The Grotesque Symposium of the Tabloid:
Reflections for Inclusive Democratic Systems
Sacha Knox

Using the case study of South Africa, this policy brief attempts to deconstruct essentialist understandings regarding what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ information through an analysis of this dichotomy in relation to broadsheet and tabloid newspapers respectively. This dichotomy is outlined as a socially constructed form of cultural relativism that speaks to a neo-colonial failure to negotiate between and within different worldviews. If the contemporary public sphere may be said to be largely constituted through the media, then this observation has potent implications for inclusion and exclusion within democratic systems – not only do claims of the superior ethics of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ within the ‘mainstream’ journalistic paradigm neglect the complexities of lived experience in terms of different ways of knowing, deliberating and communicating (a train of thought that harks back to colonialist ideologies and paternalistic attitudes, and their associations with enlightenment thinking) but they also do very little justice to continued day-to-day realities of inequality. This policy brief will locate the critique of South African tabloid newspapers as occurring primarily within the frame of a Habermasian deliberative democracy and point to the possibility for Bakhtin’s conceptions, particularly those of the carnival and the grotesque symposium, as alternative, and perhaps more appropriate, frames through which to view this form of media. Viewing tabloids in this way makes it possible to consider them as rich and vital articulations of mediated politics, citizenship and popular culture. This policy brief not only encourages policy makers to critically question that which may be taken for granted as ‘valid’ and ‘invalid’ sources of information, but also necessitates a reconsideration of what actually constitutes inclusive democratic spaces beyond disengaged and unrealised liberal ideals.

Key words: Tabloid, media, Habermas, Bakhtin, democracy

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Introduction

This policy brief begins with a subjective response to what is perceived as the false dichotomy of ‘truth’ and ‘trash’ prevalent in the landscape of South African journalistic practice, in relation to broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers respectively. This response places this dichotomy as a socially constructed form of cultural relativism that speaks to a failure to negotiate between and within the different worldviews that constitute the fabric of contemporary South Africa. This brief will then go on to establish the frame through which this binary opposition is constructed, namely that of Habermas’ conception of ‘deliberative democracy’ within the ‘public sphere’. Following this, the necessity of viewing tabloids through the frame of Bakhtin’s ‘carnival’ and the ‘grotesque symposium’ will be pointed to. It will be argued that this shift of frame is appropriate when taking into account the socio-economic and political realities of contemporary South African society and that it may, in fact, be essential in order to more fully move towards the social equity somewhat optimistically promised in South Africa’s transition to democracy, drawing particular implications for policy makers concerned with the creation of more equitable and inclusive democratic systems.

Complicating ‘Truth’ and ‘Trash’

If ‘truth’ and ‘trash’ are understood to be dichotomies, then tabloid newspapers are often articulated as embodiments of the latter extreme,1 pandering to the poorest of tastes. In the context of contemporary South Africa, ‘poor’ here not only refers to matters of aesthetic and ethical judgment; it can also refer more literally to the socio-economic status of those to whom such newspapers are primarily targeted.2 In a post-apartheid society which remains rife with poverty and where socioeconomic divides are still largely racialised divides (in other words, where social equity is still very much an unrealised ideal), recourse to such attitudes is perhaps essential, as this discourse subtly invokes homogenising conceptions of an inferior ‘other’, not only in terms of the tabloid newspapers themselves, but also in terms of those who consume them.3

South African tabloid newspapers are currently experiencing unprecedented popularity, with the Daily Sun, established in 2002, being the largest newspaper in the country with a regular readership of at least 3.8 million.4 According to Wasserman in an article titled, ‘Attack of the Killer Newspapers!’, this popularity of ink and paper constitutes a ‘newspaper revolution’ in the context of the newspaper industry elsewhere shuddering with fear of redundancy unless it can radically adapt to new technologies.5 Wasserman states with certainty, ‘the arrival of the new tabloid newspapers has changed the media landscape in post-apartheid South Africa irrevocably’.6 The problem is that if such essentialist perspectives as outlined at the onset are dominant, than it is not difficult to interpret the landscape of South Africa as somehow ‘going to the dogs’, an unfortunately popular lament for white, middle class, suburban South Africans,7 who often feel justified turning their noses up at the ‘trash’ of ‘Tokoloshe’8 tales now sprawling the isles of their local supermarkets. While this statement may contain its own elements of essentialism and homogenisation, it points to a strategy that I believe the tabloids themselves often employ, namely, sensationalism in order to speak to wider realities. For example, if not simply disregarded as ‘sensationalism’ the story of the ‘Tokoloshe’9 provided in this paper10 could be interpreted as speaking to wider realities within the lives of South African citizens, such as the ongoing negotiation between and within the non-dichotomous, simultaneous and complex positionalities or identities. Further analysis could also point to the wider reality of a sense of helplessness in the face of the prevalence of gender-based violence and perhaps even HIV/AIDS in contemporary South Africa.11

The point is that tabloid statements need to be located in the world and in lived experience – they are often a form of palimpsest, of layered meaning making, and as such should not necessarily be taken simply as ink on paper. While I may take issue with certain aspects of tabloid reporting (such as the prevalence of homophobic and xenophobic statements,12 as well as gender stereotyping),13 as a white, middle-class South African living in a post-apartheid South Africa there is something that strikes me as particularly arrogant about simply disregarding as ‘trash’14 such an immensely popular form of media, which often carries alternative (in relation to Western, Christian and, in South Africa, often white) worldviews. In other words, it is my feeling that there is something in the disregard for South African tabloid journalism accompanied by the constructed ethical superiority of South African broadsheets15 that speaks to a failure to negotiate and communicate between and within the varying worldviews that constitute the fabric of our country.
In the first place, tabloids are not in themselves a homogenous entity that can be lumped together for disapproval; they are far more complex and varied than the critique seems to allow. It is both this observation and my subjective response to the disregard of tabloids as ‘trash’ rather than ‘truth’ in the context of a post-apartheid South Africa that have provided the impetus for this policy brief. With a concern for ‘wider realities’, as stated earlier, and, therefore, situated contextual knowledge, this paper does not engage in textual analysis. Rather, in an attempt to deconstruct essentialist understandings, this paper will locate the critique of South African tabloid newspapers as occurring primarily within the frame of a Habermasian deliberative democracy and point to the possibility for Bakhitin’s conceptions, particularly those of the carnival and the grotesque symposium, as alternative, and perhaps more appropriate, frames through which to view this media within this context. Thus, South African tabloids will be placed within the socio-political context of post-apartheid South Africa in order to establish them as ‘complex cultural articulations of the often contradictory and shifting processes of transition taking place on various levels’ and as platforms for and products of ‘the complicated articulations of popular culture, mediated politics, and citizenship in a young democracy’. If this may be said to be the case, then ‘truth’ and ‘trash’ are not necessarily the dual oppositions that they are often constructed to be; rather, some ‘trash’ may be found in ‘truth’ and, indeed, some ‘truth’ in ‘trash’.

**Deliberatively Exclusionary?**

Habermas’ deliberative or dialogical democracy is based upon a conception of unrestricted rational and informed public debate, independent of the state apparatus, occurring within the public sphere. As members of our society do not necessarily literally gather in town squares to debate the issues of the day, in the dominant discourse the contemporary public sphere may be said to be constituted largely through the media. Thus, according to the dominant paradigm of ethical and responsible journalistic practice, debate should proceed along the following Habermasian lines, ‘according to universal standards of critical reason and argumentative structure that all could recognize and assent to’, without any appeal ‘to traditional dogmas, or to arbitrary subjective prejudices’. However, the actualisation of Habermas’ consensus or ‘discursive will formation’ through the medium of communicative reason within the public sphere has been criticised for masking a pervasive ‘will to power’ that threatens ‘irreducible value pluralism’. This is certainly pertinent for the heterodox and pluralistic nature of such spheres within South Africa and, arguably, for the nature of all such spheres. As Gardiner paraphrases Asen, “Habermas’ stress on a relatively monolithic, overarching public sphere characterised by specific regulative mechanisms for rational debate and consensus-building... actively ‘suppresses sociocultural diversity in constituting an arena inimical to difference’.” In Habermas’ attempt to establish both inclusive and universal formal criteria for communicative reason aimed at consensus building and in his attempts to surmount what he identified as the ‘constraints of a “subject-centered reason”,’ “Habermas fails to grasp adequately the significance of the embodied, situational and dialogical elements of everyday human life”.

To clarify for the purposes of this paper, if this is the normative framework for journalism in South Africa, the ‘Tokoloshe’ story referred to earlier would be disregarded as trash due to its ‘subject-centered reason’. The following critique given by Joan Alway is worth quoting at length as it is particularly germane to our discussion:

[Habermas espouses] a universalism that depends on a communicatively competent, but disembodied subject. Such a subject leaves us unable to acknowledge the important bodily dimensions of autonomy and self-realization; such a subject limits our ability to understand the ways in which domination and resistance have materialized in and around the bodies of... oppressed groups; and such a subject inhibits analysis of the concrete, lived and different experiences of embodied actors in their everyday or everynight worlds.

While the middle and upper classes of South Africa are more easily able to separate themselves from their bodies and their bodily functions through, for example, something as obtuse as highly sanitised flush toilet systems, a great deal of the population of this country are not able to entertain such an illusion. What this analogy points to is the fact that this removed perspective is often a luxury that flaunts a great deal of the realities of lived experience within this country. As Wasserman quotes Glynn, ‘The public (and private) demonstration of one’s capacity for detachment and distanciation... is among the primary practices through which the socially powerful...
create and display a sense of their own cultural superiority vis-à-vis the weak.29

**Questioning Neutrality in the Normative**

Not only do claims of the superior ethics of ‘objectivity’ and neutrality within the South African ‘mainstream’ journalistic paradigm30 neglect the complexities of lived experience in terms of different ways of knowing, deliberating and communicating (a train of thought that harks back to colonialist ideologies and paternalistic attitudes, and their associations with Enlightenment thinking)31 but they also do very little justice to the continued foul-smelling realities experienced in the day-to-day existence of a great deal of the South African population, some twenty years on from the first promises of equality delivered by the post-apartheid government.32 If the way in which this has been articulated seems somewhat ludicrous in the context of a policy paper, winks at low-brow humour have here been employed as a deliberate strategy in order to subvert the hegemony of the high-brow in the production of knowledge. It is the assertion of this paper that as much knowledge can be contained in such bawdy articulations as in the grammatically beautiful strings of complex words strung between ivory towers.33

What is particularly pertinent for the context of contemporary South Africa is not only that there remains an extremely high rate of illiteracy due to our particular history (and to our particular present) but that, within this context, there are also many different ways of knowing and many different knowledge systems that operate beyond the confines of the written word, as is embodied, for example in South Africa’s rich oral tradition. Bearing these realities in mind, the constructed foundations of ‘quality journalism’, ‘most often associated with textual rather than oral communication patterns (e.g. the use of colloquialisms); with rational debate rather than ritual’34 are clearly dubious.35 What has been established at even a cursory glance is that the Habermasian framework within which the critique of South African tabloids is often articulated36 is based upon an all-encompassing explanatory system that is not necessarily an appropriate ideal within which to frame the irreducible complexities of the South African context. As Haas and Steiner paraphrase Fraser, ‘a public sphere composed of multiple discursive domains’ is preferable, as ‘in socially stratified societies, “arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public”’.37

**Counter-Discourses as Ethics**

In contrast to the Habermasian frame, this paper asserts that the work of Bakhtin is perhaps more adequately suited to the task, as Bakhtin ‘develops what could be termed an “ethics of personalism”, which turns on an unequivocal acknowledgement of the value of otherness in the context of everyday sociality’.38 In other words, for Bakhtin, no genuinely moral philosophy can be formulated without an engaged and embodied or dialogical relation to the other.39 Thus, in contrast to Habermas, for Bakhtin, it is not necessary to ‘engulf the alterity of things in the unity of thought’ nor to retain ‘a sharp distinction between impartial reason on one hand and the embodied and “non-rational” features of human existence on the other’ but rather, ‘it is precisely such an attunement to the vicissitudes and rhythms of daily life that is the hallmark of genuine dialogue and the ethical moment’.40

Viewing tabloids through this frame allows for the possibility of their interpretation as ‘counter-discourses’ and ‘oppositional interpretations’41 of identities, interests and needs.42 This frame points to the fact that claims of neutrality are anything but neutral; rather, such claims ‘could leave journalism supporting the interests of dominant social groups over those of subordinate social groups’, and it is possible that such claims support the status quo ‘as much as does the conventional obsession with factual accuracy’.43 Furthermore, if there is any credence to the popular statement that ‘the personal is political’, South African tabloids, with their often subjective focus on the personal experiences of tabloid readers themselves,44 lend themselves to an interpretation through a more embodied frame in which the personal or the ‘private life world’ is not split off from the public ‘system world’.45 Bakhtin’s approach is also particularly appropriate as a frame for South African tabloids in terms of the conceptions of the ‘carnival’ and the ‘grotesque symposium’. For Bakhtin, the metaphorical ‘carnival square’ is a place where ‘dominant knowledge, a reflection of the “centre of discourse” of officialdom, is challenged by multiple voices’.46 As Meddaugh states, ‘carnival, and its primary agents parody and satire… legitimates communication practices and behaviors not sanctioned in official life’.47
Towards Alternative Public Spheres

As it has already been established that both the South African tabloids and, often, the citizens at whom they are targeted are in a number of ways excluded from ‘official life’ in terms of Habermas’ conception of the ‘public sphere’, the creation of an alternative public sphere could be said to be essential for the project of democracy in South Africa. Particularly germane is the observation that ‘through sensation and excess, popular texts like tabloids question the dominant social standards and point to the “excessive failure of the normal”... as such, tabloids can be read as having political impact, even if not in the form associated with the rational public sphere of official media.’

Returning to the carnival, Fletcher has suggested that this notion can include ‘all cultural situations where the authority of a single language and authority is called into question, notably by the simultaneous co-presence of other languages which can challenge it’.

Within the carnival, Bakhtin calls for a ‘grotesque symposium’ that ‘breaks down fixed and hierarchical distinctions’ such as those made by Habermas, which Bakhtin identifies as complicit with ‘the desire to control the power to mean, to limit the semantic flux of the sign’.

Essentially, the concept of the ‘grotesque symposium’ asserts that it is crucial for a primordial heteroglossia to ‘wash over a culture’s awareness of itself and its language, penetrate it to the core, relativise the primary language system underlying [the] ideology [of a unified language] and deprive it of its naïve absence of conflict’.

If South African tabloids are examined through this frame, then it becomes clear that ‘the typical irreverent tabloid approach can do more than satirise and undermine’, tabloids can, as a part of popular culture in a post-apartheid society, ‘force us to redefine our understanding of the public sphere and indeed of politics itself’.

In other words, to seriously engage with the realm of popular culture 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 it is about who we are, and what we, all of us, want to make of the world we live in’.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be stated that this paper has not necessarily sought to deify the South African tabloid. As was established earlier, this particular form of media often employs homophobic and xenophobic statements and in terms of both text and imagery often perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes. However, what this paper has attempted to establish is that the critique of tabloid newspapers often occurs within a framework that provides what Wasserman refers to as a form of ‘paradigm repair’ for the journalistic orthodoxy, where the tabloid becomes the ‘scapegoat’.

This points to the fact that the ‘critical debate around tabloids has been focused largely on getting tabloids to conform’, using that critique ‘more to re-establish the existing professional boundaries of journalism in the country rather than to examine the journalistic culture in the country more broadly’.

What this paper has tried to establish is that the ‘grotesque symposium’ offered by the tabloids is perhaps a necessary one in light of the socio-economic and political context of a post-apartheid South Africa, and in light of the plurality of worldviews that constitutes the fabric of this country.

As Fordred-Green quotes Foucault and asserts with regard to the cultural politics of South African journalism, ‘the challenge for a non-racial South African journalism is “not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth already is power), but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.”’

The observations of this paper carry weighty implications for policy makers not only because they encourage policy makers to critically question what they take for granted to be ‘valid’ and ‘invalid’ sources of information, but also because they necessitate a reconsideration of what actually constitutes democratic spaces beyond intangible and unrealised liberal ideals. Through the case study of South Africa, this policy brief has highlighted that tabloids are potentially rich and vital sources of information for policy makers concerned with the creation of more equitable and inclusive democratic systems.

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By SIBONISO SHOZI

UNHAPPY Bhekeknya no long­
er lets his wife sleep in the bed
with him.

That is because a small, hairy toko­
oshe, with a beard, who is only about
a metre high, is threatening to tear
their relationship apart.

AND IN THE MARRIAGE BED
OF BHEEKHKHAYA AND DELIN­
ILE, THERE IS VERY LITTLE
HAPPINESS.

When trouble first started coming to
their house, Delisile Mthembu (44) and
Bhekeknya Meyiwa (60) from Khlwane,
south of Durban, thought they would fight
this thing together.

But the little tokoloshe had other ideas.
“Whenever I sleep in the bed with my
husband, the tokoloshe drags me off the
bed,” said Delisile.

Delisile Mthembu and her
husband Bhekeknya Meyiwa
say they were attacked by a
tokoloshe.
Photo by Abraham Kortjaas
ANC RACE READY TO START

Conference to discuss key policies for the ruling party

By Simon Nare

THE battle for the soul of the ANC is about to begin.

On Tuesday the party will gather to discuss 13 key policies.

In a discussion document, the party admits it faces a “crisis of credibility and must use the upcoming elective conference in Mangaung as a turning point or it will soon, “reach a stage where it is irreversible.”

Three main weaknesses identified are:

- The decay of the ANC’s values.
- In-fighting and national capabilities that don’t match demands of the current phase of the revolution.
- Discussion around the “Second Transition” and proposed entry to the second phase of democracy is also expected to take centre stage, where focus will be on social and economic transformation over the next 30 to 50 years.

On the land issue, there has been a general consensus that the “selling seller-willing buyer” system has failed.

The party said land dispossession produced negative consequences and consigned the majority to the most unproductive land.

This resulted in land ownership biased in favour of a minority racial group and dislocation of the social and economic systems of the majority.

“The clear purpose of both redistribution and restitution will be to continue offering the landless access to land for residential and productive uses, in order to improve their income and quality of life,” the document states.

The conference is expected to focus on social grants, currently benefiting over 15 million South Africans which the government says is not sustainable.

President Zuma has called for initiatives that would reduce the number of people dependent on state grants.

The document proposes ways to deal with what the ANC has described as triple challenges of unemployment, inequality and poverty.

By Delilah Godfrey

Bishop’s holy water fails to keep tokoloshe away

Chairwoman from page 1

“I wake up in the middle of the night on the cold floor.”

Now the poor woman sleeps on a mattress on the floor and they are worried that the tokoloshe might still rape her.

She said that her ordeal started as long ago as February and it became so bad that last month they got a bishop to come to their house.

He prayed and sprinkled the house with holy water, but that only made things worse, she said.

“That same night the tokoloshe was back. He was very angry and told me that he wasn’t scared of water from a tap.”

Bhekekhaya said that at first the tokoloshe attacked him.

“Then later he moved on to my wife,” he said.

“I work night shift many nights and who can tell if he wants to sleep with my wife or not?”

He said he knew when the tokoloshe is boring his wife.

“She starts to breathe heavily. She snore and makes horrible noises,” he said.

“And many times I immediately get very tired and fall asleep as if I have been drugged.”

He said they pray all the time.

“But this thing keeps coming back,” he said.

Delissie said the tokoloshe told her that there are families in the area who are against them.

“We don’t really know them. I don’t know what they would have against us because we have never had a problem with them,” said Delissie.

Induna S*qme Mhizin said it is often difficult to help with these matters.

“I have been warned to stay away,” he said.

“I went there to get the families to talk but when I went to the family who is supposed to be sending the tokoloshe they told me they would set their dogs on me.”

A well-known and respected traditional healer, Saidhloko, said the family must visit a traditional healer who will be able to reflect on the matter.

“The family will get their lives together again,” he said.

By Delilah Godfrey
AISA is a statutory research body focusing on contemporary African affairs in its research, publications, library and documentation. AISA is dedicated to knowledge production, education, training and the promotion of awareness on Africa, for Africans and the international community. This is achieved through independent policy analysis, and the collection, processing and interpretation, and dissemination of information.