

Original Research Article

## Perception Towards Tabloidization: A Case of B-Metro Tabloid in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perceptions of audiences towards the B-metro tabloid in Bulawayo, the second largest city of Zimbabwe. The paper reports the results of a qualitative research that was undertaken to examine different ways in which people receive the tabloid at audience level. The sample was drawn from various sections of population in the community of Bulawayo. Groups such as church members, parents, the employed, unemployed as well as students were included in the study. The inclusion of these groups was necessitated by the fact that different sections of audiences are affected by media content in different ways. Data was collected using the interviews and focus group discussions. The research revealed that the reception of B-metro tabloid varies from individual to individual. It came out that the social status of individuals shapes their perceptions of the tabloid. The church members view B-metro in a different way from the non-Christians. School children have their own perceptions of the tabloid which are different from their parents. Complaints were also raised against the content of the tabloid. Some members of the community tend to shun it. There is a general feeling among members of the society that stories covered are not true or are over-exaggerated by the tabloid. The paper also points out that tabloid journalism is questionable among the Bulawayo audience. The research recommended that B-metro must incorporate community development ideas in its content. This will reduce its trivialization by part of audience and attract more readers who currently read serious news in mainstream media only. Awareness campaigns be conducted such that people are taught about the differences between mainstream media mandate versus the mandate of the tabloid in a society.

### Background of the Study

This research was motivated by the fact that *B-Metro* offers a totally different content from other popular newspapers in Bulawayo. Also, the *B-Metro* was only established in 2010 many decades after the audiences had been reading mainstream news only. This meant that newspaper audiences will have various perceptions of the tabloid. Having been exposed to serious news only for so many years, audiences might have different feelings when reading a tabloid. The type of stories that are covered and style of writing is unique to the tabloid. Readers are presented with news that they can rarely get from any local newspaper. *B-Metro* covers a range of issues including sex scandals, love scandals, witchcraft cases, prostitution cases among other scandalous activities that are done by people in different communities. This is done with the aim of entertaining and educating the society about the good and the wrong ways of living. This is expected to transform the social lives of the audience and make them better. The *B-Metro* also focuses on conflicts that are at the level of inter-family and intra-family. In the process, *B-Metro* is given various meanings by different sections of its audiences.

As a tabloid, *B-Metro* covers mainly human-interest stories. This goes in line with the view of several scholars. Franklin et al (2005, 259) argue that "Tabloid journalism conjoins the sentimental and the sensational, and the prurient and the populist, often exploiting personal tragedy for public spectacle with scandal and sensationalism, often masquerading as "human

interest.” Like other tabloids globally, *B-Metro* covers issues about lifestyles of celebrities and top individuals who are role models in society. The implication here is that by revealing the lifestyles of the celebrities and different individuals in society, tabloids impart certain ideas in a society. This makes them have a certain reception that might be unique to them in the market. *B-Metro* tabloid is locally accessed from vendors alongside mainstream newspapers such as *The Chronicle*, *The Sunday News*, *Newsday*, *The Daily News*, *The Sunday Mail* and *Umthunywa*. However, *B-Metro* remains a common tabloid newspaper in Bulawayo because of its unique content. The tabloid is displayed in most corners of the streets of Bulawayo in the city centre and suburbs. It is also found in online platforms that include facebook for easy access by the audiences.

### Problem Statement

Given the competing perspectives about tabloidization and the role of tabloids in a society, there is no clear understanding on the reception and perceptions of tabloids at the societal level. Thus, scholars such as Gripsrud (2000) argue that tabloidization involves the dumbing down of journalism values and the roles of media in a society. On the other hand, scholars such as Schudson (1978) hold the view that tabloids are an alternative public sphere. Tabloids in this view are giving voice to the previously downtrodden sections of people in society. Considering these competing perspectives, the reception and perceptions of audience towards *B-Metro* might vary at the level of audience and one needs to carry out a research to identify this. This paper interrogates how audiences, at a socio-historical and cultural context, construct meanings about *B-Metro* tabloid.

### Perceptions towards tabloids

Globally there are mixed feelings concerning the position and role of tabloids in the society. Some scholars support the idea of tabloidization as a new approach that is meant to democratize the media space. However, other schools of thought dismiss this view. Norris (2000) says that tabloidization is a murky and often confused phrase, often bandied about for anything people disapprove of in the news media, which shares three distinct meanings. According to Norris (2000) the term ‘tabloid’ can refer most simply to the production format of the newspaper, designed to be physically smaller and more manageable than broadsheet papers. The second meaning of tabloid, according to Norris (2000) concerns the style of journalism, referring to an emphasis on simple and concrete language, light, bright and vivid writing, shorter stories, and extensive use of photographs and graphics. Norris (2000) argues that tabloid content is characterized by scandals of celebrities, entertainment stories, sexual shenanigans, crime, sports, and lurid ‘victim’ or disaster stories. This research sought to qualify Norris’s ideas in the context of Bulawayo in Zimbabwe.

The paper examines the perceptions of the audience towards *B-Metro* guided by the views of previous scholars. For example, Conboy (2006) contends that tabloids are characterized by a reflection of colloquial speech patterns, a melodramatic style, sympathy for the underdog in society and siding with the people against the powerful. Conboy’s view is that tabloids offer an alternative public sphere. For Conboy (2006) tabloids carry voices of the poor and downtrodden sections of population in the society. This research studied various sections of population in society to identify their opinions. In line with Conboy (2006) ’s views, this paper reveals the perceptions of the audiences, especially the poor, pointing out whether their views have found space in the tabloid or not. More so, the paper examines the feelings of the *B-Metro* audiences following the rise of tabloid newspaper joining mainstream media in Zimbabwe.

This research has also been motivated by the findings of Johansson (2007) ’s research on the perceptions of the *Mirror* and *Sun*. Johansson (2007) revealed that the readers have their positions in the national newspaper market, distinguished both from the ‘quality’ press and mid-market tabloids. For Johansson, the readers felt that the *Sun* and the *Mirror* differed greatly from the broadsheets, described by one *Sun*-reader as ‘for business-class people,’ (Johansson 2007:122). Her research noted that even mid-market tabloids like *The Daily Mail*, likewise, were seen as more ‘newsy’, more demanding to read and more rigid in their views, whereas *The Daily Star* and *The Daily Sport* were regarded the least serious in their reporting, described as ‘made up’ and ‘stupid’, (Johansson 2007:123).

Negative perceptions towards tabloidization also came from Johansson’s findings. Johansson (2007) pointed out that *The Sun* and *The Mirror* were portrayed as of poor journalistic standards, evident in overt put-downs of these as ‘crappy papers’ and ‘rubbish’. Johansson (2007:122) further argues that *The Sun* or the *Mirror* were mainly linked to disregarded areas of popular culture, such as gossip magazines and cartoons. This implies that society ignored the role played by the tabloids and are viewed as trash.

On the other hand, Johansson's research also brought out audiences' mixed feelings. Thus, the findings of Johansson portray a hybrid society that has various uses and gratifications of the media. Johansson's (2007) study covered various age groups and came out with different perceptions. For example, Johansson (2007) says that the youngest readers openly exclaimed affinity to their preferred tabloid, using words such as 'exciting' to describe it and making positive comparisons to other papers. For instance, in depicting *The Sun* as 'the best paper out of all of them' or *The Mirror* as 'much better than the other papers'. Johansson (2007) states that one reader explained how the *Sun* made him feel 'warm'. Her research revealed that older readers of the tabloid were more guarded. Likewise, readers in white-collar positions admitted to reading the tabloid but denounced it for not being 'proper' newspapers, (Johansson, 2007). What this implies is that all age groups read the tabloid and will give various perceptions towards it.

### **Tabloids are an alternative public sphere**

Tabloids play various fundamental roles in any society. They inform people, they educate them, and they also represent the voiceless. Wasserman (2010,14) argues that "In South Africa, the tabloids have contributed to a stronger presence in the mediated public sphere of people who historically were disenfranchised politically and continue to be marginalized socially and economically in post- apartheid society." Also, Glynn (2000) argues that tabloids express the social presence of those who are subordinated, mainly on the grounds of race, economic or social capital, and geographic region. This implies that different classes of people in society are affected in various ways by the tabloids. Therefore, they are likely to construct different meanings about the tabloid. This research was carried out to find out the perceptions and meanings given to the tabloid in the community. The paper revealed classes of people who read the tabloid and those that shun it.

This paper explores the various interpretations given to *B-Metro* by its readers. The paper used perspectives of scholars like Wasserman (2010) to find out the real feelings of audiences about tabloidization in Zimbabwe. For Wasserman (2010), tabloids give voices to those groups of people that were previously suppressed by the mainstream media. Wasserman (2010) notes that in the case of South Africa, for the first time since the end of apartheid, the poor majority of South Africans are now represented from a perspective they recognized as familiar and that addressed them on their terms. This implies that with the rise of tabloids the media has been taken to even the poor people that were not covered before. Considering these views, this paper explored the perceptions of *B-Metro* audiences to find out if what was found by previous researchers in different parts of the world is applicable to *B-Metro* audiences in Zimbabwe or not.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper employed the use of qualitative research approach. Samples were drawn from various groups of people in Bulawayo. The church members, the employed, unemployed, parents as well as students were sampled. Qualitative data collection instruments that include focus group discussions and interviews were used to gather data for this paper.

### **Findings**

The paper affirms to the findings of research carried by previous scholars such as Johansson (2007). It came out that *B-metro* is received differently by the audiences. The students, members of the church, those that are unemployed and the employed have different views about the *B-metro* tabloid. *B-metro* is seen as a voice of the voiceless. There are people in Bulawayo who were not given space in the country's mainstream media such as the ZBC, *The Chronicle* and *Sunday News*. Their content has always been viewed as trivial by the formal media channels that mainly focus on politics and business. *B-metro* has offered space to issues that happen at grass root level. For example, marital conflicts, issues to do with gossips in households. These were previously not covered before the rise of the tabloid. The audience felt that *B-metro* gives them secrets that occur at community level where they stay. It came out that this is more important news for the people because it involves people they know. Unlike national issues covered by ZBC and mainstream newspapers. This goes in line with the views of scholars such as Schudson (1978) who asserts that tabloids are a 'voice of the voiceless'. This has a reference to the fact that the people who are not given space or heard in mainstream media are covered in the tabloids. This argument is supported by Johansson (2007) who contends that tabloid journalism has been liberating in some contexts, through making news accessible to a larger number of people.

*B-metro* tabloid offers a new type of public sphere in Zimbabwe. The issues such as witchcraft cases, prostitution and love scandals that were not covered by the mainstream media are now documented and published. People now read about issues that were previously viewed as taboo to be seen in the media. As such, Bulawayo now enjoys a new type of public sphere where people can deliberate on issues of witchcraft and scandals. By publishing such issues *B-metro* set the agenda for people to deliberate about in the public sphere. This paper emphasises that *B-metro* has ushered in a new public sphere in

Zimbabwe, a country where issues of gossip and witchcraft was not given value or worth debating about in the public domain.

The paper highlights that tabloid audiences enjoy reading it more than the mainstream newspapers. There is a general feeling that *B-metro* covers issues in a deeper level as compared to *The Chronicle*, a Bulawayo mainstream daily publication. They enjoy the quality of stories published. Their detail and pictures given. Pictures are in colour, something which the audience viewed as modern.

This paper also emphasizes that tabloids in Zimbabwe and world over may have larger audiences than what any audience analysis research can prove. There is a section of the audience that read *B-metro* but does not want to associate themselves with it. The case is like that of pornography in which many people watch it in their private rooms and no one can tell whether they watch it or not. This is because our society in Zimbabwe viewed as taboo to publicise sex scandals and witchcraft cases. Therefore, many people in Zimbabwean culture are Christians. They do not believe in witchcraft. Whoever talks much about witchcraft or shows keen interests in those stories is quickly associated with satanism by the society. As a result, when people read about such matters they do so privately. Many people in Zimbabwe believe that witchcraft exists but their beliefs are kept as secrets to themselves because they fear that their church pastors might punish them if they discover that they believe in witchcraft.

The paper highlights that even prominent people in Bulawayo read the tabloid. Even businessman read it. However, whenever some prominent people read the tabloid, they do not want to be seen. They fear that their customers might conclude that they like gossips as most people in the city associate the tabloid with gossips. The fact that it covers bedroom issues and witchcraft cases made people to label it a false newspaper of gossips. They support this perspective by arguing that whenever a bedroom scandal happens, the journalists will not be present to capture the story. The same applies to issues of witchcraft which many people in Zimbabwe believe happen at night when everyone is not seeing. This implies that there is a section of audience that are critics of tabloidization in Zimbabwe. Their major perspective revolves around gathering of news that are private.

The church people raised negative perceptions towards the tabloid. They do not like the type of pictures that are published. They described the pictures as nude. This is against the culture of Zimbabwe. Whenever an event occurs the tabloid captures pictures as they are. Even the prostitutes parading in town have had their pictures published while in their half-naked regalia. Such pictures are not liked by the parents and church people. They felt it will spread a wrong perception to the young girls and make them end up thinking that prostitution is a good profession, despite its risks. Considering this perspective, the paper emphasizes the view of Norris (2000) who noted earlier that tabloids are dumbing down the values of good journalism. What it means is that there are mixed feelings even in society of Bulawayo. There is a section of audience that have positive comments about the tabloid and there is another section that have negative perceptions towards *B-metro*.

The paper stresses that *B-metro* is being trivialised by the audiences largely due to its exclusion of serious matters such as politics. The larger part of the audiences indicated that they buy newspapers every day in order to read about political matters. Zimbabwe is facing a serious economic crisis but many people in the country believe that it is not an economic crisis but a political crisis. They look for political updates daily hoping that political changes might happen, and the long waited economic improvement will follow. As such *B-metro* does not cover politics. This short-changes the audiences and make them shun it.

## Conclusion

Tabloids in Zimbabwe are perceived negatively by most readers. The major reason behind this is the fact that the nation has had mainstream media operating alone for a long time. When tabloids were finally introduced, Zimbabweans were not taught about their history and role in the media industry. This research revealed that most readers expect *B-Metro* tabloid to have content like mainstream media. They regard it as a newspaper like others and are not able to differentiate the mandate of tabloids from other types of newspapers. As a result, there are negative perceptions towards tabloidization in Zimbabwe.

## Recommendations

- a. This paper recommends that the people of Bulawayo be educated about the differences between tabloids and mainstream media. Once people understand the differences then their negative perceptions towards B-Metro will change.
- b. New tabloids should be introduced so that the wider community of Zimbabwe access them and this will broaden the understanding of the generality of the population.
- c. The paper recommends that the use of figurative language, humour and hyperbole among other forms should continue dominating in the *B-metro* as these appeal to its larger part of the market.
- d. There must be awareness campaigns in which the readers are educated about cultural diversity as well beliefs which exist in their society. Emphasis needs to be put on the understanding of the heterogeneity of the society. Once people learn their differences it will be easy for them to embrace stories that come from people of diverse cultures. Also, it will be easy to understand the diversity of rituals that multicultural societies of today are characterized of.
- e. *B-Metro* must incorporate an element of community development in its news coverage. It must not only dramatize the lives of people while not giving any solutions to the predicament of the people. It is expected that if tabloid journalism gives solutions to life challenges it will be embraced by many people.

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