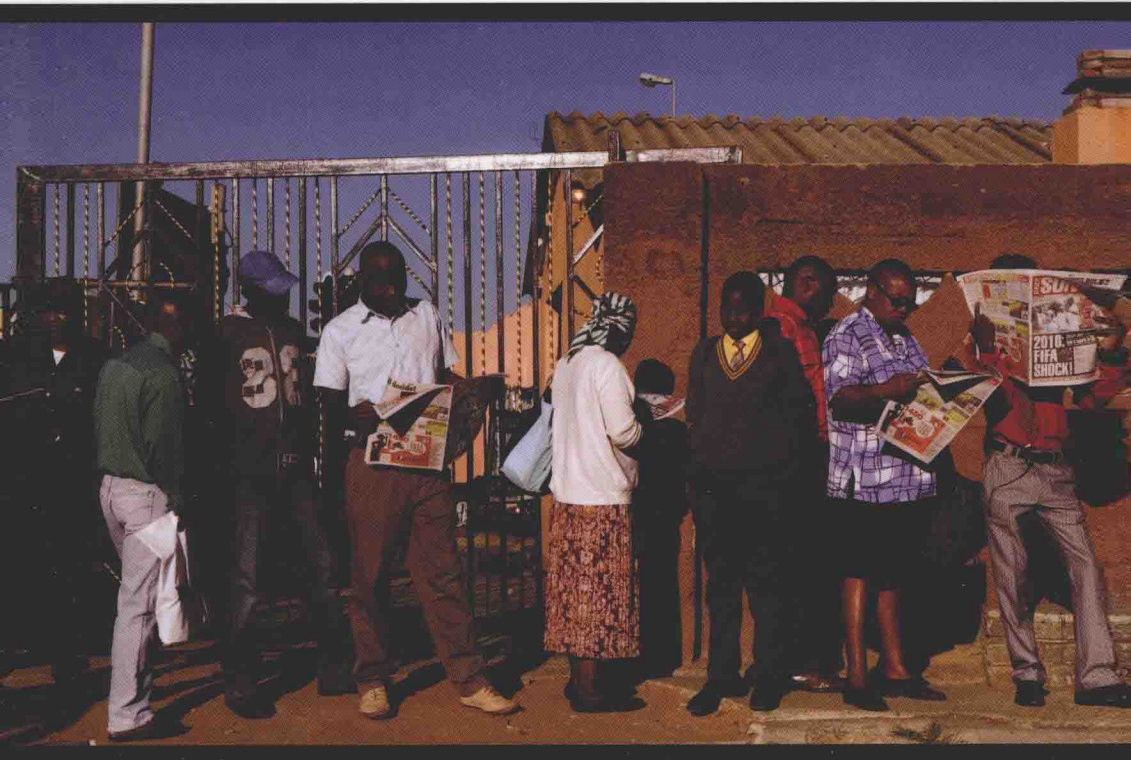


# TABLOID JOURNALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA



**Herman Wasserman**

HERMAN WASSERMAN

# Tabloid Journalism in South Africa

*True Story!*



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Bloomington and Indianapolis*

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press  
601 North Morton Street  
Bloomington, Indiana 47404-3797 USA

[www.iupress.indiana.edu](http://www.iupress.indiana.edu)

<i>Telephone orders</i>	800-842-6796
<i>Fax orders</i>	812-855-7931
<i>Orders by e-mail</i>	<a href="mailto:iuporder@indiana.edu">iuporder@indiana.edu</a>

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wasserman, Herman, [date]

Tabloid journalism in South Africa : true story! / Herman Wasserman.

p. cm.—(African expressive cultures)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-253-35492-1 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-253-22211-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Tabloid newspapers—South Africa. 2. Sensationalism in journalism—South Africa. 3. Journalism—Social aspects—South Africa. I. Title.

PN5477.T33W37 2010

079'.68—dc22

2009045608

1 2 3 4 5 15 14 13 12 11 10

## Preface

At the entrance to the *Daily Sun*'s offices in Johannesburg, a mannequin is displayed reading a copy of the newspaper. This is the "man in the blue overalls" that the paper's publisher says forms the core of the paper's readership, and that the paper remains fiercely loyal to, even as it is accused of journalistic sins like sensationalism, "dumbing down," sexism, and xenophobia.

In the clamor of controversy around the emergence of the highly popular *Daily Sun* and its tabloid counterparts in South Africa, the voices of these men and women in their blue overalls have not often been heard. This is not to say that the professors, commentators, and members of the professional journalistic fraternity did not have a right to present their own views—which in the majority of cases were damning—about these papers. Certainly there is much in these papers that invites criticism. But in the shorthand of public debate, the words "tabloid" or "tabloidization" have too easily become catch-all pejoratives for all that is wrong with South African journalism. The perspective from which these papers have been debated and criticized often is that of a professional elite that has not bothered to find out why these papers are popular, what they mean to their readers or how they articulate an experience of daily life in post-apartheid South Africa that differs vastly from theirs. Often the criticism directed at the tabloids centers around incredulity or ridicule at stories that defy belief. How could stories about supernatural events, strange sightings, or sidewalk rumors qualify as news? This book grapples with the question of why tabloids are considered by millions of readers in the country as telling a "true story" even as they are dismissed as trash by others.

What exactly it means to tell a "true story" is more complicated than just doing fact checking. It means telling stories so that they resonate with the narrative of people's daily lives, which, for millions of people in post-apartheid South Africa, remain precarious, dangerous, difficult, and uncertain. What would a "true story" about politics, transformation of society, crime, and poverty look like for readers who have lost faith in the "facts" of sound statistics, verifiable political soundbites, or expert scientific evidence? Yet the "true story" of life in South Africa is also about more than hardship. People use media to socialize, to facilitate their interactions, to be entertained. This is as true of tabloids as it is of the "quality" papers, which also have their share of rumor, gossip, and showbiz news. For a newspaper to tell a "true story" in this sense might mean that it uses the idiom, frame of reference, and spectrum of interests of one set of readers, which to another set of readers might seem banal or far removed from reality. Yet readers should be given credit for decoding, reading between the lines, and appropriating media content in a way that is sometimes more of a ritual than a deliberation. From this point of

view, what would the “true story” of the pleasures and diversions of an ordinary life—if there is such a thing—look like for readers who prefer tabloids to other newspapers?

The debate about South African tabloids also poses questions for scholars studying journalism and the media. Too often, generalizations are made about the state of journalism, its future, and its social functions that are premised on the conditions in the media-saturated, developed countries of the Global North. Taking South African tabloids seriously—to borrow the title of Barbie Zelizer’s well-known book about journalism studies—would also entail revisiting some of the dominant assumptions that govern scholarly debates about journalism today. For one, South African tabloids show that the future of print media does not look the same all around the world, nor does it look the same for different types of print media within the same country. A study of South African tabloids reiterates the importance of viewing media and journalism within its social context, against the background of specific histories, and from the perspectives of all the various participants in the communication process.

The book is not an apology for the South African tabloids. The fact that it does not dwell on tabloid transgressions does not mean that no transgressions could be found, but that the book is not primarily intended as an evaluation or assessment of the “quality” or ethical standards of tabloid papers. Instead, it wants to understand how criteria for measuring “quality” or journalistic standards come about in the first place, how these norms relate to the construction of journalistic professionalism in a transitional society, and how these norms are viewed from the perspective of the readers. This book aims to go beyond moralistic dismissals of tabloids as an inferior form of journalism, or as one which is inappropriate for a young, developing democracy, to try to understand why these papers emerged when they did, why they became so popular so quickly, and what they mean to their readers—without assuming that ‘tabloid readers’ represents a homogenous or stable mass audience (Barber 1997, 4). In summary, tabloids are viewed in this book not so much as journalistic products to be measured against a scale of good to bad performance, but as social phenomena that tell us something about the society in which they exist and the role of media in that society.

By taking tabloids seriously, the book invests popular culture with legitimacy, even as the notion of “the popular” in African society is a complex and conflicted one, as Karin Barber has pointed out (1997, 3). The emphasis in this book is on the importance of the audience in that process of understanding. This perspective raises a dilemma for a researcher who is himself not part of the target readership demographic and who therefore has to account for his own position when representing the views of readers. While methodological steps have been taken to address this problem, there are limits to how well an academic study such as this one can represent the voices and perspectives of readers. Nevertheless, this book is not intended as a comprehensive account of tabloid reading in South Africa, but as an attempt to shift the focus of the debate and reframe the tabloid

controversy to include a wider range of perspectives that has been the case up until now. It is hoped that this book will contribute to a critical reassessment not only of these tabloids themselves, but of the role of journalism in a transitional, unequal, and young democracy such as South Africa's.

# Acknowledgments

I owe the initial spark of an idea for this book to a teatime conversation I had with Professor Larry Strelitz during a colloquium at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, in 2005. Larry's views on the cultural significance of tabloid media in the post-apartheid public sphere went against the grain of the dominant discourse at the time, namely a hysterical condemnation of tabloids for their perceived lack of ethics, "dumbing down" of journalism and overall detrimental effect on the country's media. Larry's input in a subsequent meeting of a pilot research group as well as his subsequent article (with Lynette Steenveld) in *Ecquid Novi* 26(2) made it clear to me that the South African tabloids deserved to be taken seriously.

Along the way I benefited greatly from the comments, suggestions, and constructive criticism of colleagues, especially Arnold de Beer, Sean Jacobs, Winston Mano, and Wendy Willems, as well as numerous respondents who raised questions and comments when I presented parts of the book as conference or seminar papers.

The book would also not have been possible without the editors, journalists, and tabloid readers who gave generously of their time and allowed me to interview them, conduct focus groups, and spend time as a nosy observer in their newsrooms and who gave permission to reproduce visual material. Family members, colleagues, and friends who helped me obtain copies of tabloids and set up interviews include Todani Nodoba, Fadia Salie, Danie and Alpha Schutte, Gladys van Rooyen, Herman and Marietjie Wasserman, Tobie Wiese, Wendy Willems, and Lijuan Williams. Wadim Schreiner and Richard Kunzmann of Media Tenor South Africa also kindly provided data on tabloid content, Fienie Grobler of *The Media* magazine gave me access to useful circulation information, and Betsi Grabe from Indiana University and Ilana van Wyk from the London School of Economics pointed me toward relevant literature. David Baines at Newcastle University helped me with newspaper terminology, while Ané Honiball and Ylva Rodny-Gumede provided kind assistance with visual material.

I wish to thank the universities of Stellenbosch, Newcastle, and Sheffield for support to attend conferences where some of these chapters were first presented as papers. These conferences and seminars include the London School of Economics and Political Science's African Anthropology Seminar Series and Media, Communication, and Humanity conference; Westminster University Communication and Media Research Institute's Africa Media Series; the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom's annual conference in Preston, Lancashire; the AEGIS European Conference on African Studies in Leiden, Netherlands; the Future of Newspapers conference at Cardiff University; the Cultural Studies

Now conference at the University of East London; the 12th General Assembly of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria) in Yaoundé, Cameroon; the South African Communication Association's annual conference in Tshwane, South Africa; and the research seminar at the Law Faculty, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa. I also thank colleagues for sharing their thoughts and suggestions on these occasions, which made me rethink and revisit my ideas.

An earlier version of chapter 2 appeared in *Journalism Studies* 9(5), a version of chapter 4 in *Communicare* 25(1), and a version of chapter 7 in *Australian Journalism Review* 31(2). These articles are drawn upon for this book with the kind permission of the respective journals.

My publisher, Indiana University Press, and specifically senior sponsoring editor Dee Mortensen, who believed in the project from the start and patiently guided the manuscript toward publication, deserve a special word of thanks.

Like my other academic pursuits and obsessions, this book took a substantial amount of time which I could have spent with my family instead. For allowing me the space and time to work on this and other projects, I remain very grateful to Helena, Lukas, Daniel, and Sophie.

I recognize that as a member of the historically privileged class in South Africa, spending periods living abroad, my lived experience differs vastly from the majority of South Africans whose stories are recounted in the tabloids. In a sense I therefore study the tabloid media as an outsider, even though my work experience as a journalist and journalism educator in South Africa has given me wide exposure to the country's media industry. I remain fascinated by my country, its vibrant media, and the resilience of its people. One cannot ask for a richer, more challenging area of study.

The main players in the story of South Africa's "tabloid revolution" are its readers, who struggle, hope, and dream often in proud defiance of their circumstances. I hope that this book will contribute to the wider recognition of the stories of their lives.



Nor is it to enter into special pleading for contexts in Africa or elsewhere in the Global South because journalism there has just fallen behind on a trajectory that will, in the end lead, to the same place where journalism in the Global North has already arrived.

## Overview of Contents

The discussion of South African tabloids starts by locating these publications contextually. The next chapter, “Attack of the Killer Newspapers! Tabloids Arrive in South Africa,” describes the various tabloids that appeared on the scene in the mid-2000s, their target markets, and indicators of their unprecedented popularity. The chapter explains some of the reasons for their emergence at this particular historical juncture by postulating some of the key factors that led to their inception. The success of these tabloids is contrasted with fears in other countries that the newspaper format is on a steep decline, with some preliminary conclusions about why these tabloids are important for scholars of journalism.

The international perspective on South African tabloids continues in chapter 3, “Black and White and Read All Over: Tabloids and the Glocalization of Popular Media.” This chapter examines the argument that South African tabloids are just an imitation of British “red-tops” (a name that refers to the red mastheads of papers such as *The Sun*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Star*, and *News of the World*). The contrasting arguments of cultural hybridity and cultural imperialism are considered as alternative frameworks for understanding the influence of global or transnational formats on local media products. Hybridity denotes the mixing and adaptation of existing formats and genres—for instance, tabloid newspapers—to suit local contexts. Cultural imperialism, on the other hand, views the influx of global formats and genres as a threat to local culture and a tool through which Anglo-European culture achieves dominance over the developing world. Chapter 3 also considers the expectation that journalism in the developing world should play a role in the advancement of these societies and asks, what does “journalism for development” mean in the context of South African tabloid media? Can these tabloids help to improve post-apartheid society? Or, as critics have claimed, is the role of tabloids limited to that of sensation and entertainment? Chapter 4, “Not Really Newspapers: Tabloids and the South African Journalistic Paradigm,” looks at this and other critical responses to tabloids and at what the antagonism toward tabloids tells us about the professional normative paradigm within which South African journalism is conceived of and practiced. This chapter argues that instead of engaging with the challenge that the new tabloids posed for the existing norms, values, and forms of journalistic practice, the mainstream press rejected the tabloids as a way of defending the existing paradigm within which they operated.

The title of chapter 5, “The Revolution Will Be Printed: Tabloids, Citizenship, and Democratic Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” quotes the editor of the *Daily Sun*, Themba Khumalo, who described the entry of tabloids into the South African media market as a “revolution.” This might be accurate in terms of

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# 1. Shock! Horror! Scandal!

## The Tabloid Controversy and Journalism Studies in Post-Apartheid South Africa

In many regions of the world, the death of newspapers is expected soon. One critic (Meyer 2004) famously predicted that the last newspaper will be read and recycled in April 2040. Amid this panic about the future of printed news, a newspaper revolution has taken place in South Africa.

The newspaper market in that country has been conquered convincingly by the entry of the new tabloid newspapers that have turned the local media landscape upside down and created heated controversy in South African journalism circles (Wasserman 2006b) to such an extent that the tabloid “revolution” has attracted international attention.<sup>1</sup>

The *Daily Sun* is the country’s biggest daily newspaper, with a circulation of around 500,000 copies per day, which translates into around 4.7 million regular readers.<sup>2</sup> Its closest daily rival in terms of circulation (although aimed at a different market) is “quality” newspaper *The Star*, published in Gauteng province, with around 178,000 copies. The *Daily Sun* also competes with the weekly *Sunday Times* in terms of copies sold (the ABC figures for the corresponding period show 504,000 copies per week for the *Sunday Times*). Importantly, the *Daily Sun* has almost a million more readers than the *Sunday Times* (which has 3.8 million according to the AMPS for the corresponding period). This is because the newspaper is shared among more people, creating a community of readers. The publisher, Deon du Plessis, claims that there is even a second-hand market for copies—such is the demand for the paper among those that can barely afford it.<sup>3</sup>

Although the *Daily Sun* is the most successful tabloid in the country, it is not the only one that has recently entered the South African media landscape. It forms part of a wave of tabloid newspapers that have swept the country since the mid-2000s, challenging the dominant journalistic norms and sparking heated debate in industry and academic circles. But most importantly, these tabloids have created a mass readership out of the poor and working-class Black majority of the country that had hitherto been largely ignored by the post-apartheid mainstream press,<sup>4</sup> which had been concentrating on middle-class and elite readerships.

## Why Think about Tabloids?

Why a book on the South African tabloids? In the first, and most general, instance, it is noteworthy that in an era where the existence of newspapers is under threat in many parts of the world, a new print-media genre introduced in a developing country has met with unprecedented commercial success. For scholars of journalism and media, this development underscores the need for scholarship to take a global view, the importance of more comparative research instead of unproblematically extrapolating the circumstances and experiences of media contexts in the developed world. The emergence of the South African tabloids is significant not only as a case study that might contribute to a richer understanding of global journalism, but also for what they say about the mediated public sphere in emerging democracies. The genesis and growth of these tabloids are linked to the changing socio-political context and the shifting media landscape in the country since the demise of formal apartheid in the 1990s. Studying the social, cultural, and political meanings of tabloids within the transitional South African democracy can therefore also indicate to us some of the conditions under which this transition is mediated, and the potential and limitations of the popular press within such a context. The South African tabloids can provide an example of how societal shifts in transitional settings are influenced by (and prey to) local and global market forces; they offer a picture of how popular culture, mediated politics, and discourses of citizenship can converge in a young democracy; and they illustrate how local and global cultural forces interact in shaping media formats and content. Of importance in such a study is not only tabloid content, but also the views and experiences of tabloid producers and tabloid readers.

## Tabloids and the Post-Apartheid Media Sphere: Economic Shifts

In particular, this book hopes to contribute to the debates about the multi-leveled shifts occurring in South African society after the demise of apartheid, especially as these concern journalism and the media. With the arrival of formal democracy in the country in 1994, the public sphere was broadened in major ways—freedom of speech was guaranteed in the Constitution, race was no longer a formal preclusion to participation in public debate and political processes, the media were revitalized as apartheid-era restrictions were lifted and replaced by self-regulation, and the media achieved wider legitimacy as the demography of newsrooms changed to better represent the country's ethnic and racial profile.

But the public sphere also contracted. Under apartheid, there had been a vibrant alternative press which found its *raison d'être* in the struggle against apartheid. Consequently, alternative opinions to those in the mainstream media were in wide circulation, even while they were suppressed by the apartheid regime's intricate set of impediments on press freedom. In the post-apartheid era,

virtually all these alternative voices disappeared, leaving the media landscape to be dominated by commercial media—even as attempts were made to develop the community media sector through the establishment of the Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA) and the awarding of community radio broadcasting licenses (we will return to the point about alternative media in the next chapter). Progressive social movements like the Treatment Action Campaign, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and the Anti-Privatisation Forum have, to varying extents and with varying levels of success, used new media technologies to amplify other methods of communication with target audiences (Wasserman 2007). But as far as the printed press is concerned, the post-apartheid era has seen the dominance of a corporatized, professionalized commercial news industry. On one level, the tabloids can be seen as an extension of this move toward market-driven (as opposed to explicitly ideologically motivated) media. They belong to big conglomerates set on extracting as much profit as possible from the communities they cater to—if they manage to contribute to the good of society in the process, this might be seen as a positive spin-off rather than the main aim.

But on another level, the tabloids could be seen as stepping into the gap left by the demise of alternative media (although referring to the South African tabloids as alternative media in and of themselves would certainly be stretching this definition too far). The dominance of commercial media in the post-apartheid era meant that the logic of selling lucrative audiences to advertisers held sway over newspapers, and the working-class and unemployed majority in the country did not count among these readerships.<sup>5</sup> The major newspapers catering to a Black readership, like the *Sowetan* and *City Press*, had their sights trained on the middle class and elites. A number of free “knock-and-drop” newspapers had been circulating in Black townships, but these were small operations, mostly vehicles for local advertising. These small publications did not influence the mainstream news agenda, nor did they have a significant impact on debates about the media industry or journalism in the country in the way that the tabloids started doing. This climate made it possible for the tabloids to become ersatz community or alternative papers.

The tabloids seem to have turned the received orthodoxy about newspaper business models around, creating a mass readership among the poor and the working class (the latter also consisted of a young, upwardly mobile group that had the potential to become big spenders). For the first time since the end of apartheid, the poor majority of South Africans had a big print-media outlet that viewed news items from a perspective they recognized as familiar, that addressed them on their terms rather than from above, that articulated their opinions and views, and that dared to challenge dominant journalistic conventions in the process.

The tabloids’ brash, defiant attitude did not win them many friends in the journalistic establishment. The journalistic fraternity responded harshly to these new kids on the block and even considered barring tabloid journalists from the professional body for editors, the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) (this and other responses will be discussed in chapter 4). The tabloids’ entry into the

post-apartheid mediated public sphere also came under pressure from the journalistic community itself.

### Tabloids and the Post-Apartheid Media Sphere: Political Pressures

If the mediated public sphere contracted as a result of economic forces, it has also been subject to political pressures. As with many other aspects of the media in contemporary South Africa, the political dimension of tabloid newspapers is best understood against a historical background.

Under apartheid, the White press was a “pivotal institution in the racially and ethnically based struggles for economic and political power” (Horwitz 2001, 36). The mainstream commercial print media were broadly divided along ideological lines that corresponded with ethnic and linguistic differences in the White community. They made only limited attempts to cater to Black or “Coloured” (mixed-race) audiences (e.g., in separate, “extra” editions). While English-language newspapers were linked to the interests of mining capital (and provided a limited, liberal critique of apartheid), Afrikaans-language newspapers supported Afrikaner nationalism and the apartheid state. They served as key institutions for the articulation of nationalist ideology, even while some of them questioned the establishment from time to time (Tomaselli and Dunn 2001; Horwitz 2001). In the post-apartheid era, the Afrikaans and English press became de-linked from these ideologies, repositioned themselves according to the new political landscape, and adopted a more commercialized approach.

The apartheid regime put an extensive set of legal measures in place to control the media and limit criticism of itself. For instance, it was forbidden to quote or publish photographs of certain leaders in the freedom struggle (like Nelson Mandela) or to publish information that could be perceived as threatening the security of the state. Critical journalists and editors from the anti-apartheid press were censored, banished, harassed, and imprisoned (see Wasserman and De Beer 2005). This history of both complicity with the apartheid regime (on the part of the Afrikaans press and the SABC) and government interference and repression (especially with regard to journalists with a “struggle” background) resulted in the post-apartheid media being extremely vigilant of any attempt by the government to meddle in its affairs and suspicious of any media that could be seen to toe the government line. Although freedom of expression was guaranteed in the post-apartheid constitution agreed upon in 1996, this right has often been understood in different ways. As a result, the media and the government were in disagreement on several occasions (De Beer 2002; Fourie 2002; Shepperson and Tomaselli 2002).

The initial years of democracy were marked by a mutual mistrust between media and government. The government had misgivings about the media’s demographic representation, seeing ownership and editorial staff as being too White (see Mandela 1994a). For their part, many members of the media industry

anticipated that the new ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), would pose a threat to media freedom. This pessimistic expectation could perhaps be understood against the trends of governmental interference in the media elsewhere in Africa (Duncan 2003, 5), but has also been linked to “racist and misplaced associations” of the new government with authoritarianism (Jacobs 2003, 132).

The tense relationship between the new government and the media became especially evident during two investigations into the media conducted soon after the formal democratic transition took place. The first investigation, into the media’s role during the apartheid era, formed part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) hearings (1996). The second investigation was conducted by the Human Rights Commission (HRC) (1999/2000), following a complaint by the Black Lawyers Association and the Association of Black Accountants of South Africa about alleged racism in the media.

These investigations provided some of the earliest instances of friction between the media sector and the newly elected government and its related institutions that would only increase over the coming years despite formal efforts to manage the relationship through initiatives like the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS), which was tasked with facilitating government’s communication with the media. In the case of the TRC, the Afrikaans media giant Naspers, whose publications (albeit in varying degrees) had supported the apartheid regime, refused to testify in front of the commission—which resulted in a small rebel group of journalists submitting their own declaration. In the case of the HRC investigation, the media in general met the commission with “scorn and incredulity” and responded with discursive strategies of denial of racism (Durheim et al. 2005). Critical questions were asked of the media’s role in society after apartheid, but both commissions approached racism largely in terms of prejudice and representation and failed to ask broader, structural questions regarding the intersection of the South African media, the market, and race (see Krabill 2001, 591–596; *Rhodes Journalism Review* 1997; Johnson and Jacobs 2004).

Whereas the media were objects of scrutiny under the Mandela presidency, it often clashed outright with Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki’s relations with the media have been generally poor (Chotia and Jacobs 2002, 157). The bulk of the debate in professional and academic journalistic circles during the Mbeki presidency was framed in terms of “media freedom” and “independence.” The government was seen as encroaching upon the media’s constitutionally guaranteed freedom, among other things through attempts by senior ANC members to acquire ownership of Johncom,<sup>6</sup> a company which owns several influential newspapers; a proposed Film and Publications Amendment Bill which would make pre-publication censorship of the news media possible; and ANC plans to establish a media tribunal as an alternative to self-regulation by the Press Ombudsman (who adjudicates complaints by the public against the press) (SANEF 2007). The perceived influence by the government on the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), has become a recurring theme in media reports, and an antagonistic relationship between the print media and the

SABC has developed. In 2007, this antagonism came to a head when the SABC withdrew from the South African National Editors' Forum after the *Sunday Times* published allegations of alcohol abuse on the part of the health minister, Dr. Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, while illegally in possession of her hospital records. This conflict took place in a tense run-up to the election of the new ANC president at the party's general conference in Polokwane in December 2007. When Jacob Zuma emerged victorious from this conference, he was immediately scrutinized for his view of the media. In one of his first weekly emailed "Letters from the President," Zuma slammed the media,<sup>7</sup> writing that it was "politically and ideologically out of synch with the society in which it exists . . . a product of the various political, social, economic and cultural forces that exist within a society," and a "major arena in the battle of ideas" between those with economic power that seek to "reinforce their privileged position" and those who "campaign for a media that serves the cause of a more equitable society" (ANC 2008). For this criticism, Zuma was branded by the South African National Editors Forum as harboring a "hostile state of mind towards the media" (SANEF 2008).

### Tabloids and the Post-Apartheid Media Sphere: Race, Ethnicity, and Class

The roles of race, ethnicity, and class in shaping the post-apartheid media sphere are a further consideration in studying the significance of tabloids. The relationship among race, ethnicity, class, and media markets has not yet been adequately studied in the South African context. The TRC, by focusing its attention on press-freedom issues and professional media institutions in a functionalist fashion, neglected the larger issues of the political economy of the media. In turn, the HRC investigation displayed methodological failures (Tomaselli 2000b), opting to highlight individual cases of alleged racism to make the general point that the South African media was "racist." It focused largely on issues of representation, and, similar to the TRC inquiry, passed up on the opportunity to investigate the bigger questions about the more intricate power relations between race and ethnicity, the media market, and the state. Although these links were left underexplored, the continued impact of race and ethnicity on the media landscape of post-apartheid South Africa cannot be ignored. The emergence of tabloids has made it clear that South African media audiences remain marked by race, ethnicity, and class, and that this segmentation continues to shape debates about what the post-apartheid mediated public sphere should look like. But although tabloids have succeeded in creating a new, largely racially defined market that had previously not been catered to by the mainstream print media, they are worth studying for more than merely market reasons. Reader responses to tabloids (discussed in chapter 6) have suggested that these publications have also had a profound influence on the lives of their readers. They seem to have instilled a measure of trust in at least one section of the media and created a sense



of ownership over it, provided daily companionship and assisted in confirming a civic identity for a large section of the public who had felt left out or forgotten in the post-apartheid media sphere. The tabloids should therefore also be studied in terms of questions about culture, identity, and citizenship in contemporary South Africa.

Such consideration of the influence of race and ethnicity on the South African media sphere should be seen in conjunction with persisting socio-economic legacies of apartheid such as illiteracy and lack of access to communications infrastructure, which also impact how the broader public can participate in the public sphere. In short, the impact of race, ethnicity, and class on the media landscape of post-apartheid South Africa should be seen not only in textual terms—how the racial Other of apartheid has been represented in the media—but as a structural problem with historic antecedents and contemporary policy implications.

### Contested Terrain: Tabloids and Society

Although this book takes only a snapshot of the new South African tabloids, it does so out of an interest in the wider picture of South African media and society. An investigation into the emergence and popularity of the tabloids, their relationship with society in the broader sense but with their readers in particular, the response they received from the professional collective of journalists, and their political significance provide us with a vantage point from which the broader media landscape in the country can be viewed. This landscape is a contested one in which local and global political, economic, and socio-cultural interests are increasingly mediated. This mediation does not, however, take place by means of a disinterested media that serves merely as a conduit for information. In the as-yet-incomplete transition to a democratic society, the media themselves have become important roleplayers and stakeholders, facilitating the re-orientation of these interests in relation to established and shifting centers of power. It might not be too implausible to consider the emergence of the tabloids themselves as directly linked to the country's democratization process, even as they might point toward the limits of liberation (Robins 2005) and complicate notions that are central to the democratic discourse in the country, such as citizenship, human rights, freedom of the press, and the media's social responsibility.

### Notes on Approach

Because the new tabloids and the controversies surrounding them are significant for post-apartheid South African media and society on different levels, it follows that a combination of approaches would be needed to study them. This book therefore aims to follow the varied approach to the study of South African tabloid media suggested by Steenveld (2006, 20)—namely, a combination of a textual exploration, a study of audience responses, and a critical political-economic approach that seeks to situate tabloids at the intersection of local and