – resulting in tabloid reporters often arriving on crime scenes well before the authorities would.

While the function of community surveillance and information about society might be taken for granted as a minimum requirement of democratic media, it must be remembered that in the post-apartheid context the fulfilling of these functions by tabloid papers constitute the *restoration* of a notion of citizenship that the majority was deprived of under apartheid. This reconstruction of citizenship is of central importance to the continued democratic transition in the country, seeing as the experience of marginalization is still very real in post-apartheid South Africa:

In contemporary South Africa the introduction of democratic political arrangements has gone hand in hand with the unmasking of widespread marginalization. While the majority of people's legal status is assured, their experience of citizenship remains ambiguous. They continue to be excluded from economic equality and empowerment and effective, democratic participation in the public sphere. If the South African case is emblematic of anything, it is the intertwining of democracy and marginalization in contemporary life (Von Lieres 2005: 23).

Coping with the demands of life in post-apartheid South Africa might start with something as basic as being in possession of an identity document (or simply "ID" or "ID book"). This document is a crucial prerequisite for seeking employment, education, voting and claiming social grants. Due to bureaucratic incompetence, bungling and lack of resources, the

department of Home Affairs has become notorious for its inability to provide applicants with identity documents. The struggles its readers are experiencing in this regard has become a daily feature in the *Daily Sun*. In a daily column titled “Home Affairs Horrors” readers’ struggles, in many cases lasting for years, to obtain ID books are recounted. A reader in the rural town of Makhado in Limpopo saw these stories in terms of civic mediation:

The *Daily Sun* addresses issues like the home affairs department, struggles to get ID books. The *Daily Sun* mediates between people and the government

This campaign has high symbolic value as it insists on the acknowledgement of tabloid readers’ status as citizens, quite literally as people that have names, faces, and a birthright to membership of the civic community. That these identities are individual rather than group identities, is perhaps no coincidence in the light of the fact that the tabloid addresses its readers in terms of a neoliberal politics of consumerism and individual rights rather than in the language of social justice and communal redress. The emphasis on citizenship also took a negative turn when tabloids contributed to xenophobic sentiment, as will be discussed below.

Being constructed in this way as citizens, tabloid readers are now in a position to challenge authority and lay claim to their democratic rights.

#### *2.4 Keeping the powerful accountable*

Popular journalism often ‘harbors a disrespect for authorities’ (Gripsrud 2000:298), and in this regard it can 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, 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: 299).

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

Readers in the rural town of Makhado related examples of tabloid stories that challenge authorities on issues of social delivery:

The Police do not do their job properly. There have been muti killings where nobody has been arrested even if they know who it is. The *Sun* should write about that.

A lot of the villages around here do not have electricity and water. That's why it is important that the *Daily Sun* does stories on social delivery. Some areas here go for three weeks or sometimes even three months without water. People sometimes have to hike for miles to get to an area where there is water. We get no response from the authorities when we complain. We don't know where to go to speak to the government. The *Daily Sun* should tell Mbeki that we were told we would get houses, but there's nothing.

The *Daily Sun* should write stories about crime on trains and unemployment.

Jobs should be created, and the *Sun* should expose that.

A similar wishlist was conveyed by the group of farm workers outside Tshwane. The nostalgia for the apartheid past (at least in terms of what it meant on the level of local government) demonstrated by this respondent is deeply ironic but also indicative of the limited political choice available :

When I came here 20 years ago the old government used to fix the road. But since there is a new government and new ward councillors, the roads are no longer fixed. That kind of politics is what I want to read about. The *Daily Sun* does not do enough stories about this. The *Daily Sun* does not come here to our place to do these stories.

I would phone the *Daily Sun* to come, they should come here and look at how we live – the condition of the roads, the crime, the working hours, the pay.

While tabloids contribute to a sense that the authorities can be held to account, it does so by focusing on the arrogance and extravagance of those with power and money. As one

respondent in Stellenbosch remarked with reference to the *Son*'s coverage of Jacob Zuma's rape trial:

*Son* said he had to be punished. If it was somebody else, not as high up in the ANC, he would've been punished. It's true what they say – if you have a lot of money, you get things done. If you have a little money, you don't get anything done.

Surveillance of the powerful also takes on a political dimension when tabloid readers engage with stories like the government abuse of tax money, cover-ups or corruption (see Bird 1992: 128 ff. for US examples). A respondent in Makhado articulated it as follows:

There is government corruption, they are filling their pockets and do not care whether other people have enough food

The sense of powerlessness or alienation from the mainstream that tabloid readers experience, linked to their class position in society, gives them a preference for the type of story where the underdog has proved victorious, where fate and luck smiled upon someone with whom they could identify (Bird 1992:125). A female respondent in Makhado re-iterated this:

When we see stories about women becoming prosperous, selling fruit, when we see successful women it inspires us

This response is also interesting from the point of view that tabloids are often criticised for their stereotyping of women, a point that we will return to below.

Readers' sense of powerlessness can also lead them to derive pleasure from seeing the establishment elite, e.g. celebrities or politicians, falter and prove fallible (Bird 1992: 125-126.) Such stories provide the reader with validation of their resistance, outrage or anger against the powerful and the rich (Bird 1992: 131). Even stories that provide entertainment and diversion, like the high-profile 'Baby Jordan' murder case - where a woman was accused of ordering a contract killing on her boyfriend's baby daughter with an ex- girlfriend - that was covered like a soap opera, could be read in a way as to provide readers with the sense that justice was served. This went further than providing vicarious revenge, but also made readers

feel that they were participants in the judicial process. This was expressed by a respondent in a focus group in the Western Cape:

I buy the *Son* every day because I want to know what happens with a story. I want to follow a story from the beginning to the end, like the Baby Jordan story. (...) If I could have made a book with all the articles on the Baby Jordan murder right from the beginning up until the end, I would have done it. I keep the copies of the *Son* in which they cover the Baby Jordan trial. Because when the trial is finished, and they get sentenced, I want to go back to the story (from the beginning) and see if it is right, if they got the punishment they deserved for all the things they did.

A similar sentiment was expressed by respondent in a different focus group in the same region:

One thing that the Baby Jordan story does, is it focuses a lot of attention on the police force, so that they can do their job properly. Whereas in the past, none of this would have (come out).

In summary, the South African tabloids, with their focus on social delivery issues and the relationship of trust that they have established with their readers, have created a platform where readers can vent their feelings of marginalization. Whether this articulation of disillusionment will translate into political mobilisation or instead act to defuse mounting political pressure on the government, is yet to be seen. What is clear, is that anger directed at the government is channeled through the tabloids:

There are people that do not even know who is their ward councillor. The average Joe on the street wants to know what is happening. To whom do they complain. Say there is potholes in the street, they don't know who they should complain to, so they complain to the newspaper (respondent in Western Cape focus group)

### *2.5 Formal democratic processes*

South African tabloids are keen to emphasise that they do not wish to burden their readers with “heavy politics”, as the editor of the *Son*, Andrew Koopman, put it (pers. comm., 2007). But when one takes a closer look at their content, it becomes clear that not only do they cover the

“politics of the everyday” and attack the high and mighty, but they do provide considerable coverage of formal political processes.

The publisher of the *Daily Sun*, Deon du Plessis recalls that at the previous local government elections (in 2006), the paper was “heavy again on stand and deliver” (pers.comm. 2007):

We took area by area and said this is what you’ve gotta fix, it’s quite graphic actually. It’s horrifying when you delve into the conditions that so many people have to live in ...these uncovered holes that kids fall into. Now that is politics. You get bullshit workmen, badly directed, dig a hole and leave it. Then it rains, the water falls in and a three year old kid falls in and drowns. We’ve had thirty of those, and we haven’t even been looking. That’s politics, and we get very angry about it. We’re absolutely in your face about it.

Politics, for the *Daily Sun*, is about the daily lives of their readers, and they campaign actively about these issues:

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 ran ten a day for a year about this crises. And it culminated when they cut the road to Durban to Harrismith, on the issue no delivery, and that’s when Mbeki started talking about this thing and called an imbizo. We pioneered what in our view was real politics – the guys not feeling the benefits of the undoubted revolution in 1994.

The reporter covering the elections for the tabloid, Sicelo Dladla, had said before the elections that the *Daily Sun* would focus on "telling the people what is relevant to them" (Felix 2006). This included information on formal political processes: "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."

Yet it is not clear whether political actors are starting to recognise the potential for tabloids as political tools, whether for lobbying or to keep abreast of the issues that affect their voters’ lives. In a series of interviews with politicians and political intermediaries from local to national government level, conducted in 2008 as part of an international study on political

communication in new democracies<sup>2</sup>, it was found that most political actors see elite media – and especially the weekly newspapers *Mail & Guardian* and the *Sunday Times* – as politically the most influential. Tabloids were mostly dismissed as trivial entertainment.

However, isolated examples have been emerging that suggest that the potential political influence of tabloids is starting to be recognised. The editor of the *Daily Voice*, Karl Brophy, claims (personal communication 2007) that the Democratic Alliance mayor of Cape Town, Helen Zille, started ordering copies of the tabloid soon after she had been elected to office in 2006. The tabloid seems to have reciprocated this relationship by acknowledging her power as mayor, for instance through appeals like that of the columnist Nigel Pierce in 2007 for her to act against drug abuse in the city.

From the other side of the political spectrum, the chair of the Treatment Action Campaign, Zackie Achmat, in a speech before the Progressive ANC Voters' Network in Manenberg in 2007 (Lewis 2007), appealed to ANC members to write to the *Daily Voice* to demand an ANC leader in the Western Cape that promotes non-racialism. (The province has a history of voter division along racial lines, with the African constituency supporting the ANC and the 'coloured' voters supporting parties like the Democratic Alliance who are perceived to be aligned to white interests).

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. Out of a total of 11 825 articles in the *Daily Sun* over the period, across 26 categories, only 892 articles (or 7.5% of the total) dealt with 'politics'. (This definition excludes policy issues, and focuses on articles explicitly related to party political matters). 'Crime' ranked highest, with 3311 articles (or 28%) in total, followed by 'General Interest' (17%), 'Society' (14,5%) and 'Domestic Issues' (9.4%). Policy issues that are ostensibly of great political (in the broad sense) interest to *Daily Sun* readers like 'Education' (2.3%), 'Health' (2,2%), 'Transport' (1.4%) and 'HIV/Aids' (1.1%) ranked much lower.

These figures seem to suggest that the *Daily Sun*, while claiming to "take up cudgels" for the "man in the blue overall" (Deon du Plessis, pers.comm, February 2007), their news values insofar as the selection of news is concerned, do not seem to be much different from those of the mainstream publications.

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The political role that the tabloids could – and do – play, and how the the various tabloids differ in terms of their political positioning, could clearly be seen in the example of Jacob Zuma’s election to president of the ruling ANC.

Even while the paper did not explicitly ‘declare’ for Zuma, the its position was clear from their approach to reporting his election – especially when contrasted with that of other tabloids.

The *Daily Sun* responded to early indications from the party’s provincial structures that Jacob Zuma is leading the race for president of the ANC by taking a stronger political stance. On 28 November 2007, for instance, the paper published political commentary on its front page - beneath a logo ‘The *Daily Sun* says’, it provided a list of reasons ‘Where Mbeki went wrong’, which included his aloofness and the impression that he was more concerned about problems in other African countries than lack of service delivery in his own. ‘The HIV/Aids programme, RDP, public service inefficiency, crime – these were the areas where many people wanted tough presidential action’.

By the time the ANC conference took place (December 2007), it became clear from their coverage taken as a whole that the paper supported Zuma. The day before the election result would be announced (18 December), the paper led with a full front-page story playing up the tension with the headline ‘Who’s the Boss?’ The super-heading on the same story picked up on the apparent support for Zuma by pointing out ‘Mbeki loyalists take the strain in Polokwane!’, while a smaller subheading added more suspense for good measure: ‘SA will only know today!’ It pictured a row of ‘Mbeki loyalists’ – Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, Frene Ginwala, Charles Ngqakula, Essop Pahad and Mosiua Lekota – who, according to the report, were booed from the floor and ‘humiliated’ by Zuma supporters. Below the headline two contrasting pictures dominated the layout – a smiling, relaxed Jacob Zuma tipping his cap to supporters; next to that, a gloomy Thabo Mbeki, frowning and, according to the caption, ‘looking tense’. The report goes on to describe this contrast: ‘Zuma arrived smiling and upbeat in an ANC shirt, in contrast to Mbeki, who was soberly attired and grim-faced’ (*Daily Sun* 18 December 2007, p.2). The coverage of the ANC’s internal power struggle was extensive and at times resembled the type of horse-race style coverage associated with the mainstream press. The tabloid also made use of syndicated copy from News24.com. But the *Daily Sun* also deviated from the mainstream press’ approach to formal political processes, by complementing quotes from ‘authorities’ with ordinary ANC delegates, who offered subtle critiques of the political elite. The *Daily Sun*’s front page report on 19 December 2007 quoted ‘one impatient delegate’ as explaining the delay in vote counting as ‘Perhaps they are still eating their supper. Maybe we will have to wait until the champagne runs out before they tell us’ On p.2 the lead report was a feature-type story on the amount of food

consumed at the conference, syndicated by the wire agency SAPA ('1,5 Tons of Meat for Hungry Politicians!', *DailySun* 19 December 2007, p.2).

In the lead report on the day Zuma's victory became known, the *Daily Sun* (20 December 2007, pp.1-2) made a list of 'SunSuggestions' for Zuma that gave a clear indication of the paper's political position. It emphasizes local, grassroots politics (even to the point of nationalist nuances) as well as the need for skills needed for participation in a 'modern economy'. The reference to crime and people taking the law in their own hands as a priority to be addressed, correlates with the attention given to crime stories and mob justice, not only in the *Daily Sun* but also in other tabloids.

Coverage of Zuma's election was significantly less prominent in the other tabloids. Where they did pay attention, the Western Cape tabloids took a decidedly more pessimistic view of Zuma's ascendancy, also expressed by their readers in vox populi-type articles. This position can be explained by the differences in readership – the *Daily Sun* mostly has a Black working class readership, while *Son* and *Daily Voice*'s readership are predominantly 'Coloured' and were unlikely to support a candidate who could be seen to overtly espouse (Zulu) ethnic politics. The Western Cape has also been a site of contention between historically White parties like the National Party or the Democratic Alliance and the ANC. At the time of Zuma's election, the Western Cape province had an ANC government (under premier Ebrahim Rasool) but a DA-led city council, with continued tension between the two parties. Following Zuma's victory, Rasool was replaced by Lynne Brown as part of a nation-wide shake-up of ANC party structure.

It is clear that the South African tabloids, contrary to popular criticism, do cover formal political processes, albeit to varying degrees depending on their readership. The most significant political role these publications play in the post-apartheid society is however rather in terms of their coverage of the "politics of the everyday".

### *2.6 Reactionary politics*

Not all the political work that tabloids do is constructive. 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. On several occasions the tabloids have received criticism for fuelling xeno- and homophobia. These concerns came under an intense spotlight this year (2008), with criticism directed primarily at the *Daily Sun*. A homophobic column by Jon Qwelane in the *Sunday Sun* also led to widespread protests and complaints.

Following the outbreak of xenophobic violence around the country in early 2008, the media watchdog Media Monitoring Project and its partner Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) submitted a complaint with the Press Ombudsman Joe Thloloe and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHCR) against the *Daily Sun*. This complaint follows on earlier criticism by the MMP of the tabloids coverage of immigration, among other objections. The MMP accused the tabloid of stereotyping foreign nationals as “aliens”, presenting a “biased and limited” representation of government agencies, failure to “clearly condemn the violence until most of it had been contained” and a failure to “offer any non-violent alternatives, or additional information to help prevent violence and to condone mob justice” (MMP, 2008). The MMP had a point in so far as tabloid content goes. A cursory look at tabloid content makes it clear that these papers have been tapping into the widespread xenophobic attitudes in the country and amplifying them for sensational value. “Clamp-down operations” on “illegal aliens” get prominent and gleeful coverage, and foreign nationals are often glibly associated with crime. And if foreigners were the “problem”, the horrific “solution” witnessed all over the country in 2008 is also not unlike the vigilante justice that is often uncritically depicted on the front pages of tabloids. The coverage given to the violent rage of communities lashing out against suspected criminals in their midst often stops just short of celebration.

During the time of the attacks in May 2008, the *Daily Sun*'s coverage was marked by the paradoxes and contradictions that can now be seen as characteristic of the South African tabloids in other respects as well. The *Daily Sun* seemed to have taken a critical stance towards the attacks in particular, but persisted in referring to foreign nationals as “aliens” and upholding the us-them distinction between South Africans and immigrants, even as an attempt was made to personalize foreigners by recounting individual experiences of refugees. This contradiction between sympathy for victims of the violence and the persisting distinction between “us” and “them” however continues to run through the tabloid's reporting.

The outrage at the clearly homophobic rant by Qwelane in the *Sunday Sun* was similar to the debate that followed on the outbreaks of xenophobic violence, and could be seen as an encouraging sign that a culture of public debate about issues key to post-apartheid democracy is emerging. The fact that both these concerns were taken to regulatory bodies (the HRC and the Press Ombudsman) is furthermore an indication of the viability and trust placed in the self-regulatory system.

### **3. Conclusion**

The emergence of tabloids in South Africa 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: 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’.

The South African tabloids are however 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 just be shaping the very nature of post-apartheid democracy.

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