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**An investigation into the popularity of the Zimbabwean tabloid newspaper,
uMthunywa: A reception study of Bulawayo readers.**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
Journalism and Media Studies**

RHODES UNIVERSITY

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May 2006

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For my parents Smart and Judith Mabweazara:
I will always cherish your inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis was completed thanks to the academic and personal generosity of a number of people. I wish to particularly thank my supervisor, Professor Larry Strelitz, for his patience and dedicated effort in providing the intellectual guidance and support that saw the writing of this thesis come to an end.

Further gratitude goes to the following members of the Rhodes University Journalism School, who made me realise the pleasures of intellectual inquiry (perhaps without realising it themselves): Professor Jeanne Prinsloo, for making the thesis writing process lighter through her motherly advice and encouragement, and for particularly encouraging me to apply for the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC) thesis scholarship whose support enabled me to spend time at Rhodes as I did my research; Professor Guy Berger, for the provision of material and stimulating discussions at the formative stages of my research; Lynette Steenveld, for the inspiration and advice at the onset of my studies – you were right, “it can never be an MA by attendance.”

My gratitude also goes to my classmate, Hugh Ellis, for the company as the thesis writing struggle began. I am also greatly indebted to my colleagues in Journalism at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST): Stanford Matenda and Cleophas Muneri for the continual sharpening of my perceptions through discussions and informed criticisms of my work. We have indeed worked together collectively and creatively – thanks for allowing me to overstretch your indulgence by ‘giving me’ time to write as you took an extra burden of work. Many thanks also go to Elinor Burkett for proofreading sections of the dissertation.

On a personal level, I wish to express my most heartfelt gratitude to my family, who made many sacrifices, often unacknowledged by me.

ABSTRACT

The development of the tabloid press has stirred heated debate among media scholars. Critics have argued against the relevance of tabloids in society, often framing them as the ‘journalistic other’ deserving no place in ‘serious’ journalism. Much of this criticism, however, has not been based on a close interrogation of the phenomenon, or an examination of the reasons for their popularity amongst readers. It is against this background that this study investigates the reasons behind the popularity of the Zimbabwean state-controlled tabloid newspaper *uMthunywa*, among its Bulawayo readers. In particular, it explores the meanings obtained from the content of the paper and the relevance of this content to the readers’ everyday lives. In undertaking this investigation, the study draws primarily on qualitative research methods, particularly qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews (both group and individual). As the study demonstrates, these methods uncover the complex manner in which Bulawayo readers are attracted to *uMthunywa* and how they appropriate its textual meanings to their lived realities. The study establishes that despite *uMthunywa* being state-controlled, it offers space through which the conventional ways of presenting reality are challenged, and the importance of the newspaper being written in isiNdebele. As the study indicates, the popularity of the newspaper is largely dependent on its excessive formulaic and sensational stories, which cover issues experienced by its readers in their lived circumstances. The study thus argues that the newspaper constitutes an alternative mediated public sphere that finds space in the deeper social conditions that have alienated the people of Bulawayo from the macro-political life of the nation and the ‘power bloc’.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I want to know more about those instances when the people make relevant connections between the immediate conditions of everyday life and the larger structures which determine those conditions and about what sort of information encourages or enables this. I am interested in the possible points of intersection between information about events at the macro-structural level of organised political life and the information that the people desire in order to extend their control over the conditions of their lives within that macro-political order. (Fiske 1992: 61)

This study is an investigation into the popularity of the Zimbabwean vernacular (isiNdebele) tabloid newspaper, *uMthunywa* among its Bulawayo readers, who account for about three quarters of its total readership. It broadly seeks to interrogate the very meanings readers amass from the content of the newspaper and how these interface with their everyday lived circumstances. This aim ties closely with the fact that the socio-political and economic history of Bulawayo Metropolitan Province – located in a predominantly Ndebele region – has over the years been defined by marked deprivation and marginalisation by the ‘power bloc’. ‘Power bloc’ in this case, refers to an alliance of forces of domination exerting social power along a number of relatively congruent lines of force, expressed in institutions such as government, politics and the media (see Fiske 1992: 45). Particular consideration is also given to the role played by the vernacular language of the paper in stirring the audience’s preferences and pleasures, and the possibility of the paper providing an alternative arena for public discourse. Against the backdrop of radical criticisms leveled against tabloids, this chapter provides a general and personal background to the study and highlights the objectives of the study. It presents the theoretical and methodological framework pertinent to the study and the significance of the study. The chapter also outlines the general structure of the thesis.

1. General background to the study: A personal note

I was drawn to this study as a result of a few personal experiences and observations of the growing readership of *uMthunywa*, a weekly vernacular (isiNdebele) tabloid newspaper published under the state-controlled Zimbabwe Newspapers stable in Bulawayo. In its current form, the paper has gained popularity in the three Ndebele speaking provinces of Zimbabwe: Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South and Bulawayo Metropolitan Province,

where it is based. The growing readership of the paper has become obvious in the streets, taxis, pubs and offices.

As the paper established itself, news circulated that its staffers had survived a beating by two prominent footballers for stories that exposed their personal lives to the public. In the following months, a woman reportedly sued the paper for publishing her picture (unbeknown to her) as she crossed a busy road in the city centre pushing a trolley laden with bread (a scarce commodity at the time), with a caption ‘Greedy woman hoards bread.’ These incidents cultivated in me a personal and conscious desire to observe and listen to responses and comments by the readers of the paper, in an effort to understand their interest in this publication.

As this interest in *uMthunywa* grew, it became a habit for me to observe and listen to comments made by its readers in taxis, pubs, and other public places. One incident of note occurred at a filling station in one of Bulawayo’s old townships, Tshabalala: a Shona-speaking young man bought a copy of *uMthunywa*, apparently attracted by the headline, ‘Man dances in pub and collapses to death’, although he could not properly read isiNdebele. In a conversation with his friend, he revealed that he was going to ask his nephew to read the story for him so he could find out exactly what had happened to the man who collapsed. Of apparent note in this incident was the fact that the young man was Shona speaking and could not properly read isiNdebele, yet he took pleasure in the content of an entirely isiNdebele paper.

In yet another incident, a group of taxi conductors and drivers, in the city of Bulawayo, huddled against a taxi laughing and jeering as they read a story in *uMthunywa*. What fascinated them was a letter to the editor entitled, ‘We beg for cleanliness amongst taxi conductors’. They were actually laughing at each other, calling each other names on the basis of the letter.

In due course, as the stories of the paper became the talk of the town, it also became apparent to me that the readership of *uMthunywa* cut across social classes, although it reached mainly an audience in the high-density suburbs, and those in the lower echelons of administration and government – segments of society that feel drawn to oral and traditional culture.

These personal observations nurtured in me a number of questions: were all these people reading *uMthunywa* for entertainment, treating it like a fictional novel or did they actually believe its content? What kind of journalism was this and what mark would it leave on journalistic integrity? After a friend jokingly suggested that if I couldn't find a job at a 'real' newspaper, I could always work for a tabloid like *uMthunywa*, I wondered whether or not he was insinuating that *uMthunywa* is not a 'real' newspaper?

These experiences and emerging questions constituted the formative stages of this study. They crystallised and gathered focus with the debates on 'tabloidisation' in the South African press that I encountered during the course of my Master of Arts studies at Rhodes University, particularly with the rising popularity of the *Daily Sun*, a South African tabloid newspaper. The debates that emerged among practicing journalists and academics were marked by polarity between critics and supporters of tabloid journalism. The critics strongly believed that the tabloid press was ruining the credibility of legitimate journalistic practice, and that both readers and writers of tabloids were of less intellect than readers and writers of 'serious' journalism. Professor Guy Berger of Rhodes University took a clearly negative stance against tabloids, arguing thus: "[T]hey look like newspapers, they feel like newspapers, they even leave ink on your fingertips. But they're not really newspapers" (cited in Strelitz & Steenveld 2006). On the other hand, those in support of tabloids (chief among them, tabloid journalists) proffered *inter alia* that tabloids had rekindled a relationship with communities that the mainstream media had lost, by providing an alternative arena for the coverage of community issues which resonate with relevant popular entertainment.

It is perhaps important to point out that the study also largely found root in my personal socio-cultural, class and ethnic identity, an identity that finds space in the working-class and township culture, and yet shares some semblance of the elite-class identity afforded by university education and formal employment at the country's second largest university, the National University of Science and Technology (NUST). My ethnic identity is also of particular importance, as it cuts across two major ethnic groups in Zimbabwe (the Shona and the Ndebele) – being Shona by birth and Ndebele by socialisation (education and upbringing in Matabeleland). This identity has afforded me an opportunity not only to be part of, but also to deeply understand, the diverse lived-cultures characteristic of the environment within which *uMthunywa* is read. It is an identity that has equipped me with the oral competencies

key in understanding the immediate conditions of the readers' social history, which is necessary for understanding the reading and popularity of *uMthunywa*.

These personal experiences and observations, oscillating between Zimbabwe and South Africa, are the backdrop to the conception of this study. They sharpened my quest to find out why *uMthunywa*, as a tabloid, has found such a wide readership amongst Bulawayo readers. This is particularly important in light of the socio-political history of Matabeleland at large and Bulawayo in particular, a region characterised by long-standing material deprivation and political marginalisation by the 'power bloc.' Furthermore, *uMthunywa* 're-emerged' at a time when Zimbabweans in general were depressed by the state of affairs in the country owing to the alleged failures by the incumbent government. This has been largely manifest through the popularity of the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in most cities like Bulawayo. In support of this scenario, Ornebring and Jonsson (2004: 294) argue that the most important political problem facing us in the 21st century is that large groups of disenfranchised people do not feel that traditional political institutions or the prestige news and media outlets address their issues and concerns. This oppositional perception to government and its institutions is also manifest in the general decline in the circulation of Zimpapers' major papers.

1.1 Objectives of the study

Against this background, this study broadly seeks to investigate the very reasons behind the rising popularity of the tabloid *uMthunywa* in terms of the meanings its readers obtain from the paper as part of their everyday socio-cultural context and lived circumstances. In keeping with reception theory, the study makes a comparative analysis of 'audience data' and 'content data' in order to examine the processes of reception that have a bearing on the use of the content of the newspaper. It further explores the attractions and uses of *uMthunywa* in terms of the value of its content to the audience's everyday life ('cultural capital'). It is these experiences, the lived materiality of their lives, which they bring into their consumption of the newspaper, which also helps explain their preferences and pleasures (Morley in O'Sullivan et al. 1994:169). The study also explores how the pleasures of reading *uMthunywa* are related to its use of a vernacular language for its editorial content, and the possibility of it providing an alternative arena for public discourses (see Ornebring &

Jonsson 2004: 283). Given that *uMthunywa* is predominantly popular in a province whose socio-political history is defined by deprivation and marginalisation by the ‘power bloc’, it is also deemed imperative to interrogate the paradox of its popularity *vis a vis* the view that “news traditionally is produced by the power-bloc whereas popularity is a product of the people” (Fiske 1992: 45). The study thus seeks to unearth those instances where the readers of *uMthunywa* make relevant connections between the immediate conditions of their everyday lives and the larger structures that determine those conditions and the sorts of textual content which encourages or enables this (see Fiske 1992: 61).

In pursuit of these objectives the study draws its analysis from two critical theoretical and methodological frameworks: Jürgen Habermas’ conception of the role of the media in democracy (public sphere theory), illustrating how tabloid journalism is at the fore-front in changing forms of public discourse; and reception analysis, which is concerned with the ways in which people interpret and make sense of media texts within their socio-cultural and historical circumstances (see Ang 1990: 158; Algan 2003: 26; Lindloff 1991: 25; Pitout 1998: 65 and Moores 1993: 33).

1.2 Significance of the study

Tabloid newspapers are often depicted as epitomising bad journalism and hence confined to the media of ‘low-brow’ consumers. In fact, more often than not, most tabloid critics (see Guy Berger cited above) criticise the tabloids without interrogating the phenomenon or the reasons behind their popularity. In effect, little research has been done on what role these papers play in the lives of their readers, which must go some way to accounting for their popularity – Salwen and Anderson (cited in Bird 1992: 109), for example, conclude that all readers use tabloids for ‘entertainment’, a very predictable conclusion that says nothing about what ‘entertainment’ actually is or how that entertainment fits into readers’ lives. This study, therefore, seeks to compensate for this gap through contributing to the ongoing debate about ‘tabloidisation’ and tabloid journalism. It attempts to show how an understanding of the consumption of tabloid news can complement as well as challenge theories of the role of tabloid journalism in society. By giving focus to the reception of tabloid newspapers within a particular socio-cultural context, one is able to see the complex process of meaning construction made by readers as a response to tabloid media content.

It is important to point out that the researcher was quite mindful of the fact that the sample of audiences for the study did not represent the full range of readers of *uMthunywa* in Bulawayo, and hence liable to raise issues of the generalisability of the study to the entire population of *uMthunywa* readers in Bulawayo. However, in line with the position taken by qualitative researchers, the critical issue in this study is the generalisability of the isolated cases to theoretical propositions, rather than to populations (see Hansen et. al. 1998: 242; Lindloff 1995: 23 and Maxwell 1992: 293).

1.3 Thesis outline

The thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 presents a general background of the study. It highlights the research objectives and its significance and provides an outline of the thesis as a whole.

Chapter 2 discusses the context within which *uMthunywa* is produced, transmitted and received. The chapter discusses first, the broader context of the Zimbabwean press (both private and state controlled), thus providing the backdrop against which *uMthunywa* emerged as a tabloid newspaper. Secondly, it discusses the main features of the socio-political background of Bulawayo – the context of reception of *uMthunywa* in the scope of this study.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the theoretical considerations and scholarly opinions underpinning the study. The chapter defines and historicises tabloid journalism and makes an attempt at reviewing critical theoretical views and perspectives that have emerged among media scholars in trying to understand the function and popularity of tabloids in society. In this light, it discusses the Habermasian (1989) concept of the public sphere with a view of exploring views on whether popular tabloids constitute a viable framework for the formation of public opinion concerning issues of the moment.

Chapter 4 situates the study within its methodological framework – reception analysis – it therefore discusses the main research traditions, examining the nexus between media and audiences. The chapter reviews literature relating to key theoretical paradigms as research shifted from a preoccupation with *effects* to an increasing recognition of the ‘active audience’ emerging with the *Uses and Gratifications* theory, and developments rooted in *Cultural Studies* emphasising textual negotiation by readers situated within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts.

The methods, procedures and techniques employed in the study are the focus of Chapter 5. The chapter gives a rationale for the adoption of a qualitative research design, rooted in reception theory. It consequently places emphasis on the importance of a comparative empirical analysis of 'media discourses' with 'audience discourses' in reception analysis. It also highlights the sampling procedures employed in the study.

In Chapter 6 the findings of the study are discussed in relation to the research issues raised in the introductory chapter, it revisits the theoretical perspectives and literature review raised in Chapters 3 and 4. The chapter unfolds by presenting, first the qualitative content analysis data, and then the findings of the in-depth interviews (focus group and individual interviews) under five themes, namely:

- i. Readers' identities and relationships to the broader political formation.
- ii. Readers' newspaper preferences and reading habits.
- iii. Meanings obtained from the textual content of *uMthunywa* and their appropriation to the readers' everyday lived realities.
- iv. The political significance of the reading of *uMthunywa*.
- v. The role of language in attracting readers to *uMthunywa*.

The chapter combines findings from the in-depth interviews (group and individual) and presents them in narrative form.

Finally, Chapter 7 gives a summary and conclusion of the study, suggesting possible avenues for further research on the tabloid press and its role in society.

CHAPTER 2.

LOCATING *UMTHUNYWA* IN THE ZIMBABWEAN PRESS AND ITS CONTEXT OF CONSUMPTION

The study of culture must not be confined to the readings of texts, for the conditions of a text's reception necessarily become part of the meanings and pleasures it offers the [readers]. (Fiske 1987: 72)

The reader produces meanings that derive from the intersection of his/her social history with the social forces structured into the text. (Fiske 1987: 82)

2. Introduction

This chapter discusses the broader context within which *uMthunywa* is produced, transmitted and received. It takes cognisance of the fact that the production and circulation of media texts are processes that take place within historically specific and socially structured contexts or fields, as Thompson (1988) suggests. The context of consumption is characterised by social relations involving asymmetries of power and resources between social groups. In this light, the chapter unfolds by discussing first, the broader context of the Zimbabwean press (both private and state controlled), thus providing the backdrop against which *uMthunywa* emerges as a tabloid newspaper. Secondly, it discusses some of the main features of the socio-political background of Bulawayo – the context of reception of *uMthunywa* in the scope of this study.

2.1 *The press in Zimbabwe: A brief background*

This section gives a brief background of the post-independence Zimbabwean press with a view of locating *uMthunywa* within the broader context of this landscape. It provides the background against which *uMthunywa* emerged as a tabloid in its contemporary format.

The Zimbabwean press as it obtains today is characterised by a marked polarity between the 'private press' and the state controlled 'public press'. The latter has in recent years assumed a 'comfortable' position in the mainstream media owing to the gradual and well-orchestrated gagging/muzzling of the former by the government through the promulgation of prohibitive statutory instruments such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA). The domineering nature of the state controlled 'public press' over the 'private press' has been

fostered by the country's failing economy, which has led to marked difficulties in attracting advertising, thus relegating major activity in the print media to media houses surviving through cross-subsidies, which has been the case with most newspapers published under the government controlled Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (Zimpapers) stable (see Chuma 2005). Political efforts to gag the private press, as already insinuated above, are therefore also compounded by the economic scenario obtaining in the country. The discussion that follows below explores these dynamics in an effort to locate the emergence of *uMthunywa* in the broader complex of the press in Zimbabwe. It examines the 'private press' first and then shifts attention to the state controlled 'public press,' within which *uMthunywa* is published.

2.1.1 The private press

The private press was not developed at independence in 1980; this was largely because of the restrictive legislation that existed during the 15 years of the illegal Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) that started in 1965. The declaration of a state of emergency during the UDI gave the government powers to ban any news media critical of the state. By 1980, when the country attained independence, many newspapers and magazines, including the influential *Moto* and *African Daily News*, had been banned (Chuma 2005: 47).

The scenario, however, began to change with the relative stability of the 1980s, which saw the emergence of a small but vibrant class of the privately-owned press, which became increasingly outspoken against various policies of government (Chavunduka 2002: 282-283). This period followed a deterioration in the country's economic situation characterised by high unemployment and high inflation, accompanied by a serious decline in the government's popularity in the second half of the 1990s. Several of these private printing and publishing companies prospered and contributed to wide-ranging weeklies, monthlies and bi-monthlies both foreign and indigenous in origin. Among these were the *Moto* magazine, *Parade* magazine (no longer operational), the *Horizon* magazine (no longer operational), the *Financial Gazette*, the *Independent*, *The Standard* and the *Daily News* (no longer operational).

Although with less national reach, the private press competed with the government press, which consisted of the mammoth state-owned Zimpapers, which published titles in every province of the country and had a well-established distribution network (Chavunduka

2002: 283). In the early years of independence, the private press enjoyed relative autonomy from direct interference by the government and the ruling party in terms of censorship and supervision. This was mainly a culmination of the state's professed commitment to 'media freedom' against the backdrop of reconciliation efforts, as well as the political economy of donor funding. This privilege was to slowly diminish as the government gradually deemed the private press a serious threat. In the comfort of the tranquil and 'free' environment, the diverse array of the private publications dealt with critical issues not covered in the state controlled Zimpapers stable. In terms of content, the private press hardly pursued the sensationalist style of the tabloid press; their stories were limited to the public domain and public personalities. As Chuma observes:

[T]he private press became a significant terrain for mobilisation around issues of poverty, democratic rights and corruption, especially as expressed by those opposed to the government. (2005: 49)

This became predominantly clear, as the opposition posed no threat to the incumbent government as evidenced by its dismal performance in successive elections.

The government subsequently made concerted efforts to muzzle the private press in the wake of increasing dissenting voices within the country that found space in the 'private press' as the impact of the economic sanctions trickled down to the 'common' man on the ground. The promulgation of tough laws, key among them, the Access to Information And Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) in January 2002 saw the closure of newspapers like the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) 's *Daily News*. Some newspapers and magazines, however, succumbed to the biting economic environment and folded – much to the relief of the government – examples are the *Horizon* magazine and the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe's *Dispatch* (see Chuma 2005). With these developments, the state-owned press, under the Zimpapers Group, assumed dominance over the private press. It is against this background that Makumbe and Compagnon (2000: 193) note that in Zimbabwe, as in many parts of Africa, the 'public press' is more pervasive compared to the 'private press.' They further observe that Zimpapers is the most stable media organization in Zimbabwe and its publications have a total circulation ratio of 25: 1 to the 'private press.'

2.1.2 *The state-controlled press*

As indicated above, the major newspapers in the country are owned by the state controlled Zimpapers Group. The ownership structure of the company consists of Private and Government shares. At its formation, the latter were administered by the Ministry of Information through the now defunct Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT), which as Ronning (1989: 10) observes was headed by a group of ‘eminent’ Zimbabweans. The company published two daily newspapers: *The Herald* (Harare) and the *Chronicle* (Bulawayo), and five weeklies: *The Sunday Mail* (Harare), the *Sunday News* (Bulawayo), *Manica Post* (Mutare), and the vernacular, *Kwayedza* (Harare) and *uMthunywa* (Bulawayo). Moyo argues that, although these newspapers are referred to as national media, this is actually misleading as the reality is that most of the newspapers are regional papers covering mainly events in their regions of location (2003: 673).

The establishment of the ZMMT at independence can be seen as the first comprehensive articulation of media policy in the new Zimbabwe as it was meant to alter the whole structure of management in the public print media and make it “mass - oriented, nationally accessible and non-partisan in content” (Saunders 1991: 74). In effect, the whole idea of trustee ownership was initiated as a democratic experiment aimed at insulating the press from state power and business interests, thus guaranteeing independence to the public print media (see Saunders 1991: 74-76 and Chuma 2005: 47). Chuma (2005: 48) argues that although the idea of the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) providing a buffer between the government and the public press was laudable in principle, it was never actually implemented as the government’s interference in Zimpapers started almost as soon as the MMT was launched. With the acquisition of 51% shares, the Trust assumed outright control of Zimpapers. This control was evidenced in the sacking or demotion of editors deemed to be critical of government, as well as direct interference in daily newspaper management, especially by the Minister of Information (Rusike in Chuma 2005: 48; see also Saunders 1999: 18). In so doing, the government and the ruling party transformed the public press into an ideological apparatus. The public press thus became an appendage of the government. Zimpapers became a classic case of a majority shareholder wielding tremendous allocative power ahead of other shareholders (with the remaining 49% of shares), who included significant sections of minority white capital, such as Old Mutual (see Anderson & Olsen

1997: 45). With the advent of Jonathan Moyo as the Minister of State for Information and Publicity in 2000, the government's direct control and manipulation became marked (see Moyo 2003: 674). In 2001, the Department of Information and Publicity finally dissolved the ZMMT, formally placing the running of the public press under direct state control.

It is perhaps important to highlight that it is, to a large extent, with the public press that trends towards sensational journalism emerge. The government's goal of using the press for developmental objectives across all segments of society opened doors to the coverage of personal issues of the 'common man' or private domain. This, as discussed above, also emanated from the government's protracted control of the editorial content of the 'public press' bent on ensuring that issues critical of the state's failures, cases of corruption and the rising dissenting voices led by civil society, got no coverage in the public press. The 'sacking' of Geoff Nyarota, then editor of the *Chronicle* at the exposure of the Willogate Motor scandal in 1989, is a case in point (see Saunders 1999: 18). The tendency towards tabloidisation manifested itself initially, through 'snippets' of sensational stories strewn mainly in the Zimpapers' major broadsheets, like the *Chronicle*, *Sunday News*, *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*. The visibility of the stories has been evident through 'screaming' banner headlines that titillate and sometimes shock readers. These superficial attempts at tabloidisation can in many ways be attributed to attempts at attracting readers given the attenuation of the public press's market, owing mainly to the rising skepticism towards the state-controlled press by the public, and the ailing economic situation obtaining in the country (Mabweazara 2005: 32). It is against this background that one can argue, as suggested by Chuma (2005: 56), that the public press did not provide the critical discursive realms in the ideal sense of the public sphere as proposed by Habermas.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, one can summarily argue, as suggested by Moyo (2003: 673), that the development of the press in Zimbabwe after independence needs to be seen in the context of the tightening of control over debate and political expression by the ruling party. It is against the backdrop of this media environment that the sensational tabloid *uMthunywa* emerges, it emerges from within the 'public press,' thus providing a strikingly different scenario to that obtaining in other African countries, in terms of the ownership of sensational tabloid newspapers. In South African, for example, the ownership

of tabloids is in the hands of private business. The next section discusses the emergence and development of *uMthunywa*.

2.1.3 The emergence and development of uMthunywa

As is evident in the preceding section, the English press has dominated the Zimbabwean press throughout the country's history, and there have been very few cases of newspapers that have either printed in African languages or have covered some stories in local languages. In effect, the press has been 'elite oriented.' In response to this and the challenges that emerged with independence, such as the urgent need for national development, reconciliation and the new political reality of black majority rule, the government supported Zimpapers in the establishment of weekly newspapers that published in the country's major vernacular languages, starting with the Harare based *Kwayedza* publishing in Shona and later the Bulawayo based *uMthunywa* publishing in isiNdebele. According to Matenda (2001: 9), these newspapers emerged at a time when government had initiated massive literacy campaigns that not only catered for school children but also for adults throughout the country. This was in keeping with the challenges of nation building, development, decolonisation and reconciliation, which confronted the government in the new dispensation (see also Ronning 1989: 3-5).

At its inception in 1985, *uMthunywa*, was controlled in Harare, at the Zimbabwe Newspapers head offices, alongside its stable-mate *Kwayedza*, under the editorship of a Shona novelist and journalist Paul Chidyausiku. Some of the paper's editorial operations were, however, based in Bulawayo, at the *Chronicle* offices. Ostensibly, its establishment was an attempt to cater for the Ndebele readership that hitherto had no vernacular newspaper covering issue and events occurring within Bulawayo and the Matabeleland region as a whole. The scenario surrounding the emergence of *uMthunywa* mirrors the socio-political history of Bulawayo, mainly characterised by material deprivation and political marginalisation by the 'power bloc' over the years – this is explored at greater length in section 2.2 below.

It is perhaps no coincidence then that from the onset, *uMthunywa* faced serious challenges owing to viability problems linked to low circulation, as it failed to provide an alternative voice to that offered by the 'mainstream' English newspapers (Mabweazara 2005:

32; see also Saunders 1991: 142). This led to a reduction in the size of the paper from a twelve-paged tabloid to four pages in 1987. In 1988, it became a full appendage of *Kwayedza*, changing its name to *Kwayedza-uMthunywa* at the time. In 1993 the Ndebele section of *Kwayedza-uMthunywa* disappeared, signaling the folding of *uMthunywa*. Saunders (1991: 142) links the demise of the paper to the fact that it became a mere translation of the Zimpapers mainstream English papers and failed to establish itself as an alternative source of rural and community centered news. Direct political interference was a further factor contributing factor to the fall of *uMthunywa*. According to Saunders, political interference resulted in the public media, in general, increasingly being seen “as government mouth pieces, with their news and reportage taken with great skepticism by ordinary Zimbabweans” (1999: 23-24). These developments were inextricably related to the socio-political relations between the power-bloc and Matabeleland discussed in section 2.2 below.

On July 4, 2004, *uMthunywa* re-emerged under a new editor with a new, ostensibly market-driven editorial thrust, anchored on the values of tabloid journalism as suggested by Sparks (1992: 39) – giving priority to immediate issues of daily life over those traditionally ascribed to the ‘public sphere.’ *UMthunywa* thus took the lead as the prototypical representative of ‘tabloid’ journalism in Zimbabwe, gaining popularity as a paper that prints gossip and human-interest stories to which the ‘man’ in the street relate and identify with (Mabweazara 2005: 32). In its new form, the paper has out-competed its Bulawayo based sister weekly paper, the *Sunday News*, in circulation, which rose from 2500 in its first week of publication to around 30 000 at its highest peak (see Mabweazara 2005: 32). One can thus draw a comparison of the paper’s sharp rise in circulation to the Penny press of America in the 19th century – taking newspapers beyond the small power elites to a truly mass audience (Onerbring & Jonsson 2004: 281). Of interest though, is the fact that its circulation has not translated into meaningful revenue, as advertising support for the paper has not corresponded to the high circulation figures. Part of the reason for this is the fact that the paper attracts mainly the low-income groups, who are not attractive to advertisers, and the length of time it takes a paper to recoup investment (Mabweazara 2005: 32).

Although the paper has a national readership base, with copies selling across the country, it however, (by virtue of it being an isiNdebele paper) has wide readership in the three Ndebele speaking provinces of Zimbabwe, viz: Matabeleland North, Matabeleland

South and Bulawayo Metropolitan province where it is based. Bulawayo takes the lead in the circulation of the paper and hence constitutes the focal point of this study, in terms of its geographical scope. The readership of *uMthunywa* cuts across social classes despite the fact that it reaches mainly an audience in the high-density suburbs and the lower echelons of people in administration and government. Noticeably, it is segments of society that feel drawn to oral and traditional culture that have largely provided a market for the tabloid (see Mabwezara 2005: 32).

This brief overview of the press in Zimbabwe has shown that the ‘tabloidisation’ of the press in Zimbabwe is a relatively new trend and that the ‘shrinkage’ of the private press has relegated the operations of the mainstream press to the government-controlled Zimpapers Group. Hence the prototypical representative of ‘tabloidisation’ in Zimbabwe – *uMthunywa* – has emerged from within the Zimpapers stable.

2.2 The context of consumption: socio-political background of Bulawayo

This section discusses the socio-political background of the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, the context in which *uMthunywa* is read. The section takes a cue from the view that any understanding (and interpretation) of texts must always be situated within historical traditions because a people’s history plays an important role in the way they appropriate messages. The reception of media texts, after all, is a process situated in a definite socio-historical context (see Pitout 1988: 66; Fiske 1992: 59; Schroder et al. 2003: 152). In this regard, Thompson rightly proposes that the first phase of cultural analysis is to “reconstruct this context and examine the social relations and institutions, the distribution of power and resources, by virtue of which this context forms a different social field” (1988: 368).

Bulawayo Metropolitan Province is the second largest urban province after Harare Metropolitan Province. It was founded by Lobengula, King of the Ndebele tribe, in 1870. The province is located in the Matabeleland region – situated in the southern and western parts of Zimbabwe, stretching for more than 800 kilometers from the country’s southern border with South Africa at Beitbridge, to Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River in the north. Bulawayo is positioned half way between Beitbridge and Victoria Falls, 440 kilometers from the capital province, Harare.

The Matabeleland region comprises of two other provinces: Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South. The region is home to the Ndebele ethnic group, whose main language is isiNdebele; these constitute about 15% of the total Zimbabwean population, which is currently pegged at about 14 million. The Ndebele ethnic group is the second largest in the country after the Shona ethnic group, which comprises about 70% of the country's total population (Zaaijer 1998: 30).

Although Bulawayo and Matabeleland at large remain predominantly Ndebele, other ethnic groups have been 'integrated' into the region through socialisation, related *inter alia*, to births and intermarriages. This factor indicates some fluidity between ethnic groups and has defined the region's socio-political and cultural geography. It is important to point out that the predominance of isiNdebele, as the main language has been key in shaping the socio-cultural and political identities of the people of Matabeleland. As Kramsch notes, "to identify themselves as members of a community [the people of Matabeleland] have to define themselves jointly as insiders against others, whom they...define as outsiders" and language plays a critical role in cementing this identity (1998: 8) (see also Edwards 1985: 3). Consequently, language is the principal means through which we conduct our social lives as it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways (Kramsch 1998: 3; Wa Thiongo 1981: 13). In fact, for Kramsch (1998: 3) and Edwards (1995: 17) people identify themselves and others through their use of language, as they view their language as a symbol of their social identity, embodying common attitudes, beliefs and values. In this sense, therefore, language is not a culture-free code, distinct from the way people think and behave, but rather it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture (Kramsch 1998: 8). For the people of Matabeleland, language (isiNdebele), therefore, constitutes a fundamental aspect of their socio-cultural identity.

Bulawayo has a population above a million, of which 96% is of African origin and 4% of non-African origin (whites and Asians) (Zaaijer 1998: 31). Kaarsholm (1995: 241) observes that the proportion of whites in Bulawayo was always smaller than in Harare and that this balance has become even more marked with the post-independence exodus of whites and the entry of a new black elite into the quiet residences of the wealthier suburbs. The scenario has become even more dramatic in contemporary times, with the rising animosity against whites stirred up by the 'farm invasions.'

High-density areas are primarily located in the western part of the city and the low-density areas in the southern, eastern and northern parts of town. Most of the low-income residents of the high-density areas work in the industrial areas that are also to the west and south of the city (Zaaijer 1998: 33). The townships' 'high-density suburbs' continue to display old characteristics of poverty and deprivation; crime persists as an everyday problem; and the limited institutional cultural facilities continue to centre around beer gardens, shebeens, churches and community halls (Kaarsholm 1995: 241). Unemployment, homelessness and destitution continue to be problems, not least in the context of persistent droughts and an accelerated influx from rural districts. In fact, there are many poor areas that display a feeling of permanence. Thus the overwhelming impression a visitor gets is of persistent segregation between the living conditions of the poor and the rich.

Perhaps the major historical experience that defines contemporary Bulawayo and Matabeleland's socio-political life is the war that took place immediately after independence in the region, around 1982. The peacefulness of independence was interrupted when the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union: Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) clamped down on alleged dissidents thought to retain their loyalty to Joshua Nkomo, leader of the Patriotic Front: Zimbabwe African People Union (PF ZAPU) in Matabeleland, and sought to eliminate what they saw as the potential for a (PF) ZAPU *coup d'etat* (Kaarsholm 1995: 242). The government deployed a special North Korean-trained army unit (Fifth Brigade) to Matabeleland to quash the 'revolt.' According to Moyo (2003: 674), more than 20 000 civilians were massacred, maimed or detained. Women were raped, and many people disappeared. He further observes that the government declared a state of emergency for a period of more than five years in the region and ensured a 'black out' in the media by declaring some places out of bounds, thus making it impossible for journalists to investigate developments in the region. Referring to the attacks, Joshua Nkomo observes that:

The pattern and frequency of the [attacks] led many people to believe that this was a deliberate and coordinated campaign to create insecurity in... Matabeleland...[A] climate was being created which would be used to justify full-scale repression. (2001: 237)

Speaking at a memorial service for the late Vice-President and founding figure of the Ndebele affiliated (PF) ZAPU, on 2 July 2000, President Robert Mugabe admitted that

atrocities had occurred in Matabeleland and thousands of civilians had been killed. He referred to the disturbances as:

[A]n act of madness... [W]e killed each other and destroyed each other's property... [I]t was wrong and both sides were to blame. We have had a difference, a quarrel. We engaged ourselves in a reckless and unprincipled fight. (cited in Stiff 2000: 228)

The disturbances left a lasting impression on the people of Bulawayo and Matabeleland at large. In fact, the pain that persists in the communities as a result of what happened has sustained a climate of fear amongst the people of Matabeleland. People remain afraid of officials, official places, or official programmes. They are afraid to voice their opinions in public gatherings for fear of being victimised later (CCJ.PZ & LRF Report 1999: 25). Alexander et al. proffer a telling observation of the impact of the Matabeleland disturbances on the people of Matabeleland:

The Fifth Brigade's greatest 'success' may have been in hardening ethnic prejudice, and in bolstering a strong identification between ethnicity and political affiliation. It also grossly undercut the capacity of local institutions – the party, the council – to represent their constituencies, and mediate with the state. (2000: 224)

Kaarsholm (1995: 242) contends that while the anti 'dissident' campaign in the Matabeleland country-side assumed proportions of general destabilisation and indiscriminate massacre, the effects in Bulawayo were to create a 'period of silence,' which lasted until the reunification of the two major nationalist organizations in December 1987. The unification of (PF) ZAPU and ZANU (PF) in 1987 quelled the tension in Matabeleland, bringing relief, but also leaving behind a number of problems for the local people. Kaarsholm (1995: 243) argues that unity both restored a level of state repression to Bulawayo and Matabeleland and did away with the image of (PF) ZAPU as a possible party of radical opposition and a different post-nationalist politics. Thus with increasing political frustration at the outcome of (PF) ZAPU's integration into national government, Ndebele ethnic organisation has been gaining new ground.

More perilous, however, in contemporary Matabeleland is the problem of the younger generations wanting revenge for the past. It is no wonder, then, that Matabeleland has become a stronghold of the opposition, a development cultivated since the days of the Joshua Nkomo-led (PF) ZAPU. With (PF) ZAPU incorporated into the government, the Movement

for Democratic Change (MDC) emerged as a ‘saviour’ to the people of the region, who complain of years of marginalisation and underdevelopment. As local jobs are awarded to people from outside the region, Ndebele youth are turning to South Africa for employment (Mukumbira 2001: 7). Tension has heightened so much that some people within Bulawayo are vigorously advocating for a constitutional amendment that would lead to the establishment of a federal state in Zimbabwe (see Mukumbira 2001: 7; Kaarsholm 1995: 244). The discontent has increased in the wake of the contemporary crippling economic difficulties that bedevil Zimbabwe as a whole. In recent times, then, Ndebele ethnic organisation, cultural nationalism and the idea of federation all become expressions of an attempt to secure a better deal for the people in the region from what they refer to as a ‘Centralist Zimbabwean State’ dominated by the Shona (Kaarsholm 1995: 244). This socio-political background of Matabeleland, and Bulawayo in particular, provides a critical backdrop of the context within which *uMthunywa* is read.

2.3. Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has attempted to put the study into perspective through discussing the broader context of the press in Zimbabwe (private and state-controlled) within which *uMthunywa* emerges as a tabloid newspaper. It has also examined, within the limitations of the scope of this study, the socio-political background of Bulawayo, the context within which *uMthunywa* is consumed. The most significant issue is that the post-independence disturbances in Matabeleland left an indelible mark on the people of the region in terms of their socio-political character. And it is this history, and its intersection with other social and cultural forces, which forms the backdrop against which *uMthunywa* readers derive meaning from the paper.

CHAPTER 3

THE HABERMASIAN CONCEPT OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND TABLOID JOURNALISM: THEORIES AND PERSPECTIVES

[I]t pays to consider that going “tabloid” isn’t just changing a newspaper’s format. It’s a state of mind, as well, which translates into content that is more appealing and more personal, redefining the old definition of news. (Garcia 2005)

The standards and values, by which journalism is judged needs to be reassessed to take into account the *potential* of tabloid journalism to expand public discourse and the public sphere (Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 294).

3. Introduction

This chapter gives a broad overview of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere and the diverse conceptions and theoretical positions on tabloid journalism. The chapter acknowledges that the public sphere concept has, in many cases, been taken rather too literally and leans more on the revised conception of the public sphere as discussed by authors like Fraser (1992), who argues that we need to accommodate more contemporary models of the public sphere characterised by smallness of scale and composed of small interest groups which key into the underlying theoretical issues that motivated Habermas’ account. Further to this, the chapter defines and historicises tabloid journalism, reviewing various theoretical positions and perspectives that have emerged among media scholars in trying to understand the function of tabloid journalism in society. Finally, the chapter explores debates on whether popular tabloid newspapers constitute a viable framework for the formation of public opinion concerning issues of the moment

3.1 *The Public Sphere concept*

Habermas’ theorisation of the public sphere is most thoroughly explored in his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) – an attempt to find possibilities through which democracy could be realised (Hartley 2002: 191). Despite the limitations of his views, his ideas have provided an attractive reference point for critics wanting to examine the democratic function of the media (McDonald 2003: 80; see also Fraser 1992: 111). Since Habermas’ conception of the model, it has been developed and updated (not least by himself) to take into account a number of different aspects – one of the more important ones being the changing nature of the media landscape (Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 284).

It is important to note that the public sphere concept is not an attempt at a prescriptive political theory, but a conception of the conditions within which healthy and just political conditions may be realised. It is an arena within which debate occurs, the generation of ideas, shared knowledge and the construction of opinion that occurs when people assemble and discuss (Hartely 2002: 191). Habermas conceptualises the idea of a public sphere as that of a body of 'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of public 'concern' or 'common interest' (Fraser 1992: 112). He idealises the liberal bourgeois public sphere as a place where citizens come together to engage in rational discussion on issues of common concern, and where differences of identity would be put on hold so that true equality might prevail in reaching a consensus (Macdonald 2003: 80). Habermas argues that, although real and experienced, the public sphere cannot be located in a particular place or identified as an object, it cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organisation. The public sphere is where ideas and information are shared leading to the formation of public opinion (Habermas 1996: 360; see also Habermas 1974: 49).

For Habermas the public sphere is most constructive when not influenced by commercial interests or state control. In its original formation, the public sphere was thus conceptualised as entailing insulation from the interests of such powers, which have a potential of polluting the process of public discussion, if it was to be a corrective of them. Only in this way would it effectively produce democratic conditions (see Fraser 1992: 111). In fact, for Habermas the public sphere envisages citizens actively questioning state authority and the excesses of commercial interests. Hartley (2002: 192) posits that this was a weakness, for it allowed no function of the public sphere to be assigned to commercial organisations and media (whether the latter were public service media owned by the state or private commercial media).

It is important, however, to note, as highlighted by Thompson, that we have gone rather far from the forms of societal organisation where dialogue and face-to-face communication are viable instruments for day-to-day democracy, as suggested by Habermas (cited in Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 284). In fact, Habermas himself acknowledges that the concept of the 'public sphere' and 'public opinion' acquire their specific meaning from a concrete historical situation (Habermas 1974: 50). Thus under present day altered conditions, the bourgeois or liberal model of the public sphere is no longer feasible. We are, therefore, not able to participate in political life in the same way as described by Habermas. On the other

hand however, public life is marked by greater visibility – mediated publicness or mediated public sphere as some scholars posit. This mediated public sphere according to Ornebring and Jonsson (2004: 285) is characterised by struggle for visibility, which seems to indicate that there might not be just one mediated public sphere but rather a mainstream and a number of alternative spheres from which marginalised groups strive to gain access to and representation in the mainstream. This is contrary to Habermas' account, which stresses the singularity of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere. It is Fraser's reconstructed conception of the public sphere that has relevance to this study. She contends that some new form of public sphere is required to salvage that arena's critical function and to institutionalise democracy (Fraser 1992: 111; see also Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 285-286). Oddly, Habermas himself stops short of developing a new post-bourgeois model of the public sphere.

Feminist perspectives have also highlighted the exclusionary, elitist nature of the public sphere's original conception. Habermas' public sphere was based primarily on the process of debate and knowledge exchange. The participants' status was not a factor in the success or character of the public sphere. Fraser (1992) thus argues that it is unrealistic to assume that the historical exclusion of women, or the racial and property criteria needed to participate in the public sphere can be overlooked. Rather, the likelihood is that ignoring group differences will lead to the exclusion of some groups from participation within the public sphere. As intimated above, Habermas later admitted that the exclusion of women and other minority classes had structuring significance in the formation of an idealised bourgeois public sphere, but argued that this posed no fundamental challenge to his model, since the bourgeois public sphere has the capacity to transform itself from within (Fraser 1992: 430). Fraser thus suggests that creating possibilities for alternative public spheres to exist and thrive is a better way to promote democratic participation and open public debate. She argues thus:

[I]n stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestations among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, over-arching public. (Fraser 1992: 122)

Consequently, Fraser rejects Habermas' seemingly modernist conception of the public sphere underpinned by the assumption that a people can have a shared national identity under which issues of common concern can be discussed, arguing that the more vibrant and diverse the public spheres, the better for democracy. Her conception of alternative public

spheres leans more on the post-modern understanding of identity, that there is no singular (over-arching) identity and that one's identity is one of many possible identities to which different public spheres may speak. This post-bourgeois conception permits us to envision a greater role for public spheres, beyond Habermas' idealised exclusionary liberal public sphere which fails to examine other non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres, one that would enable us to think about strong and weak publics, as well as about various hybrid forms (see Fraser 1992: 136 and Fiske 1992). The counter publics, who emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, help expand discursive space, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech. In this way, people who previously have been denied access in the mainstream public sphere,

... manage to find in the discourses of the [alternative] public sphere[s] representations of their interests, aspirations, life problems, and anxieties that are close enough to resonate with their own lived self-representations, identities, and feelings. (Fraser 1992: 139)

Fraser further posits that although in stratified societies the ideal of participatory parity is not fully realisable, it is more closely approximated by arrangements that permit contestation among a plurality of competing publics than by a single comprehensive public sphere (Fraser 1992: 124). It is against this backdrop that scholars like Ornebing and Jonsson (2004) and Fiske (1992) conceptualise the democratic function of tabloids as alternative mediated public spheres catering for marginalised groups in society. Having discussed Habermas' theory of the public sphere, the next section makes an attempt at shedding light on the meaning of 'tabloid' journalism.

3.2 Defining the 'tabloid'

Various efforts at defining 'tabloids' demonstrate that the term is slippery and not amenable to a clear universal definition. Its characteristics are hard to pin down with precision (see Machin & Papatheoderou 2002: 36; Garcia 2005: 3 and Fiske 1992: 48). The term is murky and often confused, often bandied about for anything people disapprove of in the news media (Norris 2000). Thus Gripsrud argues that the term 'tabloid' is more of a journalistic buzzword than a scholarly concept and connotes a process of decline of serious journalism (cited in Machin & Papatheoderou 2002: 35). Indeed, the different meanings of the term 'tabloid' on offer are indicative of much conceptual confusion; the term is often used interchangeably with the

‘popular,’ sometimes in a pejorative sense (see Dahlgren 1992; Sparks 1992 and Fiske 1992). In as far as some consensus may exist with regard to particular meanings of the term; one observes that it can be used as a compass to help us navigate the often unpredictable waters of ‘market-driven’ journalism.

Attempt is thus made in this section to shed light on the meaning of tabloids, focusing mainly on understandings that relate to three distinct aspects: the format, style and subject of a newspaper. 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 term was introduced into the world of media by Alfred Harmsworth having derived it from Burroughs-Wellcome’s 1884 trademark for their process of making “tablet-like” compressed pharmaceuticals. The connotation of compressed tablet was thus applied to the “compressed” journalism that condensed stories into a simplified, easily-absorbed format. In similar vein, Harmsworth wanted his newspaper, the *Daily Mail* (1886), to be like a small, concentrated, effective pill, containing all news needs within one handy package, half the size of conventional broadsheet newspaper (Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 287). It must be added that the tabloid format was also synonymous with certain ways of selecting and presenting news, this leads to the second meaning of the term ‘tabloid’, which concerns the *style* of journalism. Emphasis here, is placed on the simple and concrete language; light and vivid writing; shorter stories; extensive use of photographs and dramatic headlines with stories conveyed in a vivid and direct style on the front page (Norris 2000).

The last meaning, which has aroused the greatest concern, and is more relevant to this study, refers to the distinctive *subject* matter of news stories, characterised above all by focus on minor scandals of minor celebrities, entertainment stories, sexual shenanigans, crime, sports and lurid ‘victim’ or disaster stories, as their staple fare (see Machin & Papatheoderou 2002: 36-37; Bird 1992: 8). It is against the backdrop of this understanding of tabloids that Ornebring and Jonsson note that:

[F]rom the very beginning, the tabloid press was criticized for sensationalism and emotionalism, for over-simplification of complex issues, for catering to the lowest common denominator and sometimes for outright lies. (2004: 287)

In summary, the term ‘tabloid’ is synonymous not only with a specific paper format (smaller in size), but also with a certain way of selecting and presenting news. Critics appear to

agree that the tabloid style seeks to engage media publics emotionally, with ‘private enjoyment and pleasure’ as its primary function (see Sparks in Machin & Papatheoderou 2002: 37). It is this function that sets tabloid journalism at odds with ‘serious journalism’, which *inter alia*, is driven by its express objective of facilitating the exercise of democratic citizenship. The tabloid press is thus a binary opposite of the ‘quality’ press, which is concerned with quite different values and priorities and hence is regularly subject to vehement scorn and disapproval for not only transgressing norms but also exceeding them (see also Sparks 1992: 37; Fiske 1992: 53 and Glynn in Fiske 1992: 47). Having made an attempt at defining tabloids, the next section gives a brief picture of the historical development of tabloid journalism, elaborating on some of the issues raised in this section.

3.3 Tracing the origins of tabloid journalism

The current tabloid papers are the heirs of a long tradition in journalism whose roots may be traced back hundreds of years – a history that oscillates between Europe and America, precisely London and New York. According to Stephens, there is no document about American journalism that places the ‘tabloid’ as an original United States product, since the outside influences are considerable, especially those coming from Great Britain (cited in Garcia 205: 4).

Bird (1992: 9) observes that the tabloid press (in Europe and America) has its roots in the seventeenth century broadside ballads and newsbooks, which were packed with tales of strange and wonderful happenings – murder, natural disasters, unusual births, and omens. In fact, the distinction between early newspapers and ballads was hazy as some of the early forms of popular newspapers were simply single printed sheets which gave topical news items in prose, while the broadside ballads gave news in verse (Shepard in Bird 1992: 9). It has thus been noted that some ballads told stories that could grace the cover of any modern tabloid. Stephen notes that readers’ fantasies were catered to in lavish descriptions of events like royal weddings: “News reports on royal pomp and circumstance dwelt on the details because the events depicted were more extravagant and magnificent than anything else in their readers’ experience” (cited in Bird 1992: 10).

Noticeably, much of the material in the ballads and newsbooks sheets drew from oral tradition or on word-of-mouth reports. And to satisfy demand, the printers often recycled old tales with new dates and locations (Bird 1992:10).

Although it is argued that sensationalism was pervasive in the early ballads and newsbooks, journalism historians tend to attribute the growth of human-interest and 'sensational' style to the 1830s in America, with the growth of the 'penny press,' considered the forerunner of the contemporary prototype tabloid press (see Bird: 1992: 12 and Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 287). Garcia asserts that it is with the penny press in large metropolitan areas that one first sees human interest stories on page one, presented with greater visual impact than ever before, with images playing as important a role as the text (Garcia 2005: 4). It provided the first instance of popular journalism aimed specifically at a non-elite public. The penny press thus transformed newspapers and ultimately removed the market for ballads and newsbooks, consequently relegating research on tabloids squarely on newspapers rather than other forms of media that influenced them (Bird 1992: 15). Bird contends that:

It is the writing style rather than the subject matter as such that marks off the penny press from its newspaper predecessors [discussed above]... [which] indeed covered sensational subject matter, but the style was far from the human-interest narratives of the penny press era, usually lacking the 'sensory detail'... that the penny press pioneered. The short, clear active style became the model for journalism from then on – tabloid journalism simply developed the style at its most formulaic. (1992: 13)

With the penny press, both the reason for publishing newspapers and the content of the newspapers changed. According to Bird (1992: 12), innovations of this period changed newspapers forever. The birth of the penny press was accompanied by two characteristics: catering for readers in a hurry, especially in cities with large numbers of commuters in public transportation environments, and offering a unique journalistic formula generous in human-interest stories, police news, entertainment and sports (Garcia: 2005: 3). The penny press was more of an economic venture, with the express dual aim of selling a product to a general readership and selling the readership to advertisers (Schudson in Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 287). The emergence of Benjamin Day's *New York Sun* was defining in the penny press; it specifically targeted the 'common man', contrary to general trends prevailing at the time, and was sold in the streets for a penny (see Bird 1992: 12). It was also smaller and more portable than other newspapers, foreshadowing the popular appeal of later tabloids. The paper

redefined news to bring to the fore human interest stories. Ornebring and Jonsson (2003: 288) observe that scandalous tales of sin, the immoral antics of the upper class and humorous tales of mishaps of all kinds were a staple of the *New York Sun*. The tone of the paper was based on the language of the ‘common man’ with plain talk that was athletically lean and representative of realistic human condition (Whitby in Bird 1992: 12-13). The growth of the penny press saw the circulation of newspapers rising significantly, though it inevitably faced criticism from other contemporary publicists – it was accused of ‘lowering the standards of journalism through its vulgarity, cheapness and sensationalism (Ornebring & Jonsson 2003: 288).

It was not until a little later that conditions were right for the successful precursors of the tabloids – the ‘yellow press.’ The emergence of the ‘yellow journalism’ movement in the 1890s, marked by William Hearst’s acquisition of the *New York Journal* in 1895, saw sensationalism become even more brazen than in the preceding penny papers. Hearst embarked on a ‘constant series of titillating excursions into the bizarre and the erotic’ (Bessie in Bird 1992: 18). Other papers that emerged with yellow journalism in the US include James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald*, and Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* (see Norris 2000).

In the United Kingdom, the impact of the yellow press culminated in the creation of popular mass-circulation national newspapers such as the *People* (1881), *Daily Mail* (1896), *Daily Express* (1900) and *Daily Mirror* (1903). *The Pall Mall Gazette* was at the forefront of the ‘new journalism’ in the London press in the 1880s. This ‘new journalism’ sought new audiences and was characterised by a lighter approach and dramatisation of news (especially crime) – in other words, it was the tabloid journalism of its day (Ornebring & Jonsson 2003: 290).

As Ornebring and Jonsson rightly observe, two points can be made from this short and admittedly selective history of the tabloid press:

First, that it demonstrates the continuous existence of a journalistic other, that the established institutions of journalism use to define themselves – according to its critics, the penny press, and later the yellow journalism... epitomized everything that good journalism should not be. Second, that this journalism... played an important role... as an alternative public sphere, where a grass roots based populist critique against established corporate and governmental elites could come to the fore. (2003: 289 – 290)

In the light of this picture of the historical development of tabloid journalism, the next section attempts to discuss different theoretical conceptions and perspectives that have emerged with respect to tabloids.

3.4 Tabloids: theories and perspectives

The emergence of the tabloid press triggered debates questioning the most cherished foundations of journalism. At first glance, there seems to be a rather widespread consensus about the manner in which tabloid journalism is both perceived and conceived within the profession and, to a large extent, among media scholars. In fact, the boundaries so characteristic of journalism's self-legitimizing discourses have become fluid and the central distinctions between journalism and non-journalism, or good journalism and bad journalism, have come to the fore (Dahlgren 1992: 14). Bird demonstrates that while there are obvious and important differences between the 'straight press' and the tabloid press, their similarities in such areas as the choice of topics, the use of anonymous sources, the prominent role of experts and expertise in the reporting and the dependence on 'entertaining' devices, result in a common 'story telling continuum' (cited in Dahlgren 1992: 14).

Against this background, debates on tabloid journalism have been framed in diverse ways, in line with positions espoused by different media scholars. In what follows, I attempt to explore these debates and perspectives in depth, beginning by highlighting the perspectives that uncritically celebrate the consumption of popular culture (tabloids) rooted in the 'cultural populism' tradition; followed by views from scholars who argue for the need of a nuanced understanding of tabloids, rooted in reception analysis. Subsequently, I explore debates that support tabloid journalism rooted in the post-modernist conception of identities, which argue for the necessity of multiple public spheres. Finally, I discuss views critical of tabloid journalism embodied in the critical theory perspectives.

The 'cultural populism' tradition represented, among others, by scholars like Fiske (1987; 1989a; 1989b), attaches importance to reading popular texts for pleasure – the uncritical celebration of popular culture. Developing this discussion, McGugan posits that the predominance of the active audience concept within *Cultural Studies* led to a drift,

... into an uncritical, cultural populist position, with a narrow focus on interpretation and related uncritical celebration of popular readings at the expense of questions of power [central to critical theory]. (cited in Strelitz 2005: 12)

McGuigan further argues that, “the celebration of the consumer has led to a crisis of qualitative judgment whereby the value of cultural forms resides in their popularity, rather than any external criteria” (cited in Strelitz 2005: 12). It is important to note that this tradition’s celebration of the consumer assumes that:

[T]he people who render [popular culture] popular are not misguided when they do so; not fooled; not dominated; not distracted; not passive... [rather]... popular culture is popular because and only because the people find in it channels of desire, pleasure, initiative [and] freedom. (Gitlin in Strelitz 2005: 13)

This assumption is central to the tension between the cultural populism tradition and the critical theory paradigm.

It is important to point out that some media scholars, who note a more varied picture than the cultural populism theorists posit, have contested the uncritical celebration of popular culture. In fact, for these scholars, although tabloids are generally perceived in bad light, they are not necessarily opposed to serving public good. The scholars argue for a nuanced understanding of tabloids and the need to take their reception into account without necessarily lapsing into ‘cultural populism’. Their approach is predominantly sociological, and calls for the understanding that the reading of tabloids is a symptom of a deeper social malaise which involves not only taking a position for or against tabloids. Strelitz and Steenveld (2006) and, in part, Fiske (1992) are notable in this direction of thought. In attempting to make sense of the rapid growth of tabloid newspapers in South Africa, Strelitz and Steenveld (2006) argue for the need to transcend the ‘futile moralism’ that characterises much of the debate in South Africa. They contend for the need to account for the emergence of tabloids historically and sociologically. For them, “[a]n important aspect of this project is to investigate why South African readers with a particular... profile are drawn to... tabloids... characterised by a particular form and content”. Clearly, this line of thought escapes from the frame of uncritical celebration of popular preferences (populism) and points to the need to understand how tabloids have come about, and the dimension of the social structure they challenge or hold in place (see Strelitz & Steenveld 2006).

For Fiske (1992: 49), the popularity of tabloids, in part, is an expression of general skepticism towards the news from the ‘power bloc’. He emphasizes, among other things, the pleasures of its excesses, arguing that the last thing that tabloid journalism produces is a

believing subject. For him, one of its most characteristic tones of voice is that of a skeptical laughter which offers the pleasures of disbelief, the pleasures of not being taken in. The mundane are thus perceived as a site of political resistance, producing belief “at the moment of disbelief... relational knowledge constantly in play between belief and disbelief, always characterized by pleasurable skepticism” (Fiske 1992: 52). In further reinforcing his argument, Fiske posits that the ‘quality press’, with its professional ideology of ‘objectivity’ (the production of a value-free, depoliticised truth) differs with the popular press in that it produces subjected, believing reading relations (Fiske 1992: 59). It is important, however, to highlight that while Fiske believes that the pleasures of excess of skepticism can be progressive, he concedes that they are not always necessarily so as the politics of popular culture are as deeply conflicted as the experience of the people.

Theorists who attempt to understand tabloids within the context of the perceived breakdown of the modernist project (of which the public sphere concept and critical theory are a part) point to the necessity of multiple public spheres and draw largely on the post-modernist understandings, which argue for multiple identities. For these scholars, tabloid newspapers provide an alternative space for marginal identities negated by the mainstream press. Extending Fiske’s views into a post-modern approach, Glynn pursues the possibility that tabloids break down the hierarchies of discourses typical of ‘established journalism’ and allows space for heterogeneity of voices and points of view. In this case, ‘official’ knowledge is subject to the challenge of perspectives previously excluded from journalism (cited in Macdonald 2003: 59). It is further argued that by allowing ordinary people’s concerns to impinge on criteria of newsworthiness, a challenge may be presented to dominant ideologies, especially when the perspectives provided are those primarily of the subordinate or the marginalised (Macdonald 2003: 59). In response to these assertions, Sparks (1992: 42) offers a cautionary statement that in order to argue that the popular can be the site of some sort of liberating political practice, it would be necessary to show how it is that the concerns of the everyday may be used to construct a more generalised oppositional position, which is capable of transcending the limits of orthodox political power and providing the intellectual material for self-liberation.

Ornebring and Jonsson (2004: 293) present a different but complementary point of view to that proffered by Fiske, arguing that tabloid journalism – both in its worst excesses and in its most subversive moments – represent failure of other societal institutions, among them

the more prestigious news organisations and traditional political organisations, to address adequately issues of vital concern to many members of the public. For them, although tabloid journalism may fall short in providing coherent as well as critical information needed to make political decisions in the political public sphere, they remain fundamentally important in providing information critical for participation outside the arenas of traditional politics.

Some media scholars have been bent on analysing what is specifically appealing about the tabloid press – its aesthetics. Gripsrud (1992) argues that well-known features of the tabloid press, such as sensationalism, personalisation and the stress of private concerns, are very much similar to the main components of the popular melodrama and has attained a prominent position in the popular media. These features, for Gripsrud, are popular precisely because they provide a way of understanding the world, which is an alternative to the abstract and theoretical discourse of the serious press. The tabloid press is thus seen as opposing or interrogating norms, offering an alternative reality to the official one, and carrying utopianised fantasies of emancipation from the constraints of poverty and perceived social failure (see Fiske 1992: 50).

Journalism scholars rooted in the critical theory paradigm represented *inter alia*, by scholars like Berger (2000), Sparks (1992) and Gray and Williamson (in Strelitz 2005), are concerned with ‘preserving’ the traditional normative functions of journalism and find space in perspectives advocating that media representations have social consequences beyond the uncritical celebration of popular readings. In this light, much of the current attack on the tabloid press echoes long-standing debates over the encroachment of ‘popular culture’ on ‘high culture’, and taps deep-rooted ideological divisions between ‘giving the public what it wants’, versus the desire to educate, reform and improve (Norris 2000). Dahlgren (1992: 18) thus notes that no researcher says that tabloid journalism is ‘good’ in any traditional sense of the word, but the interpretations are by no means uniform – there are many nuances as much as tabloids themselves differ.

One dimension taken by the critics of ‘tabloidisation’ borders around the tabloids’ pre-occupation with celebrity personalities, with human interest, as one of the central complaints for those who allege that the media are ‘dumbing down’ or indulging in ‘infotainment’ at the expense of serious news that analyses home or international affairs. Reporting styles that draw attention to the personality and feelings of the audience are thus

perceived as breaching the codes of objectivity that have been regarded as sacrosanct in journalistic discourse. Critics of 'tabloidisation' extend their concerns further; arguing that information that aims to be entertaining makes only modest demands on the audience. Thus, Bourdieu argues that the focus is on those things which are apt to arouse curiosity but require no analysis (cited in Macdonald 2003: 57). This type of reporting, in the words of Nicholas (cited in Macdonald 2003: 61), urges audiences to 'look but not care, see but not act, know but not change,' a scenario that conflicts with Dahlgren (1995: 50) and Berger (2000: 90)'s submissions that, at some level good journalism must in part, depend on its capacity to attract and engage the audience in order to stimulate the processes of meaning-making and critical reflection.

In the same line of thought, critics of the cultural populism tradition, Williamson and Gray (cited in Strelitz 2005: 16), argue against the uncritical celebration of pleasure, calling for the need to critically interrogate underlying issues behind pleasures. For them, the often uncritical acceptance of the aesthetic preferences and pleasures of audiences begs the question not only of their effect, but also their origins. Gray consequently argues, "we should ask how popular pleasures come about and what dimensions of the social structure they help to hold in place" (cited in Strelitz 2005: 16).

In submitting to the picture painted by Nicholas above, Bourdieu contends that tabloids feed a style of reporting capable of mobilising prejudice against those who are already stigmatised, an aspect equitable to 'symbolic lynching' as the readers cease to be addressed as citizens or active participants in democracy, and are perceived instead as mere consumers, eager to be diverted by gossip or scandal (see Macdonald 2003: 57). In the same vein, Sparks expresses antipathy to the personalisation of news, arguing that it makes 'the personal' not only the starting point, but also the substance and end point, thus leading to what he terms 'depoliticisation' of understanding as individual actions and experiences are detached from social processes (Sparks in Macdonald 2003: 58).

Sparks further proffers a more ideologically critical appraisal, rejecting the submission that popular interpretations of the tabloids can be viewed as resistance to dominant social order, as suggested by Fiske (1992). Sparks argues thus:

However, attractive the prospect of 'capturing' the popular for the forces of social progress may appear, it seems to me that the theory of the popular which comes closest to describing how it is actually structured... [is that classic socialist position

which] argues that while it undoubtedly rests upon the mobilization and organization of the concerns of ‘the people’ *it does so in a way that prevents them becoming aware of their status as members of social-class.* (1992: 42) (emphasis mine)

It is also important to highlight that the diversity of views on tabloid journalism call for a greater openness when making normative judgments about tabloid journalism and its diverse aspects. As this section has attempted to demonstrate, academic opinion on tabloidisation is divided. Acknowledging the divergence of opinions in the debate, Bird sees tabloidisation as a multifaceted phenomenon, whose different manifestations and functions could be evaluated quite differently within diverse cultural contexts (cited in Machin & Papatheoderou 2002: 37).

Against this background, the next section attempts to examine diverse views that have emerged in applying the public sphere concept to tabloids – it demonstrates the continuing relevance of Habermas’ ideas as a frame for analysing the social function of the media in general and tabloids in particular, with respect to this study.

3.5 Tabloids and the Public Sphere concept

Media scholars are divided between those who accuse tabloids of blindfolding readers from mainstream political issues and those who acknowledge their function in stirring critical rational political debate as encapsulated in Habermas’ public sphere concept. For tabloid critics, tabloids are quite obviously a dubious guide to adequate political understanding as they represent systematic disinformation, reducing their readers’ chances of rational political choices and actions (see Gripsrud 1992: 91). For the critics, tabloids accomplish this through giving priority to immediate issues of daily life at the marginalisation of concerns traditionally ascribed to the public sphere. The structure of the popular press is thus seen as one that is massively and systematically ‘depoliticised’ (see Sparks 1992: 39). Sparks further observes that the majority of tabloids take a conservative political position on the main questions of the day (issues of public concern). While traditional ‘quality’ journalism does indeed – at least on the surface – provide a picture of the world in which the construction of coherence and totality is the work of the reader, the tabloid press embeds a form of immediacy in its handling of public issues. This immediacy of explanation is manifest in direct appeal to personal experience. The popular conception of the personal therefore becomes the explanatory

framework within which the social order is presented as transparent. In the same light, the experiences of the individual are offered as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of the social totality (Sparks 1992: 39).

Although Sparks concedes that there is a sense in which the matters with which the popular press is concerned have a ‘political dimension,’ he is quick to argue that a conception of politics which concentrates on the everyday at the expense of the historical is one which remains within the existing relations of exploitation and oppression (Sparks 1992: 39). According to Machin and Papatheoderou (2002: 37), it is this function that sets the tabloid apart from serious journalism and its declared objectives to enlighten and facilitate the exercise of democratic citizenship.

Tabloid critics further reflect concern over the potential erosion of the foundations of public debate through a shift in priorities towards agendas and discursive practices associated with tabloid journalism. The UK *Daily Mirror*, which adopted tabloid characteristics between 1934 and 1936, faced radical criticism for its unapologetically sensational, ‘vulgar’ and ‘non-objective’ nature – seen as shameless abandonment of democratic aspirations through its relationship with readers than ‘public interest’ (see Bromley 2003: 130). Arguing within the context of the Bulgarian tabloid press, Spassov (2004) submits that the essence of quality debates in the tabloid press has impacted on the character of the public sphere and the political class itself has become accustomed to functioning in the conditions of absence of quality debate, low authenticity and widespread unaccountability. Spassov (2004: 6-10) further contends that the tabloid press’s ‘depoliticisation’ of the people is a strategy opposite to the one which society needs – critical, rational and politically reasoned debate on key issues of public interest.

Expressing similar sentiments, Berger, makes a case against the democratic function of journalism coloured by emotion, sensation and pleasure-orientation (tabloid journalism), arguing that:

[A]s much as the politics of the personal are important for democracy and the distribution of power in society, journalism should not lose sight of the politics of the state and economic power... Journalists should be challenging... political apathy, thereby playing the part of a watchdog that thinks for itself. (2000: 90)

Other perspectives, however, argue that tabloids play an instrumental function in enhancing the democratic participation of their readers. Therefore, despite misgivings about the

relevance of the public sphere theory to the analysis of the reception of tabloids, a sensibility remains amongst some media scholars that tabloids nevertheless contribute to public participation, deliberation and public expression. Thus, while tabloids cannot easily be defended as occasioning autonomous, rational and critical discussion leading to consensus, alternative conceptions of the public sphere that are more compatible with tabloids have been explored. These articulate a more modest and partial role for tabloids in broader processes of democratisation and public participation. The alternative conceptions of the public sphere are a culmination of the revision of Habermas' exclusionary bourgeois public sphere which confines public life to a single, overarching public sphere as discussed in section 3.1 above. As Fraser (1992) argues, in the single overarching public sphere, members of subordinated groups have arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives and strategies. In this situation, they are less likely to find the right voice or words to express their thoughts and hence are unable to articulate and defend their interests in the comprehensive public sphere. It is against this background that members of subordinated social groups have found it advantageous to constitute parallel discursive arenas where they invent and circulate discourses that relate to their identities, interests and needs (Fraser 1992: 123).

The idea that the tabloids might fit an alternative conception of the public sphere through offering the opportunity for expression of marginal voices that would otherwise not be heard in public has been given impetus by a wide ranging critique. Fiske has been quite instrumental in these debates, positing that the popular press has emerged as a new ideological arena in which popular politics has found a home. For him:

Popular politics tend toward those domains where popular interests may be promoted. In our current conditions, the public sphere has been thoroughly and often corruptly colonized by the power-bloc that the people are channeling their political energies elsewhere. (Fiske 1992: 42)

Fiske thus sees the tabloid press as providing an alternative platform for rational critical debate as it provokes conversation – the taking up and re-circulating news issues (orally) that the people construct aspects of the public sphere as relevant to their own.

It is further argued that conventional forms of official news can actually limit rather than facilitate a full flow of information necessary for democracy, thus necessitating the transformation of knowledge about the political world into popular information, that is, into

information that forms the world and those who know it as part of the conditions of the everyday life of the people (Fiske 1992: 42). In the same line of thought, Ornebring and Jonsson (2004: 284) argue that tabloid journalism, in many cases, does a better job in serving the public good than 'respectable journalism'. It has positioned itself in different ways as an alternative public sphere.

Drawing on several examples in journalism history, Ornebring and Jonsson demonstrate that the tabloid press can actually be an important and influential part of the mainstream mediated public-sphere and public discourse, serving the public good. They argue that:

The populist nature of tabloid journalism may have many faults, but it can also be seen as an alternative arena for public discourse, wherein criticism of both the privileged political elites and traditional types of public discourse play a central role. (Ornebring and Jonsson 2004: 293)

In the view of these scholars, tabloid journalism has an ability to broaden the public by giving news access to groups that previously have not been targeted by the 'prestige press' (as was the case when the penny press and the yellow journalism aimed for the mass audience). The key assumption here is that the often-criticised appeal to emotions prevalent in tabloid journalism can actually stimulate political participation by speaking to the senses and feelings as well as the rational mind. According to Tomlinson the shift of emphasis towards personal narratives is a significant means of democratising public discourse by opening it up to new voices (cited in Machin & Papatheoderou 2002: 37). It is thus argued that although tabloids' stress on the private seems anathema to what the public sphere is all about, authors like Fraser (1992) point out that battles both for recognition and power have often been fought by first having to redefine issues previously viewed as belonging to the private sphere as issues of public concern (see Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 294). In this light, the tabloid press represents a new possibility for people not normally covered by the 'prestige media' to speak in public and to gain attention, this is particularly so, considering that the discourses created in tabloid journalism are clearly not taking place 'somewhere else,' and hence are providing some kind of an 'emancipatory potential.' According to Fraser (1992: 124), the alternative publics, with whom the tabloid press is associated, have a dual character. On the one hand they function as spaces for withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand they function as bases and training

grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between the two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. Against this background, Ornebring and Jonsson (2004: 287) argue that there is no theoretical reason why tabloid journalism should not be able to do exactly the same kinds of things Habermas has shown that the early press did during the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere.

It remains highly contestable, however, whether tabloids can generate a critical awareness of societal reality, despite the view that they offer alternative content to an increasingly disenfranchised population as suggested by Fiske (1992) and other media scholars cited above.

3.6 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has discussed the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, demonstrating that the concept has been revised by scholars like Fraser (1992) and used in exploring whether tabloids constitute a viable framework for the formation of public opinion concerning issues of the moment. The chapter has also demonstrated the divergence of views among media scholars regarding tabloids and their democratising effect upon public discourses in society. It is a divergence rooted in the critical theory/ cultural populism debates on which the binary perception of tabloid journalism as good or bad is entrenched. On the one hand, tabloids are perceived as opening up new spaces for debate and representation of social reality, and on the other hand, they are perceived as blindfolding their readers from critical social and political activities. It is important, however, to underline the fact that these ideas remain contestable. The next chapter explores audience studies theory in an attempt to locate reception theory, which as indicated in Chapter 1 constitutes the methodological framework of this study.

CHAPTER 4

AUDIENCE STUDIES: SITUATING RECEPTION ANALYSIS

Reception involves active sense making. People are by no means passive recipients; to make sense is to actively interpret the world and one's place in it. This takes place within the horizons of everyday life. (Dahlgren 1992: 17)

[T]he meaning of media texts is not something fixed, or inherent, within the text. Rather, media texts acquire meaning only at the moment of reception, that is, when they are read, viewed, listened to, or whatever. (Ang 1990: 160)

4. Introduction

Concern over the relationship between media texts and their audiences has spurred audience research since the first messages were disseminated to a mass audience. Much speculation and debate has emerged in attempting to understand the exact nature of the relationship between audiences and media output. In reviewing the progress of this debate, media scholars have made attempts to identify 'distinct' phases of theoretical developments sprawling over time. To this end, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the main research traditions examining the nexus between media and audiences with a view to situate this study within its methodological framework – reception analysis. The chapter thus reviews literature relating to key theoretical paradigms as research shifted from preoccupation with *effects* to an increasing recognition of the 'active audience', emerging with the *Uses and Gratifications* theory and developments rooted in *Cultural Studies*, emphasising negotiations between texts and readers situated within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts.

4.1 Background

The history of audience studies oscillates between perspectives which stress textual power over audiences, and perspectives which stress audience power over texts (see Morely 1989: 16; Strelitz 2000: 37). What makes these phases 'distinct' is the degree to which the balance of power and influence is attributed to the media, in terms of production and content, or to the audience, as receiver of that content (O'Sullivan et al. 1994: 150). Thus as the debate progressed, the criticism of one approach constituted the basis upon which new perspectives emerged. It is in this light that the research shifted from exclusively quantitative empirical data

collection traditions to more integrated approaches that include qualitative analysis of both content and audience reception.

In discussing approaches to understanding the relationship between texts and audiences, Strelitz (2000: 37) observes that at the most general level, competing attempts to make sense of text/audience relationships are underpinned by differences amongst theorists about how to analyse the social formation as a whole, hence Bennett's argument that:

[T]he sorts of assumptions made about the broader structure of society within different bodies of theory have determined both the sorts of questions that have been posed in relation to the media and the way in which those questions have been pursued. (cited in Strelitz 2000: 37)

In explaining this view, Strelitz cites the example of the Frankfurt School theorists' preoccupation with factors impeding radical social and economic transformation in Europe, which led them to focus on the role of the 'culture industries' as ideological apparatuses serving dominant societal interests. For Strelitz, "the social and political assumptions of Marxist materialism shaped [the Frankfurt theorists'] concerns and their theoretical approach" (2000: 37).

Strelitz further suggests that another way of distinguishing the competing approaches is to distinguish between those approaches stressing the determining power of the media, and those that highlight the interpretive freedom of audiences (Strelitz 2000: 38). The first position is represented by the *effects* tradition, which draws on a hypodermic model of media influence. This position is represented by the whole tradition of *effects* studies, mobilising a hypodermic model of media influence, in which the media are seen as having the power to 'inject' their audiences with particular messages which will cause them to behave in a particular way (Morley 1989: 16). Overall, the shift in audience studies has gone from 'mass audience' perspectives with stress on the passive model, to perspectives rooted in *Cultural Studies* with stress on the active model. Against the backdrop of this brief background, the following sections make an attempt to discuss the 'distinct' phases of audience studies theory with a view to locate reception analysis.

4.2 *Effects studies: the passive audience*

The idea that the media are a powerful social and political force gathered momentum in the 1920s and 1930s, when the political propaganda of, first Soviet Russia and then Nazi Germany,

seemed capable of seducing and persuading ordinary citizens in ways not thought possible prior to an age of mass media (O'Sullivan et al. 1994: 168; Brooker & Jermyn 2003: 5). Audiences came to be seen as comprising a mass of isolated individuals vulnerable to the influence of powerful new media such as cinema, radio and especially the tabloid newspapers – hence the label mass manipulation. According to this thesis:

[M]odern society was characterized by the breakdown of the traditional social responsibilities and ties, leading to a mass of alienated individuals who could be led and controlled. (Brooker & Jermyn 2003: 5)

These conclusions emanated from studies, mostly conducted by American psychologists using stimuli experiments and controls which led to the conclusion that the media had direct influence and effects on people (see O'Sullivan et al. 1994: 152). As Bennett (1982) notes, the audience was then theorised as a mass of passive and vulnerable recipients. By the same token, the media were likened to an irresistible hypodermic needle or a magic bullet often associated with mass society theory rooted in the belief that industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation of European and American society in the 17th century led to the breakdown of traditional human relationships. As people migrated to towns in search of employment and other attractions of modernisation, a new society of alienated, culturally rootless, undifferentiated and anonymous people who had no relations based on friendship, kinship and traditional loyalty emerged. It is therefore not surprising that a lot of early fears about the powers of the media were fed by the idea of the mass. Ang observes that:

Some early theorists were concerned that the media – especially very popular media such as movies, radio, and later television – were acting like ‘hypodermic needles,’ injecting messages directly into the veins of their completely defenceless viewers and listeners. More generally, the mass audience was often looked down upon as being composed of people with low taste and intelligence. (1990: 157)

Members of the Frankfurt School advanced one of the most influential versions of this kind of ‘hypodermic’ theory of media effects. Their ‘pessimistic mass society thesis’ reflected the authors’ experience of the breakdown of modern Germany into fascism during the 1930s (Morley 1992: 42). The breakdown was attributed, in part, to the loosening of traditional ties and structures which were seen as then leaving people more ‘atomised’ and exposed to external influences, and especially to the pressure of the mass propaganda of powerful leaders, the most effective agency of which was the mass media. This ‘pessimistic mass society thesis’ stressed

the conservative and reconciliatory role of 'mass culture' for the audience. Mass culture was seen to suppress 'potentialities', and to deny awareness of contradictions in a 'one-dimensional world' (see Morley 1992: 43). Implicit here was a 'hypodermic' model of the media, which was seen as having the power to 'inject' a repressive ideology directly into the consciousness of the masses. Thus, the Frankfurt School theorists saw the media as purveyors of narcotising ideology, defining for the audience terms in which to 'think' (or not to think) about the world, for them:

The treat [the media] embody is that they inhibit thought itself by inducing us to live, mentally, in a world of hypnotic definitions and automatic ideological equations which rule out any effective cognitive mediation on our part. (Bennett 1982: 44)

In this light, early audience research sought to discern the 'effects' the media had on its audiences, and this phase of audience research has become known as the *effects* or 'hypodermic needle' model, a simple stimulus-response approach which imagines the media as a kind of narcotic and the relationship between the media and audiences as one where the audience can be 'injected' with a message (Brooke & Jerymn 2003: 6). In large measure, therefore, the discussion of media *effects* associated with the mass society approach, asserts that people exist only as receptacles for media messages, as passive groups whose behaviours and attitudes are the result of a powerful external force - the media. The implicit assumption is that to understand the media's effect on people, all we need to know is what the messages say. Certainly, this image is a bit overdrawn (Croteau & Hoynes 2003: 265 - 66).

However, against this overly pessimistic backdrop, the emigration of the leading members of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer) to America, during the 1930s, led to the development of a specifically 'American' school of research in the forties and fifties. The Frankfurt School's 'pessimistic' thesis, of the link between 'mass society' and fascism, and the role of the media in cementing it, proved unacceptable to American researchers. The 'pessimistic' thesis, they argued, took too far the thesis that all intermediary social structures between leaders/media and the masses had broken down, it did not accurately reflect the pluralistic nature of society, hence was sociologically naïve (see Brooke & Jerymn 2003: 6-7). By focusing on the 'effects' of the media, this perspective largely striped members of the audience of any human agency. Clearly, the media had social effects that needed to be

examined and researched, but equally clearly, these effects were neither all-powerful, simple, nor even necessarily direct.

It is therefore not surprising that the shortcomings of the *effects* model began to emerge with the realisation of its neglect of diverse and even conflicting ‘cross-pressures’ wrought on every individual by various social and cultural affiliations, such as class, ethnicity and religion - the failure to place adequate importance on social context. Ang thus aptly argues that the mass society thesis tends,

[t]o ignore the fact that media audiences consist of human beings who do not merely respond to media output more or less passively, but who are actively involved, both emotionally and intellectually, with particular forms of media material. [It does not] take account of the fact that we do not consume media material as isolated and solitary individuals, but in particular social settings and cultural frameworks. (1990: 158)

Ang (1990: 157) further contends that the concept of the mass does not give us any understanding of the world of media audiences themselves. After all, do we see ourselves as passive, easily manipulated, and anonymous while we are watching television? As British cultural analyst Raymond Williams has put it, there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses, and those ways tend to be elitist and moralistic (see Ang 1990: 157).

It is important, however, to point out that the *effects* research highlighted what virtually all observers now accept, the fact that media messages matter – that they are not separate from our ‘real’ lives but are central to our everyday lives (Croteau & Hoynes 2003: 265). The weaknesses of the *effects* tradition nevertheless led to the birth of new perspectives with stress on the active audience, these constitute the focus of subsequent sections.

4.3 Changing perspectives: the birth of the active audience

Instead of the media being seen as an all-powerful force working on the audience, there emerged the view that audiences are active in interpreting media content and that they comprise individuals whose membership of social groups should not be ignored (see O’Sullivan et al. 1994: 152 and Ang 1990: 159). This shift in perspectives within audience research is represented by James Halloran’s much repeated phrase: “We must get away from the habit of thinking in terms of what the media do to the people and substitute for it the idea of what people do with the media” (cited in O’Sullivan et al. 1994: 155).

The earliest attempts towards the birth of the active audience perspectives were spearheaded by the *Uses and Gratifications* tradition researchers, who propounded that the

media are functional for people and therefore using media gratifies certain needs and wants (Ang 1990: 158). Subsequent to the *Uses and Gratifications* approach, emerged the reception tradition, developed by researchers concerned with the ways people ‘interpret and make sense’ of media texts within the context of everyday life. Within this approach, audiences are thought of as active readers rather than passive recipients. The meaning of media texts is seen as something that these active audiences construct rather than something pre-fabricated by media producers. This is mainly because a large body of recent research demonstrates that media audiences are active interpreters of meaning. As Croteau and Hoynes (2003: 266) put it, “real people with lives, histories, and social networks are the audiences for mass media products.” The sections below alternately discuss, in detail, these changing perspectives in audience studies.

4.3.1 Uses and Gratifications

As highlighted above, in the wake of studies that questioned the hypodermic needle or magic bullet theories of media power, media researchers suggested that they start asking what people do with the media since different members of the audience may interpret media content differently (see Jensen & Rosengren 1990 and Morley 1992). The new approach, called *Uses and Gratifications*, largely associated with the work of Katz, Blumler, Halloran and the work of the Leicester Centre for Mass Communications Research during the 1960s, marked the departure from the conception of the audience as a mass of passive individuals to seeing them as active users of media content. Within the perspective, the audience came to be credited with an active role, so that there was then a question of looking at what people do with the media, rather than what the media do to them. This argument was obviously of great significance in moving the debate forward to begin to look to the active engagement of the audience with the media.

One key advance developed by the *Uses and Gratifications* perspective was that of the variability of responses and interpretations of media texts by the audience, which led to departure from talk about the ‘effects’ of a text on a homogenous mass audience who are all expected to be affected in the same way. The *Uses and Gratifications* researchers thus assumed that media audiences are active in their choices of media material. Similarly, Ang argues that:

[F]rom this perspective, the use of media is a highly selective and motivated activity, and not just a mindless pastime. In general, people use the media because they expect

that doing so will give them some gratifications – hence the name of this research tradition. These gratifications are assumed to be related to the satisfaction of social and psychological needs experienced by the individual. (1990: 159)

The reasons repeatedly mentioned by people for their choice of particular media can be divided into four categories, viz: *information* – finding out about society and the world, seeking advice on practical matters and satisfying curiosity and interest; *personal identity* – finding reinforcement for personal values, finding models for behaviour and gaining insight into oneself; *intergration and social interaction* – gaining insight into circumstances of others, gaining a sense of belonging, finding a basis for conversation and helping to carry out social roles; and *entertainment* – being diverted from problems, relaxation, getting cultural and aesthetic pleasure, emotional release and sexual arousal (McQuail in Ang 1990: 159). Ang (1990: 159) adds that most people will be able to recognise themselves in many of the items mentioned above and it has been the merit of *Uses and Gratifications* researchers to have provided sufficient empirical evidence for all of them.

According to Morley (1989), the shift from a passive to an active audience in media studies came because of the rise of the psychology of personality, which emphasised that differences in personality were responsible for people's idiosyncrasies, including how they use the media. However, while acknowledging that the audience are active and chose what to watch, the *Uses and Gratifications* approach as a model of understanding audiences also has its limitations; critics argue that the perspective remains individualistic, in so far as differences of response or interpretation are ultimately attributed solely to individual differences of personality or psychology (Morley 1989: 16). The model does not consider how messages are interpreted or any other factors affecting the audience's interpretation. To this end, one may concur with Morley that, clearly the:

[u]ses and gratifications [theory] does represent a significant advance on effects theory, in so far as it opens up to the question of different interpretations. However, it remains severely limited by its insufficiently sociological or cultural perspective, in so far as everything is reduced to the level of individual psychology. (1989: 17)

One also notes that like the *effects* tradition, the *Uses and Gratifications* model ignores to some extent the audience and their social backgrounds, how they form their interpretations of the media messages and their specific relationship with the media text. At its crudest, the

model implies that audiences comprise individuals whose conscious search for gratification elicits a media response, which supplies their needs. This laissez-faire market concept overlooks the extent to which audience needs are partly a product of media supply (learning to enjoy what is available), and the social context from which the audience originates, e.g. class and ethnic subcultures (O'Sullivan et. al 1994: 157, see also Ang 1990: 159).

The model also tends to concentrate solely on why audiences consume the media rather than extending the investigation to discover what meanings and interpretations are produced and in what circumstances, that is, how the media are received (O'Sullivan et. al 1994: 131). This is compounded by the fact that the approach essentially does not give attention to the content of media output, that is, *Uses and Gratifications* researchers attempt to find out why people use the media, but forget to analyse exactly what people get out of a TV show, a book, or a pop song (Ang 1990: 160). What is overlooked are the meanings people give to media culture.

It is important to point out that it was in an attempt to fill the gaps in the *Uses and Gratifications* theory that Stuart Hall and other *Cultural Studies* theoreticians viewed mass communication as a structured activity, largely influenced by socio-cultural context (see Morley 1992 and O'Sullivan 1994). These issues form the focus of reception theory – the general theoretical and methodological framework guiding this study, as already pointed out in Chapter 1. The next section discusses this approach.

4.3.2 Reception analysis

In the late 1980s, there were a number of calls to scholars to recognise a possible 'convergence' of previously disparate approaches under the general banner of 'reception analysis' (see Jensen & Rosengren 1990). In practice, the term 'reception analysis' has come to be widely used as a way of characterising the wave of audience research which occurred within communications and *Cultural Studies* during the 1980s and 1990s. On the whole, this work has adopted a 'culturalist' perspective and has tended to be concerned, one way or another, with exploring the active choices, uses and interpretations made of media materials by their consumers. The most important point of origin for this work lies with the development of *Cultural Studies* at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the early 1970s and, in particular, Hall's 'encoding/decoding' model of

communications, which provided the inspiration and conceptual framework on explorations of the process of media consumption. Drawing heavily on semiology and structuralism, media texts were seen as structured according to well-defined codes and conventions, but more importantly, emphasis was placed on the 'active audience' (see O'Sullivan et. al 1994: 157). In this sense, the value of Hall's model was its freeing the text from complete ideological closure, and in its shift away from the text towards the reader as the site of meaning production (Fiske: 1987: 64). Hall's model thus remains a vital moment in audience research since it ties together a number of themes within discussions on interpretive social science, ideology, semiotics, and crucially, how these ideas influence the approach we take to media audiences (see Schroder et al. 2003: 127; Ruddock 2001: 123; and O'Sullivan et. al. 1994: 164). It is accordingly, important to take a brief detour in the next section and focus on Stuart Hall's, *Encoding and Decoding* model.

4.3.3 *The foundation of reception analysis*

The encoding/decoding model

As indicated above, the model's conceptual framework and core theoretical concepts have been canonical for a generation of reception researchers (Schroder et al. 2003: 128). The model was designed to take on board concerns with the ways in which responses and interpretations are socially structured and culturally patterned at a level beyond that of individual psychologies. The model was also critically, informed by semiological perspectives, focusing on the question of how communication works (see Schroder et al 2003: 128; Morley 1989: 17). The key focus was on the realisation that we are, of course, dealing with signs and symbols, which only have meaning within the terms of reference supplied by codes which the audience shares, to some greater or lesser extent, with the producers of messages.

The model's aim was therefore holistic as it tried to grasp mass communication as a complex, non-linear signifying process. In the model, Hall posits that in analysing a media text, we are not dealing with a fixed structure of meaning, but with a volatile phenomenon resulting from the codes at the disposal of both the producers and the recipients of the text, all of which are steeped in a sea of social meanings and ideologies (Schroder et al. 2003: 128). The model thus draws upon two extreme ends of a spectrum, what Abercrombie (1996) refers to as the dominant text view and the dominant audience view. In fact, it took from the *effects* theorists,

the notion that mass communication is a structured activity, in which the institutions which produce the messages do have the power to set agendas, and to define issues. It moved away from the idea of the power of the medium to make a person behave in a certain way, holding onto a notion of the role of the media in setting agendas and providing cultural categories and frameworks within which members of the culture will tend to operate. The model also attempted to incorporate, from the *Uses and Gratifications* perspective, the idea of the active viewer, making meaning from the signs and symbols, which the media provide (see Morley 1989: 17).

In summary, the premises of Hall's encoding/decoding model were as follows: the same event can be encoded in more than one way; the message always contains more than one potential 'reading'; messages propose and 'prefer' certain readings over others, but they can never become wholly closed around one reading – they remain polysemic, that is, capable, in principle, of a variety of interpretations; understanding the message is also a problematic practice, however transparent and 'natural' it may seem. Messages encoded one way can always be decoded in a different way (see McQuail 1997: 18-19). Hall thus took the dominant audience view, which acknowledges the presence of a strong preferred meaning, but also saw texts as polysemic – they have a number of possible meanings and that it is up to the audience to analyse and interpret them.

Aligning himself with the idea that media meaning was best understood from the perspective of people at the receiving end, Hall postulated that audiences could react in one of three ways to a media text: they could accept the *preferred* reading; they could accept parts of the text while rejecting others, constructing what he called a *negotiated* reading; or they could reject what the text was trying to make them think in an *oppositional* reading (Ruddock 2001: 125 – 126). Hall set up a textual standard that the decoding positions engage in the sense-making process, leading him to suggest the notion of preferred reading. According to Schroder et. al.

[t]his is the connotative meaning, inscribed in the text, which is produced by the hegemonic framework governing mass media production routines and which promotes socio-central taken-for-granted meanings that serve the interests of the dominant social groups. (2003: 128)

Within the terms of Hall's model, it is highly probable that the meaning 'preferred' by the ruling-class encoders will also become the preferred 'reading' of the working class decoders,

because “encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate” (Hall in Schroder et al. 2003: 129).

Despite the fact that Hall’s ideas were largely based on textual analysis, encoding/decoding implied that the only way to assess the impact of a text was to look at the audience (Ruddock 2001: 125). The strength of the model lies in its realisation that the meaning made by the audience is affected by various factors which include socio-economic frameworks, past experiences and the context in which the media message is consumed. The model has thus continued to set the basic conceptual framework for the notable boom in studies of media consumption and the media audiences which occurred during the 1980s. To take only the best known examples, the body of work produced in that period included, *inter alia*, Morley (1980) § study of the “*Nationwide*” audience, Ang (1985) § study of *Dallas* viewers and Fiske (1987) § study of *Television Culture* (see Ruddock 2001: 130-131). Hall’s model has thus been instrumental in changing perspectives in audience studies, it highlighted that meaning is dynamic and happens as a result of the interaction between the message and the receiver. As Hart (1991) argues, the meaning is not in the text, but in the reading. The idea of active reception now fuels much of the research on audience interpretation; particularly work focusing on the context of media consumption, much of which is situated within the broad framework of reception analysis. The next section gives a brief overview of the essentials of reception analysis.

4.3.4 *The essentials of reception analysis*

Reception analysis has served to reinvigorate theoretical as well as political discussions on the issue of ‘impact’, raised in the early theoretical traditions of audience studies discussed above. Its starting point is that the meaning of media texts is not something fixed, or inherent, within the text. Rather, media texts acquire meaning only at the moment of reception, that is, audiences are seen as producers of meaning, not just consumers of media content - they decode or interpret media texts in ways that are related to their social and cultural circumstances and to the way in which they subjectively experience those circumstances (Ang 1990: 160; see also Pitout 1998: 65). In support of this view, Ruddock (2001: 119) argues that communication is culturally specific and as such can only be understood as a process from the point of view of the people involved. In general, therefore, reception researchers aim to uncover how people in their own social and historical contexts make sense of media texts in the ways that are

meaningful, suitable, and accessible to them. There is, therefore, acknowledgement among reception researchers, of the fact that “the reader produces meanings that derive from the intersection of his/ her social history with the social forces structured into the text” (Fiske 1987: 82).

Reception research can thus be seen as a cross-fertilisation project, attempting to borrow from its predecessors. It ‘draws its theory from the humanities and its methodology from the social sciences’ (Jensen in Schroder et al. 2003: 123). Its basic tenet is that meaning is never just transferred from the media to their audiences. Meaning, in media as well as in face-to-face interaction, is generated according to the communicative repertoires, or codes of the encoder(s). Moreover, media/audience meaning processes are firmly embedded in the social contexts of everyday life in which people use the media (Schroder et al. 2003: 122).

In this light, the approach has defined itself in dual opposition: on the one hand, to humanistic textual analysis, with its implied position that media meanings and ideologies are imposed on passive minds and may be brought to light by textual analysis alone; on the other hand, to the survey-based *Uses and Gratifications* approach, whose analysis of media gratifications ignores the meanings that create these gratifications (Schroder et al. 2003: 122). Reception research is critical of both for neglecting to explore the everyday contexts in which meanings and uses arise.

It tries to understand audience-meaning processes in accordance with hermeneutic theories underlying the humanistic traditions of semiotics and linguistic discourse analysis, and it explores the meaning processes through methods of empirical fieldwork, borrowed from the more phenomenological traditions in the social sciences (Schroder et al. 2003: 123).

Reception analysis is thus interested in social meanings, that is, meanings that are culturally shared. Ang (1990: 161) observes that some reception researchers have used the terms ‘interpretive communities’ or ‘subcultures’ to denote groups of people who make common interpretations of a text. Such groups of people do not have to be physically united in one location, but can be geographically dispersed and can consist of many different kinds of people who do not know each other but are symbolically connected by their shared interest in a media product. In the same vein, Jensen (1988: 4) notes that the central locus of analysis is the interface between medium and audience, and the interface itself is a social form rather than a direct consequence of the specific technology.

It is perhaps important to highlight the fact that reception analysis has made considerable contribution to media research. One key point is that:

[R]eception is a relatively open activity of making sense, so that audiences reformulate or, perhaps, oppose what is arguably the dominant meaning of the media text. Drawing on their own categories of experience, the recipients may establish links between media discourses and everyday discourses from politics and culture, which are rather unexpected and which move beyond the universes 'immanent' in the text. (Jensen 1988: 4)

Reception analysis has also been fundamental to the theory and politics of communication. By exploring the mechanics of meaning production, reception studies began to characterise, in more concrete terms than much earlier research (discussed above), the process through which the mass media can be said to make an impact on individuals, social groups and whole cultures (Jensen 1988: 4). The approach provides new material for the political and public debate of cultural 'impact' of communication. It is for this reason that this study is rooted in reception theory. Reception analysis thus makes it clear that an interdependent relationship exists between readers and texts. As Livingstone suggests, what is required is:

[A] negotiated position that recognises the complexity of the interaction between text and viewer, where encoding may differ radically from decoding. The attack on structuralism, where elite critics locate unique and determinate meanings 'in' the text and where actual interpretations by readers are either neglected or regarded as misguided or incorrect, has changed the way we conceive of meaning. (1998: 7)

In terms of data gathering methods, reception analysis combines a qualitative approach to media as texts with an empirical interest in the recipients as co-producers of meaning. It is, in other words, audience-cum-content analysis (Jensen 1988: 3; see also Jensen & Rosengren 1990: 214). Qualitative empirical methods of data gathering are thus pivotal to the method. It is, in particular, the in-depth interview, in different varieties, which has most frequently been employed to probe the audience experience of the media (Jensen 1988: 4). As Ang (1990: 162) observes, unlike the *Uses and Gratifications* researchers, reception researchers do not usually use the standard questionnaire as a method of investigation. Instead, they use more small-scale, qualitative methods such as group interviews and in-depth individual interviews.

The data gathered is further interpreted with reference to surrounding socio-cultural context, as social context is considered important in shaping the interaction between media and recipients. Jensen warns that:

[It] should be said emphatically that reception analysis does *not* assume that audiences simply tell it 'like it is'. In other words in-depth interviews are not finished accounts of what media experience feels/ looks/ sounds like; it is only a better, more differentiated material concerning reception, which must be analysed further and interpreted. Audience interviews constitute another text to be decoded analytically (1988: 4).

Although reception analysis has now consolidated itself as an established tradition with a solid theoretical and methodological foundation, it is not without limitations. Ang (1990: 162) posits that in their emphasis on interpretation and production of textual meaning, reception researchers still tend to isolate the text-audience relationship from the larger context in which the media are consumed by people – the context of everyday life, which is the cornerstone of ethnographic approaches to audiences, whose object is to analyse how the media are integrated in people's everyday lives (Ang 1990: 162). It is, however, not the object of this Chapter to discuss ethnographic approaches.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has made an attempt to review past theories on the way audiences receive and interpret media messages in a manner of situating reception analysis – the methodological position that underpins this study - in audience studies. The chapter has revealed that there are various ways in which the audience can be viewed, with research shifting from the *effects* tradition to recognition of the 'active audience' emanating from the *Uses and Gratifications* theory and the *Cultural Studies* tradition. Although there are some indications of increasing convergence in research approaches, as some authors have noted, especially in the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, large differences of underlying philosophy and conceptualisation remain between the alternate schools. Having situated reception theory within the broad and general developments of audience studies theory, the next chapter shifts attention to the research methodology used in this study, which is inextricably attached to reception theory.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

If we, as academic researchers, are interested in understanding how people experience media content, we have to use a research approach that enables us to explore the processes through which people actualise media meanings and incorporate them in meaningful ways into their daily lives. (Schroder et al. 2003: 122)

It has become conventional wisdom within reception research that one of its achievements has been to bring together two research enterprises that have traditionally been segregated: the analysis of media texts and the study of audience practices. (Jensen 1991: 135)

5. Introduction

In attempting to generate empirical data on the popularity of *uMthunywa* amongst its Bulawayo readers, in terms of the meanings they derive from the newspaper as part of their everyday lived experiences, this study followed a qualitative research design rooted in reception theory as discussed in the preceding chapter. It consequently places emphasis on the comparative empirical analysis of ‘media discourses’ with ‘audience discourses’ in order to examine the processes of reception which have a bearing on the use of the editorial content of the newspaper (Jensen & Rosengren 1990: 219; Jensen 1988: 3). In this light, this chapter describes and discusses the research design and procedure followed in the study. It also highlights the sampling procedures employed in the study. In doing so, the chapter places particular focus on the following: the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research; the epistemological foundations of reception research; the research procedure and sampling (qualitative content analysis, focus group interviews, individual in-depth interviews); and the data analysis procedures.

5.1. Research design and procedure

5.1.2 Qualitative research: philosophical underpinnings

As pointed out in Chapter 1, the methodological approach in this study is principally qualitative. Jensen (1984:4) observes that it is the qualitative empirical methods of data gathering which are most often associated with reception analysis. The goal of qualitative research is to access “insider” perspective characteristic of members of a culture (or

subculture) (Priest 1996: 103). Priest (1996: 106 -107) further adds that when the goal is to understand the “insider’s” perspective, a quantitative design is just not the way to go, one requires a holistic and inductive approach which provides the opportunity to develop a descriptive, rich understanding and insight into the individual’s beliefs, concerns, motivations, aspirations, life styles, culture, behaviour and preferences. The approach was seen as appropriate for this study, whose central locus is the interface between *uMthunywa* and its Bulawayo readers.

The question of the appropriateness, for this study, of the methods discussed in section 3 below, is therefore closely hinged on the epistemological foundations of qualitative research methods. The philosophical underpinnings of qualitative methodology are typically attributed to phenomenology. The point about the phenomenological position is that it takes the actor’s perspective as the empirical point of departure. In this light, qualitative studies start from the assumption that in studying humans, we are examining a creative process whereby people produce and maintain forms of life and society and systems of meaning and value. The creative activity is grounded in the ability to build cultural forms from symbols that express this will to live and assert meaning. Given that humans live by interpretations, it is this attempt at recovering the ways persons live by intentions, purposes, and values that qualitative studies are dedicated to (Christians & Carey 1989: 358 - 9). It is chiefly in this sense that it differs radically with quantitative research. The *sine qua non* is a commitment to seeing the social world from the point of view of the actor – one’s subjects (Bryman 1984: 77).

Qualitative research is thus much more fluid than quantitative research. While qualitative research stresses the need to understand social behaviour in its social context (Moore 1993: 33), quantitative research exhibits a tendency for the researcher to view events from the outside and to impose empirical concerns upon social reality (Bryman 1984: 78). The need to study the consumption of media or social behaviour within social context as underlined in qualitative research is fundamental to reception theory. Lindloff also underlines the need by qualitative researchers to explain what observed behaviour or verbal utterances mean in context, he argues thus:

The analytic task is to show the meaningful coherence of these expressions, as it is experienced by the people who are studied. These arguments are then used to

construct theoretical propositions which, in the case of media studies, may address such domains as the interpersonal negotiation of media content... (1992: 25)

It is also important to highlight that the focus of qualitative research is primarily on understanding particulars rather than generalising to universals (Maxwell 1992: 296; Ang 1996: 71). Maxwell observes that qualitative studies are usually not designed to allow systematic generalisations to some wider population, but rather:

[G]eneralization in qualitative research usually takes place through the development of a theory that not only makes sense of particular persons or situations studied, but also shows how the same process in different situations, can lead to different results (1992: 293).

Yin further posits that:

[g]eneralisability is normally based on the assumption that this theory may be useful in making sense of similar persons or situations, rather than on an explicit sampling process and the drawing of conclusions about a specified population through statistical inference. (cited in Maxwell 1992: 293)

In fact, as Anderson and Meyer (cited in Lindloff 1995: 21) note, the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods is that qualitative methods do not rest their evidence on the logic of mathematics, the principles of numbers, or the methods of statistical analysis. Rather actual talk, gesture, and other social action are the raw materials of analysis, which lead to an in depth understanding of the phenomenon in question.

It is important to highlight the fact that the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research have generally led to the questioning of the validity and reliability of qualitative research findings by quantitative researchers. However, as Maxwell observes, there is a place for the issue of validity in qualitative research if one applies the concept primarily to accounts, not to methods. He argues thus:

The applicability of the concept of validity... does not depend on the existence of some absolute truth or reality to which an account can be compared, but only on the fact that there exist ways of assessing accounts that do not depend entirely on features of the account itself, but in some way relate to those things that the account claims to be about. (cited in Strelitz 2005: 65; see also Priest 1996: 114)

Against this background, it is thus important to point out that qualitative studies that follow the basic principles of social science are not 'unscientific' just because they are more interpretive than positivistic in their approach.

5.1.3 Epistemological foundations of reception research

Clearly the research methods discussed in this chapter are hinged on theoretical positions prescribing how reception research ought to be done. It is therefore proper to briefly highlight the epistemological imperatives of reception research. Reception research is the empirical study of the social production of meaning in peoples' encounter with media discourses (see also section 4.3.2 and 4.3.4 in the preceding chapter). It combines a qualitative approach to media as texts, producing and circulating meaning in society, with an empirical interest in the recipients as co-producers of meaning (Jensen 1988:3). The method, then, does not study media use as it happens in natural situations of everyday life like ethnography, though in some instances the two research approaches have been seen as related to a point where they have been used interchangeably (see Schroder et al. 2003).

Reception methodology also differs radically from the methodology of survey research, as it does not expose people to a finite set of questions with pre-given response options. Rather, it explores media experiences through the medium of extended talk (Schroder et al. 2003: 147). It thus seeks to illuminate the audience's practices and experiences, through "getting those involved to verbalise them in a *non-natural but open situation* of the qualitative research interview, in which informants have considerable power to influence the agenda" (Schroder et al. 2003: 147) (emphasis mine). It is worth noting as well that, as with other methodologies in audience research, the data and findings of a reception study should be seen as discursive constructions produced jointly by the researcher and informant's interaction in the research encounter and by the researcher interpreting the interview transcripts. The interpretation of data is done with reference to the surrounding socio-cultural system, which again is conceptualised as a historical configuration of social practices, contexts of use, and interpretative communities (Jensen & Rosengren 1990: 218). It is perhaps important to conclude this section by pointing out that reception research is as adamant about securing good data as any methodological approach (Schroder et al. 2003: 147). The next section discusses and describes the specific research methodologies and sampling procedures implemented in the study.

5.2 *Research procedure and sampling*

The research adopted a three-stage design, which allowed inferences or leads drawn from one data source to be corroborated or followed up by another. The sections below, in turn, discuss the three stages of the research process and the sampling procedures in the following order:

- i. Qualitative content analysis.
- ii. Focus group interviews.
- iii. Individual in-depth interviews.

5.2.1 *Qualitative content analysis*

Since reception research predominantly uses in-depth interviews for the empirical study of how people make sense of a media product, it follows that the researcher must have a certain amount of knowledge about this media product, in order to be able to conduct a meaningful and focused conversation with the informants about it (Schroder et al. 2003: 154). Attempts to find out what it is that readers of the tabloid *uMthunywa* appreciate in the newspaper thus required, as suggested by Jensen and Rosengren, a comparative examination of the audience data and as well as content data:

What characterizes reception analysis is, above all, an insistence that studies include a comparative empirical analysis of media discourses with audience discourses – content structures with the structure of audience responses regarding content. (1990: 214)

This is particularly important in the light of the view that meaning is defined by both the text and by its audiences (Hart 1991:60).

It is however, important to point out that for this research, as advised by Schroder et al. (2003: 126), it was considered necessary to abstain from a detailed preliminary textual analysis, and just familiarise oneself with the text sufficiently enough to be able to pursue the cultural research that motivates the project. The qualitative content analysis thus constituted of rudimentary textual analysis with the sole purpose of preparing the researcher sufficiently for the role of interview facilitator in the succeeding in-depth interviews. To this end, copies of *uMthunywa* were analysed in terms of the representations that are prevalent in them as a tabloid genre.

By definition content analysis is a technique used for gathering and analysing the content of texts and how they are combined. Content refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes or any message that can be communicated (Deacon et al. 1999). Qualitative content analysis adopts an interpretative approach that seeks to explore the ways in which language and images are presented, combined and used in complementary fashion. This involves exploring the meanings that are embedded in the representations as opposed to looking at the frequency of particular themes as a reflection of particular phenomena, which is characteristic of quantitative content analysis. In this light, Neuman observes that:

Qualitative content analysis allows the reader to probe into and discover content in a different way from the ordinary way of reading a book or watching a television program. (1997: 273)

Qualitative content analysis thus helped in identifying ‘preferred meanings’ encoded in *uMthunywa* as a tabloid genre and set the backdrop for subsequent in-depth analysis of the audience’s attractions to the newspaper as the researcher proceeded with a clear picture of the content of the paper, requisite for the focus group and individual interviews. It was also noted that the content, structure and form of tabloids produce a perspective or point of view for the reader who is drawn into the flow of the narrative through the various characteristic features of the tabloids – how the text ‘speaks to’ the audience as O’Sullivan et al. (1994:158) suggest. Qualitative content analysis in this study was thus used in a sense of trying to draw analysis from two extreme ends of a spectrum, what Arbercrombie (1996) refers to as the dominant text view and the dominant audience view. The aim was to produce thick descriptions of how meaning is organised in the tabloid newspaper thus uncovering the way in which the everyday and social life is mediated through meaning (see Alasuutari 1995: 27).

To systematically sample copies of *uMthunywa* for inclusion in this study, stratified random sampling was employed. The sampling frame constituted a total of 43 copies of *uMthunywa* collected between the period August 2004 and May 2005, a period during which the researcher purchased every issue of the paper. This period was also particularly significant because it covered a period during which there were senatorial elections in the country. Given that the newspaper is published weekly on Fridays, the research population naturally fell into 10 distinct non-overlapping strata composed of the months August 2004 to July 2005. Each stratum had between four and five issues of *uMthunywa* depending on the

number of Fridays in the given month. Sample elements were then randomly and separately selected from each of the stratum using systematic sampling. 20 issues from the total sampling frame of 43 were deemed adequate and manageable for this study. Subsequently, the figure 20 was divided into the total sampling frame, giving a sampling interval of 2, which was then used to randomly select the first element of the sample, thus becoming the starting point for the selection of the rest of the sample, selecting every second entry on the sampling frame (using the sampling interval) until a total of twenty issues were selected. According to Deacon et al. (1999: 47), the main advantage of this method of sampling is that it allows the researcher to ensure that the sample composition is representative in relation to important variables related to the research.

Because the analysis of texts is concerned with both their meanings and their forms, the newspapers were analysed in terms of their particular representations and recontextualisation of social practice, in terms of the particular constructions of the writer and reader identities – what the stories highlight or ignore. In doing this research, it was taken into cognisance that media texts have certain identities, which are governed by the codes and conventions they are constructed in relation to, in this regard, Morley posits that:

When analysing texts or programmes we also have to look at the assumptions that lie behind the content. There will be assumptions made about the audience and these assumptions need to be made visible if we are to understand the implicit messages which a programme/text may transmit over and above what is explicitly said in it. (1992: 84)

It was also deemed necessary that the qualitative content study focus on the mode of address or how the stories ‘speak to’ the readership as this would help establish the kind of relationship the newspaper has with its readership and whether it appeals to a particular kind of readership. As Morley (1992:83) argues, we need to be concerned with the modes in which the texts address the readers and with how these modes of address construct our relation to the content of the text, requiring us to take up different positions in relation to them. In this regard, Fairclough (1995: 103) argues that media texts do not merely mirror realities but they constitute versions of reality in ways that depend on the social positions, interests and objectives of those who produce them. This is done through choices that are made at various levels in the process of producing texts:

[T]he analysis of representational processes in a text therefore comes down to an account of what choices are made, what is included and what is excluded, what is made explicit or left implicit, what is fore-grounded and what is backgrounded, what is thematised, what processes types and categories are drawn upon to represent events. (Fairclough 1995: 104)

In considering therefore, the nexus between *uMthunywa* and its readership, it was thought necessary to apply Morley's (1992: 75) two modes of analysis to examine two distinct types of constraints on the production of meaning, viz: internal structures and mechanisms of the text, which invite certain readings and blocks others and the cultural background of the reader, which has to be studied sociologically. In attempting to understand latent or implicit communication inherent in *uMthunywa*, there was therefore the need to go beyond content analysis and use other methods of investigation and analysis enabling the researcher to understand the complex levels of communication.

It is in this light that qualitative in-depth interviews were used. These constitute the prescribed methodological approach to reception analysis as they allow audiences to verbalise their experiences of media material, thus enabling the researcher to explore the processes through which the audience actualise media meanings and incorporate them in meaningful ways into their lives (see Ang 1990: 162; Ruddock 2001: 134-135; Schroder et al. 2003: 122; Jensen 1988: 4). As highlighted in Chapter 1, two main variants of the qualitative interview were used in this study, one is the focus-group interview the other is the individual in-depth interview. Although much of the data that one would get from group and individual interviews would be quite similar, there are significant differences between the two approaches that make them suitable for different purposes. As Halkier puts it, the main difference between individual and group interviews lies in their producing respectively, "accounts *about* action and accounts *in* action" (cited in Schroder et al. 2003: 151). The two data collection methods are discussed in turn below.

5.2.2 *Focus group interviews*

Focus groups are typically defined as bringing together a small group of people to participate in a carefully planned discussion on a defined topic, the aim of the technique being to make use of group interaction to produce data and insights (Morgan in Macun & Posel 1998:115). The method captures the way in which participants 'naturally' talk about, make sense of,

reason about, and generate meaning in relation to specified issues, topics, and phenomena – but these should be limited to ‘representative illustrations’ (Hansen 1998:281). As already raised, this method is central to reception studies as it assists in attempts to answer concerns about how readers ‘interpret,’ make sense of, interact with, and create meaning out of media content within their social contexts (see Macun & Posel 1998: 116; Silverman 2004: 178; Ruddock 2001: 135 -136). They create an opportunity for the energy and momentum of the group interaction to open up a wider range of responses than is possible in an individual interview.

Silverman (2004: 181) posits that focus group interviews “may be particularly useful in working with severely disadvantaged, hard-to reach social groups, people who may be uncomfortable with individual interviews but happy to talk with others” (see also Macun & Posel 1998: 114). For this reason, they were considered particularly relevant for this research, given the socio-political history of Bulawayo, as discussed in Chapter 2. The method was also seen as most appropriate in the light of Fiske’s argument that:

[F]or news to be popular it needs to provoke conversation, it is by taking up and re-circulating the issues of news orally that the people construct aspects of the public sphere as relevant to their own. The oral recirculation of news is a typical way of re-informing it into popular culture. (1992: 57) (see also Fiske 1989b)

The focus group interview thus simulates oral circulation of news in specific and different formations of the people, for this reason, information becomes reformed through the active participation of the people who are themselves equally re-informed.

Because interviews must define a narrow audience for study, sampling and recruitment of the groups was critical. This meant that individuals invited to participate in focus groups had to be able and willing to provide the desired information and be representative of the population of interest (see Hansen 1998: 264). As suggested by Ruddock (2001: 133), guidelines for sampling within audience research are more flexible and situational, the choice of participants is determined by criteria that are appropriate for a specific study and the number of participants chosen is also situational. In this light, since the general observation was that *uMthunywa* is read across demographic variables, it was not deemed essential that the sampling of the groups takes into consideration the demographic, occupational or other similar dimensions of the participants. For this reason, participants

were purposively selected using convenience and snowball sampling, placing particular focus on their residence in Bulawayo metropolitan province; shared cultural characteristics; and their symbolic connection in the regular reading of *uMthunywa* (see Schroder 2001: 13 and Ang 1990: 160). The informants were selected non-randomly because they possess particular common characteristics – the reading of *uMthunywa* and their residence in Bulawayo. Of considerable importance, however, in the sampling was the need to ensure that participants felt comfortable and uninhibited with each other as much as possible through ensuring homogeneity in the groups (see Macun & Posel 1998: 119).

Particular consideration was given to the fact that focus group studies in media research have rarely sought to obtain groups representative of the general population as is characteristic of most qualitative research (Hansen et al. 1998: 265) (see discussion in section 5.1.2 above). Although Hansen et al. (1998: 268) argue that one should have a minimum of six focus groups, until comments begin to repeat themselves and little new material is generated, for this research, four group discussions with participants ranging between four and eleven were held. This was mainly due to the resources available to the researcher and the number of readers willing to participate in the sessions. It is perhaps necessary to reiterate the fact that in qualitative research, scientific validity is obtained through systematic collection and interpretation of data, not by generalising findings to other groups, nor quantifying into an overall truth. In other words ‘it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something’ (see Geertz in Pitout 1998: 74; Drotner in Pitout 1998: 74; and Ruddock 2001: 133).

Attempts were made to select ‘neutral’ and convenient interview settings where every participant felt comfortable. Two settings were thus used, the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) library garden, located in the city centre, and the lounge of a popular food outlet in the city centre.

As a moderator, my task was to make the participants feel at ease with the situation before starting on the thematic agenda of the interview guide, the intention being to make them speak freely from the discursive resources available to them in the area of study (see Schroder et al. 2003: 143). It was also made clear that the study is after the participant’s personal experience and impression of the newspaper and nothing more. Given that reception involves ‘active sense-making’ (Dahlgren 1992: 12), participants were asked to page through

copies of *uMthunywa* as they would do in a normal reading situation, and speak freely to the content, making associations with their lived experiences (see Schroder et al. 2003: 111; Lunt & Livingstone 1996: 83 and Hansen et. al. 1998: 275). In casting the research interview as a simulation of a natural conversation, the researcher used the features routinely employed in everyday conversation, using the ‘funneling process’, where one begins by asking general questions, before moving on to more specific ones that are rooted in the content of the newspapers, in relation to the informants’ everyday lived circumstances (Schlesinger et al. in Ruddock 2001: 135). In the same manner, all the discussions made use of isiNdebele, a language that everyone understood.

As the moderator, my role was also to ensure that the conversation in the group did not stray from the key question in the research, which was to interrogate the reasons behind the popularity of *uMthunywa* amongst the readers, although much of the energy and interest in the discussion was generated from the group itself.

In conducting the focus groups, I worked from a list of broad questions (interview guide) revolving around the research’s objectives highlighted in Chapter 1 (see appendix). To record the data in the focus-group proceedings, a tape recorder was used. The focus group discussions suggested ‘new’ research questions, which necessitated further interrogation through individual in-depth interviews, discussed in the subsequent section.

5.2.3 Individual in-depth interviews

Indeed, as with most social research, focus group data should as far as possible be combined and juxtaposed with a range of data gathered from different sources and using various research techniques, in the interest of as complete and reliable an answer to the research question as possible (Macun & Posel 1998:132). It is for this reason that individual in-depth interviews were deemed important as a follow-up to focus group interviews.

Individual in-depth interviews are essentially a hybrid of the one-on-one interview approach, a commonsensical justification for their wide usage in media studies being that “the best way to find out what the people think about something is to ask them” (Bower in Jensen 1982: 240). Individual in-depth interviews have affinities to conversation and are well suited to tap social agents’ perspectives on the media, since spoken language remains the

primary and familiar mode of social interaction (Jensen 1982: 240). Schroder et al. further contend that:

The individual interview also avoids the ‘spiral of silence’ effect that may prevent... controversial views and experiences from being expressed in a group context. The individual interview may thus be the best choice for a researcher who wishes to illuminate a sensitive issue, located beyond the discursive range of the socially acceptable or the politically correct – or an issue that is felt by the individual to be too sensitive to talk about in the presence of others, other than a researcher who grants the informant full anonymity. (2003: 153)

This aspect of the individual in-depth interviews was seen as important for this study given the socio-political history of Bulawayo discussed in Chapter 2.

In terms of sampling, as Wimmer and Dominick (2000:181) note, in one-on-one interviews respondents are selected based on a pre-determined set of screening requirements, hence candidates for individual interviews were purposively selected from the participants in the focus-group interviews. Particular attention was given to the most articulate and enthusiastic participants.

In conducting the interviews, an open, dialogic relationship with the interviewee was established at the introductory stages of the interviews, so as to make the interviewee feel comfortable with the speech event of the interview, thus giving the researcher access to relatively unfiltered and spontaneous meanings from the interviewee’s lifeworld as suggested by Schroder et al. (2003: 112). On each occasion, the informants were given copies of *uMthunywa* to browse through, a key methodological necessity of reception research. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, in which the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely to the thematic content of the newspaper [in-between questions], making associations from the content to other aspects of their everyday lived experiences (Schroder et al. 2003: 112).

5.3 Data analysis procedures

All the interviews were transcribed and translated into English, with an attempt made at maintaining the sense of meaning which emerged in the conversations. The data was interpreted and analysed further. In other words, as Jensen (1988: 4) suggests, the in-depth interviews were not considered finished accounts of the audiences’ experience of *uMthunywa*. Given that the interviews produced data in the form of verbatim transcripts, it

was the researchers' task to interpret the meaning of these data and present their most salient features in critical and coherent form (Jhally & Lewis in Ruddock 2001: 138-139). The analysis essentially progressed by way of undertaking what Fiske (1987) calls 'ethnography of discourse' – an analysis of talk about the experience of reading *uMthunywa*. Thematic coding was used as the mode of analysis. As Jensen (1982: 247) aptly explains, the approach is:

[A] loosely inductive categorisation of interview... extracts with reference to various concepts, headings or themes. The process comprises the comparing, contrasting, and abstracting of the constitutive elements of meaning.

The researcher's task, therefore, was to report those sections of interviews that shed most light on the research question at hand. Thus, in analysing the interview transcripts, it was seen proper to take into consideration the multi-dimensional character of the readers' signifying practices, noting particularly the readers' motivation towards the content of the newspaper, their individualised appreciation of the content, their attitudes to the content *vis a vis* their socio-cultural and political lived circumstances, and the extent to which particular stories appear to be of communicative value to the readers – impacting on their everyday practices (see Jensen & Rosengren 1990:218). As Ruddock (2001: 139-140) points out, within reception research, data analysis involves assessing the degree of fit between the languages of text and audiences. The data was then written in narrative form, with pertinent quotations used to illustrate the major findings of the study.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to map out the research design and procedure implemented in this study. The methodological approach chosen for the study was principally qualitative as qualitative approaches are most often associated with reception analysis – which constitutes the mainstay of this study. The study used a three-stage qualitative approach to enable a comparative empirical analysis of the content of *uMthunywa* with its audiences' discourses thus examining the very processes of reception which have a bearing on the value of the editorial content of *uMthunywa* in its readership's everyday life. The use of the two main variants of in-depth interviews, focus group and individual interviews respectively, allowed inferences from one data source to be followed up by another and the data thus gathered were thematically analysed. Particular attention was also given to the theoretical and

epistemological issues entailed in qualitative research in general, and reception research in particular. The chapter also highlighted the sampling procedures employed in the study. The next chapter presents and analyses the findings of the research.

CHAPTER 6

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Ndlovu:... the paper [*uMthunywa*] caters for all age groups, but the elderly, like my father, are proud that there is an isiNdebele paper to voice their tradition and culture. This has not been the case before. We did not have an isiNdebele paper that communicated with us and about us directly, in the fascinating and captivating way that *uMthunywa* does. (Personal interview 23/11/05)

Dube:... when I go home without the paper, my mother always asks me why. But when I don't bring the *Chronicle*, she never bothers to ask. People are proud of this paper and it will definitely last. (Personal interview 07/ 12/ 05)

6. Introduction

The key objective of this study has been to investigate the reasons behind the popularity of the Zimbabwean tabloid *uMthunywa* among its Bulawayo readers, who constitute the bulk of its total readership. It sought to unearth the readers' perspectives on *uMthunywa*, which account for the reasons behind their interest in the paper, that is, the meanings they accrue from the paper within their everyday lived realities and how the textual meanings are appropriated in their everyday lived circumstances, which they bring into their consumption of the newspaper. The study thus sought to make a comparative analysis of 'audience data' and 'content data' in a manner of examining reception processes which have a bearing on the use of the editorial content of the newspaper by its readers. The object of the study has also been to examine how the reading of *uMthunywa* is tied to the vernacular language it uses – isiNdebele – for its editorial content, and the possibility of it providing an alternative arena for public discourse *vis a vis* the marked criticisms of tabloids by some scholars. The study thus attempts to contribute to ongoing debates on the popularity and role of tabloids in African societies, Zimbabwe in this case, through the theoretical and methodological framework of the Habermasian theory of the public sphere and reception theory.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing objectives of the study, this chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study. The interpretation, analysis and discussion are rooted in the objectives of the study, and informed by the theoretical considerations and literature review in Chapter 3 and 4. The chapter combines findings from the qualitative content analysis and the in-depth interviews – both group and individual interviews.

The chapter unfolds by way of presenting data from the qualitative content analysis, followed by the findings from the in-depth interviews. These findings will be presented, illustrated and corroborated with quotations arising from in-depth interviews comprising of 4 focus group interviews and 4 follow up individual interviews drawn from the focus group participants. The interviews constituted of a total of 22 interviewees, aged between 19 and 40 years, all in the low to middle in-come groups. In terms of gender, 13 were males and 9 were females.

Due to the qualitative nature of the methodology employed in the study, the in-depth interviews findings are presented and discussed concurrently, under various sections in a narrative form based on 5 major thematic concerns hinged on the objectives of the study as follows:

- i. Readers' identities and relationships to the broader political formation.
- ii. Readers' newspaper preferences and reading habits.
- iii. Meanings obtained from the textual content of *uMthunywa* and their appropriation to the readers' everyday lived realities.
- iv. The political significance of the reading of *uMthunywa*.
- v. The role of language in attracting readers to *uMthunywa*.

Although these themes are in practice intertwined, they are treated separately for analytical reasons and for the purposes of clarity of analysis. The next section presents data from the qualitative content analysis of sampled copies of *uMthunywa*; this data provided the backdrop for the in-depth interviews as already highlighted above.

6.1 Qualitative content analysis findings: a brief overview

This section presents data from the qualitative content analysis of sampled copies of *uMthunywa* with a particular view to establish the fact that *uMthunywa*, as a tabloid newspaper, is characterised by particular content and form. The analysis abstains from detailed textual analysis as its main object is to familiarise the researcher with the text sufficiently enough to be able to pursue the cultural research that motivates the study. It sought to provide a backdrop for the in-depth interrogation of audiences through a

comparative analysis of ‘content data’ and ‘audience data’ in order to examine the audiences’ uses of the editorial content of the newspaper. According to Strelitz and Steenveld:

A textual approach will help us understand what constitutes ‘news,’ in tabloids, their sources, their linguistic style, the textual mix they favour, and the visual elements... they use in communication with their audience. (2005: 36)

Table 1 below presents a summary of the content of *uMthunywa* in terms of its main sections and the issues covered in the sections. Clearly, the paper deals with a variety of issues, although it gives more space to local news which constitute largely of human-interest stories. It is these stories that broadly give the paper its tabloid character in keeping with tabloid definitions given by Norris (2000), Machin and Papatheoderou (2002), and Bird (1992) as discussed in Chapter 3.

Name of section	Issues covered in the section
Ezakuleli	Local news: largely human interest stories
Ezokuzithokozisa	Entertainment and Arts
Imibono	Opinions: including the paper’s comment and letters to the editor
Ezamasiko	Traditions: by guest columnists
Ezokulima	Farming: largely advising farmers on diverse farming issues
Ezemfundo	Education: chiefly isiNdebele language and grammar
Ezabomama	Women issues
Ezemidlalo	Sports

Table 1

The qualitative content analysis established several factors about *uMthunywa*, which border around *inter alia*, language usage, the narrative structure of the stories and the various sources used in the newspaper. Noticeably, the paper is different from other media, particularly the print media that exists in the country, not only in terms of the foregoing

factors but also because of the issues it covers and its sensationalism that seems to debase the seriousness of hard news. Of particular note about the stories, is that they bear hallmarks of a residually oral tradition rooted in folk narrative and are largely drawn from rural areas and urban high-density areas.

The sources used in the bulk of the stories are mostly ordinary people. This is mainly because the focus of most of the stories is rooted in the lives of ordinary people, and this is also evident in the pictorial content of the newspapers. The content of the paper thus confirms that the paper puts emphasis on social issues that occur among the ordinary people as news. These are in the majority of cases, rural people or other disadvantaged members of urban communities residing mainly in the townships. As discussed in Chapter 3, this is a key feature of tabloid journalism (see Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 287).

In general, the paper places emphasis on township gossip, rumour mongering and other unconventional stories, all of them bursting at the seams with idiomatic and slang expression usually reserved for spoken rather than written communication. The storylines pre-eminently capitalise on unadulterated exaggerations characteristic of the yellow journalism of the 1920s in America (see Chapter 3 above). The bulk of the stories in the papers studied appear to defy logic and normality, one notes for example the following stories: 'Isela limila amathamathisi emhlane' (Tomatoes grow on thief's backside) (24 September – 1 October 2004); 'Ubabhemi utholakala etshaye isathongwana embhedeni' (Donkey found fast asleep in bed) (3 – 10 December 2004); 'Ubaba owelapha ngephone usenze esinye isimanga' (The man who heals by phone has performed another miracle) (18 – 24 February 2005); 'Isikhulu sixotsha uyise emfeni yaso' (Rich man chases his father away from his funeral) (1 – 8 April 2005); 'Indoda ithiya inhlanzi iphume lonyawo lomuntu' (Fisherman catches human leg) (29 April – 5 May 2005).

These stories are evidence of the fact that in *uMthunywa* there is a predominance of negative traumatic stories which in most instances foreground negative individual and family experiences or the most bizarre issues. The stories hardly give advice on, for instance, keeping marriages intact or keeping families happy. The paper dramatises threats to the ideal and harmonious world of family, friendships and other relationships, allowing readers to explore these threats vicariously. This observation finds support in Connell's (1992) view that the social function of the excesses of tabloids is to provide an expression of outrage on

behalf of the disadvantaged members of communities in concrete and recognisable ways, thus indirectly mounting a populist challenge on privilege.

The language used in the newspaper gives it a distinct identity in Zimbabwe as it emerges as the only newspaper whose editorial content is published in isiNdebele. The way the language is used is different from how other newspapers use language. It plays a fundamental role in projecting the paper as a sensationalist medium that specialises in using flowery and comical language that debases even the seriousness of hard news stories. The language has a propensity of expressing issues in quite brazen and sensational ways when compared to English. For this reason, the paper appears to reinvent expressions and words, which in some instances resonate with colloquial street talk. One notes the following examples: 'Ijazi lika mkwenyana' literally meaning 'son in law's jacket' (4 – 11 June 2004) being used as a euphemism for a condom; 'Z' khuphani ngempelaviki' (What's happening over the weekend) (in all copies studied); and some expressions used for emphasis or to express surprise, for example, 'Umhlolo batayi!' (What a strange incident) (3 – 10 December 2004). It is quite clear that the newspaper uses the language of its readers which is conversational in nature.

One other clear and unusual feature of *uMthunywa*'s journalism, as evident in the newspapers studied, is that neither the names nor the photographs of people in the stories are disclosed in most of the stories, particularly in sensational stories. To use Mabasa's words:

The way stories are reported in [*uMthunywa*] tends to be structured in the form of the African folk tale which has a narrator, sometimes unspecified stories and characters, fusion of fact, fiction, fantasy and romance with the occurrence, the unusual being the common trend. (cited in Matenda 2001: 57)

The stories are also not confirmed or denied by people in positions of responsibility, like chiefs, headsmen or the police, and this has invariably nurtured the conception that *uMthunywa* is a fictitious medium among some people.

It also emerged from the content analysis, as shown on table 1 above, that the newspaper gives considerable attention to agricultural, education and health issues, issues which are developmental in nature. Further to these developmental issues, the paper has a regular feature column where a legal expert, Kucaca Phulu, provides free legal advice; there

is also a column on isiNdebele language and grammar and considerable space is also given to the coverage of women's issues.

Importantly, *uMthunywa* contains very little political coverage (stories on political parties, those centred on political elites and government activities). For example, in the 20 issues studied, there were only 3 political stories, one on the dangers of political violence during the senatorial elections (29 October – 4 November 2004); a ZANU (PF) senatorial election campaign advert (25 – 31 March 2005); and a comment on the senatorial elections (1- 4 April 2005). This scenario is particularly striking in the light of the fact that the paper reemerged in a politically charged environment, characterised by major political occurrences, such as the 17th amendment of the Zimbabwean constitution; the debates around the senatorial elections; the appointment of Joyce Mujuru as the first female Vice President of the country and the divisions in the main opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The paper does not cover all these significant political issues.

As already highlighted above, more space is given to social issues – human-interest stories. Most of these stories are characterised by personalisation and focus on private rather than public issues. A number of the stories expose the private lives of public personalities (celebrities), particularly in instances where they are involved in sex scandals. As discussed in Chapter 3, such kinds of stories have constituted the centre of the criticism of tabloid journalism (see Bourdieu in Macdonald 2003: 57; Nicholas in Macdonald 2003: 61 and Sparks 2003: 61). Two stories can thus be cited as examples, one involving the goal-minder of one of Zimbabwe's prominent football clubs, Highlanders, Tapuwa Kapini, whose involvement in street fights for women was published in a story titled: 'Ukapini wehlula abafundisi' (Church ministers gave up on Kapini) (1- 7 April 2005); and another story on Peter Ndlovu (Zimbabwe national soccer team captain), exposing his involvement in paternal wrangles with different women, titled: 'Sezimkhalele njalo uPeter Ndlovu' (Peter Ndlovu in trouble again!) (18 – 24 March 2006).

6.2 Readers' identities and relationships to the broader political formation.

This section discusses the identities of readers of *uMthunywa* and their relationships to the broader political formation. It also highlights the factors that underlie the distinctive nature of their consumption practices. The discussion constitutes the background for understanding not

only the audiences' print media preferences and reading habits, but also the way in which they construe and articulate their identities, which are fundamental to their consumption of the newspaper. It is thus in keeping with reception analysis as it takes cognisance of the fact that the consumption of *uMthunywa* is not an isolated and solitary experience, but rather is one experience firmly embedded in particular socio-historical, political and cultural circumstances which are subjectively experienced by the readers (see Fiske 1987: 62; Ang 1990: 160; Ruddock 2001: 119; and Thompson 1995: 23). In this light, the readers' descriptions of their identities and relationships to the wider political arena are translated verbatim from isiNdebele to English in order to portray their unique features as residents of Bulawayo (Matabeleland) and how they relate to the broader political formation.

The interviewed readers came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, ranging from minority to predominant ethnic groups: the Khalanga (mainly composed of people in the south-western parts of Matabeleland); the Nyanja and Chewa (largely immigrants scattered across the country from the neighbouring countries, Zambia and Malawi); the Ndebele, who dominate in Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South and Bulawayo Metropolitan Provinces; and the Shona, who constitute the biggest ethnic group in Zimbabwe and are scattered across the country. Although the readers are from these diverse ethnic groups, it is striking that they all identify with the Ndebele ethnic group. As discussed in Chapter 2, this scenario generally points to the fluidity of identities with socialisation, intermarriages and the influence of the geo-political space playing key roles in shaping their identities. Highlighting this point, Nobuhle, 20, a female university student, pointed thus:

I'm Ndebele when I'm in Bulawayo, but when I'm back home in Lower Gweru, I'm Shona. It depends on where I am at a particular point in time. This is mainly because of my parentage. My mother is Shona from Lower-Gweru and my father is Ndebele from Nkayi.

Nobuhle's statement reinforces the fact that socialisation and geo-political space play key roles in determining readers' identities. From all the interviewees, it became apparent that socialisation in Matabeleland, Bulawayo in particular, has played a key role in framing identities around the Ndebele ethnic group. The extracts below show how readers construe their individual identities.

Mthembo: I'm Ndebele because I grew up in a Ndebele society, speaking isiNdebele and I don't identify myself with Mozambican people, where I'm said to be originally from. I know nothing about Mozambique.

Sibekezele: I'm Ndebele, we speak isiNdebele at home, in fact my paternal background is entirely Ndebele and our rural home is in the heart of Matabeleland, Nkayi. This does not mean however, that I can't speak Shona, I'm also very much acquainted with Shona customs and traditions by virtue of the fact that my mother is Shona.

Nothando: I'm Khalanga bred among the Ndebeles, but I can say I'm more affiliated to the Ndebele because at home we speak isiNdebele. However, we sometimes speak Shona because my mother is Shona from Shurugwi.

Nyasha: I'm Shona by birth, but over the years I've tended to shift towards the Ndebele identity. I grew up in Bulawayo, I speak fluent isiNdebele and all my friends are Ndebele.

Amon: I'm of Malawian descent; my parents came here a long time ago so I grew up here in Bulawayo. I can't speak Nyanja or Chewa. Only my parents can speak these languages. Rather, I speak isiNdebele, which I learnt at school. For this reason, I think my identity revolves around the Ndebele ethnic tradition.

These extracts clearly show that the readers' identities are closely tied to the language (isiNdebele) they speak, which as noted in Chapter 2, is key in shaping the socio-cultural and political identities of the people of Matabeleland, given that language is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways thus constituting a key symbol of identity (see Kramsch 1998: 3; Wa Thiongo 1981: 13; and Edwards 1995: 17). In the same vein, ethnicity is crucial to identity formation, yet its impact is not complete. According to Hall, it is something that we continually shape and in which we position ourselves (cited in Hartely 2002: 84). This collective identity directly influences the readers' relationship to the broader political formation, as they read *uMthunywa* as a distinct marginal group with a shared identity akin to ethno-nationalism, which resonates with their political behaviour. Schroder et al. (2003: 25) argue that individuals in these specific social groups acquire interpretive repertoires. This implies that the repertoires are, to a large extent, shared and socially patterned – in other words, mutual intelligibility and social allegiances and communities would be impossible.

The pervasive feeling of disillusionment and marginalisation from the 'power bloc' by the people of Matabeleland, as discussed in Chapter 2, is marked among the readers of *uMthunywa* and is manifested in a number of ways, from their sceptical attitudes and general lack of confidence in government and its institutions, to their general fear of involvement in

political activities. In this regard, Faith, 22, stated thus: “We are tired of government institutions. We are treated like second class citizens and sometimes we are harassed.”

It is against this background that some readers of *uMthunywa* pointed out that they put more trust in ‘non-political’ institutions like NGOs and Churches, which they feel are not as biased as the government in their approach to national development. The extracts below further describe the readers’ general feelings about the government’s attitude towards Matabeleland.

Dube: ... [T]he government clearly favours the Mashonaland side. Just look at the Nkayi road [in Matabeleland]. Construction of that road started years ago and to date it’s still not finished. If this road was in Mashonaland, I assure you, it would have been finished years ago.

Tshuma: I would like to base my comment on National Television, which was set to start broadcasting from Bulawayo. The Russians donated the transmitters and the government took hold of the transmitters and then they destroyed that station just because it was based in Matabeleland and was going to promote the Ndebeles. It was supposed to have 60 percent isiNdebele productions and 40 percent Shona productions and the government couldn’t handle it.

Blessing: ... [T]he government only develops Mashonaland and Matabeleland is left to rot. The Zambezi water project was initiated a long time ago, but it still has not been finished. If it were in Mashonaland, it would have been completed a long time ago.

These comments reflect a sense of alienation from mainstream politics, the sense that the government has its own agenda and is conspiring against the people of Matabeleland. In support of these sentiments, as discussed in Chapter 2, Kaarsholm (1995: 24) observes that Bulawayo’s high-density suburbs continue to display old characteristics of poverty and deprivation. This scenario has arguably led to a shift from public to private politics, as is typical of the content of tabloid journalism, as discussed in Chapter 3. Some participants in this study succinctly put this scenario forward:

Mrs. Dube: I don’t know the meaning of politics; it doesn’t affect me at all. When I go to vote I just vote because it is said to be my right, not that it immediately affects me in any way. For an example, in the just-ended senatorial elections, I didn’t even know what the role of a senator would be. I suppose politics has its people and I’m not one of those [chuckles].

Dube: [As] one of my colleagues noted in our earlier discussion, we are not keen to be at the forefront of political discussions. We have had terrible experiences in the

past. Talking politics won't help us. It won't even bring development to Matabeleland.

Interviewer: Which terrible experiences are you referring to?

Dube: Walls have ears my brother! Let's talk about *uMthunywa* [laughs].

From these comments, it is clear that a culture of fear and indifference bedevil some readers of *uMthunywa*, who not only identify with the cause and experiences of Matabeleland, but also show some semblance of disillusionment with the 'power-bloc.' This scenario finds reinforcement in Ornebring and Jonsson's observation that:

The most important political problem facing us in the 21st century may well be that the large groups of disenfranchised people... do not feel included in the body politic, and do not feel that their issues and concerns are addressed by traditional political institutions or the prestige news and media outlets. (Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 294)

It is important to reiterate that these perceptions by audience members about their social, cultural and political context have a lasting influence on their print media preferences and consumption habits. As seen in Chapter 2, everything about the context of the interaction between the reader and the text influences the interpretation of the text (see Pitout 1988: 66; Fiske 1992: 59; Schroder et al. 2003: 152 and Thompson 1988: 368). By highlighting the readers' identities and relationship to the broader political formation, this section has underlined the fact that the activity of audiences is a discursive activity that implicates audience members in the construction of social, political and cultural identities and the collective production of social reality (see Schroder et al. 2003: 124). The individual readers of *uMthunywa* have thus been socialised into particular interpretive repertoires acquired and developed in the social and cultural contexts of Matabeleland. Before focusing on the reading of *uMthunywa*, it is proper then, to briefly discuss the readers' newspaper preferences and reading habits.

6.3 Readers' newspaper preferences and reading habits.

This section discusses the broader picture of *uMthunywa* readers' print media consumption habits and content preferences, with a view to establishing their attraction to the tabloid *uMthunywa*.

From the interviews conducted, it emerged that the readers of *uMthunywa* make conscious and selective use of the print media in a manner that is in keeping with the active audience approaches. Their preferences and reading habits are opposed to the passive audience theories, which substantially misrepresent the social nature and impact of the mass media by ignoring subjective aspects of human experiences (see Gitlin & Hall in Ruddock 2001: 118 and Thompson 1995: 25). In this light, readers' newspaper preferences and reading habits are influenced and structured by their ethnic identities and personal relationships to the broader political formation. These factors are, in turn, broadly shaped by the socio-cultural and political aspects of the readers' lived circumstances and experiences, which constitute the context within which they read *uMthunywa*.

In terms of general newspaper reading habits and content preferences, *uMthunywa* readers can be divided into three closely related categories – those who read both state-controlled and private newspapers in pursuit of 'balanced' news; those who believe the private press does a better job in projecting 'balanced' and 'objective' news than the bulk of the state-controlled mainstream press; and those who generally lack interest in political issues and see no value in using the better part of the mainstream press, particularly the state-controlled press, as news sources. What apparently unifies these three categories of readers is their scepticism toward sections of the mainstream press as news sources and their resolve to selectively consume newspapers.

The readers who consume a varied selection of newspapers across the state-controlled and private press divide are driven almost entirely by the polarised print media environment that exists in Zimbabwe, as discussed in Chapter 2. Their efforts are spurred by a desire to strike a balance between the two main polarities. For them, it is difficult to believe either side. Dube, 35, a male taxi conductor, pointed out that he reads diverse newspapers on a daily basis at the taxi terminus, just to get different views, but on Fridays (when *uMthunywa* is published) he would rather read *uMthunywa*. Similarly, Sibekezele, 23, a female university student, noted:

I read newspapers from divergent positions to know the truth. But as for the *Chronicle* [state-controlled], I just read the headlines. As for *uMthunywa*, which I can't afford to miss, by the way [laughs], I read almost every page.

Although cognisant of the polarisation of the print media in Zimbabwe along political lines, some readers prefer the private press, which they view as providing diverse and critical information not found in the state-controlled press. These readers are sceptical of news provided by the state-controlled press because of the alleged predictability and partisan nature of the news they provide. One 20-year-old male petrol attendant succinctly captured this scenario:

Tshuma: In terms of news at least I can put up with *The Standard* and *The Financial Gazette*. They are far better than the *Chronicle*, which I think is biased toward the president and his government. This is apart from *uMthunywa*, which I read every Friday, for particular reasons.

It is perhaps in this light that Saunders (1999) argues that with the decreasing popularity of state-sponsored print media in Zimbabwe, several weekly private newspapers managed to penetrate the market. Taking into consideration the broader context of the relationship between the people of Matabeleland and the 'power bloc,' as manifest *inter alia* in the widespread support for the major opposition political party (MDC) in the region, it is arguable that the reading of the private press is a sign of frustration with news churned out by the mainstream state-controlled newspapers. This picture however, does not render the private press entirely popular among the readers. Khanyile, 26, a male university student, voiced his general frustration with Zimbabwean newspapers as follows:

I find newspapers not credible anymore. I can't rely on them for the truth, it is for this reason that we have shut out news. We would rather discuss other important subjects like pressing family issues, which are outside the 'tired' issues circulated in the mainstream press.

These scepticisms and frustrations with the mainstream press constitute the grounds on which readers of *uMthunywa* find, in the newspaper, representations of their interests, aspirations, life problems and anxieties that resonate with their identities and feelings (see Fraser 1992 and Fiske 1992 discussed in Chapter 3). There is, therefore, a sense in which one can argue that *uMthunywa* has resonated with a readership that has found a voice previously 'denied' to them in the mainstream press (see Joseph 2005: 31). Although the paper is state-controlled, its tabloid form and content sets it apart from its sister papers, like the *Chronicle*, *Sunday News* and the *Sunday Mail*, hence its popularity, even in the face of a waning readership of state-controlled newspapers. This scenario ties in closely with Fiske (1992)'s argument that the popularity of tabloids, in part, is an expression of general scepticism

towards the news delivered from the 'power bloc.' *UMthunywa*'s popularity thus clearly hinges on its readers' marginal identities and relationship to the broader political formation. The fact that the paper's editorial content is in isiNdebele also conjures a strong sense of collective identity among its Ndebele readers. Mrs. Dube, 40, a housewife who avidly reads *uMthunywa* stated that:

It is hard to trust government newspapers, so we read them knowing a greater part of the content are lies. Although *uMthunywa* is a government newspaper too, it is very different, we can identify with its stories because they are part of our everyday lives and such stories are not in other newspapers like the *Chronicle*. For this reason, people from the eastern parts of the city centre [where the rich reside] can read the paper but not appreciate it because it is beyond the scope of their everyday experiences.

This extract shows that the consumption of state-controlled mainstream newspapers is characterised by interpretations opposed to encoded meanings at the point of reception (see Ruddock 2001: 126). Also apparent is the impact of social identities (attached to lived circumstances) in attracting readers to *uMthunywa*.

UMthunywa also gains preference among its readers for its different approach to 'politics.' It escapes from the polarised framework characterising the mainstream press in Zimbabwe through covering little or no 'politics' on its pages. This factor has played a key role in its selection by its readers, as the following extracts from the interviews illustrate:

Utsile: *UMthunywa* covers stories that affect people at grassroots level...that is why we buy it. Other papers concentrate too much on politics so it makes them boring. But stories in *uMthunywa* are fascinating. We read the stories for amusement and one can read *uMthunywa* for the whole week unlike other papers.

Sibekezele: I can put up with stories in *uMthunywa* because they are not the ZANU (PF) versus MDC issues [political issues] we always read in the *Chronicle* and *The Herald*. It's the same with the private newspapers, *The Standard* and its sister papers. They talk politics throughout. *UMthunywa* provides different stories... light stories that one can read and relax his/her mind, not the serious political stories carried by most of these papers.

Ndlovu: *UMthunywa* takes a different stance from other newspapers. In most papers, politics is always in lead stories. But with *uMthunywa*, a lead story always touches on pertinent issues affecting ordinary people. It's as though *uMthunywa* is published in a world of its own where there is no politics

Writing from a Norwegian context, Grisprud (1992: 92) notes that it remains a pervasive fact that most people prefer pleasure to politics, and this may be understood as a *choice* made on the basis of some sort of recognition of their social conditions. Drawing on Fiske, Strelitz and Steenveld (2005: 36) submit that tabloids set up a more egalitarian relationship between themselves and their readers, avoiding the pontificating of the mainstream press, which addresses readers from the position of one who knows and is providing information for those who don't.

Although *uMthunywa* is read across a wide demographic spectrum, it is clear that the lack of interest in political issues among some of its readers, particularly those in the lower classes, is a key influence in newspaper preferences and reading habits. In this vein, 'serious' newspapers that cover politics, particularly the state-controlled papers, are viewed with indifference. This attitude toward political issues resonates with the general and sustained climate of fear that emerged with the immediate post-independence experiences of the people of Matabeleland, as discussed in Chapter 2. It is in this context that one of the respondents, Mthunzi, 30, noted with concern the differences between Ndebeles and Shonas:

Ndebeles can't stand up for what they believe in. They always want to go with the crowd. You should understand this region's past experiences to make sense of what I'm saying, my brother. We don't want unnecessary trouble. For example, if a Shona person comes to live in Bulawayo, he or she would stay for years without learning our language. But we [Ndebeles] always want to adjust and learn their language. This is how unfortunate our situation is.

This critical point by Mthunzi provides a basis for what may be viewed as the structural framework for the reading of *uMthunywa*, embedded in the historically specific context characterised by systematic asymmetries of power between the two major ethnic groups in Zimbabwe. The popularity of *uMthunywa*, therefore, to use Fiske (1989: 117)'s observation on sensational publications in America, is evidence of the extent of dissatisfaction in society, particularly among those who feel powerless to change their situation. It is important for that reason to emphasise that mediated communication is always a contextualised social phenomenon, always embedded in social contexts which are structured in various ways (Thompson 1995: 11; see also Thompson 1998: 361).

This section has for the most part discussed why *uMthunywa* readers do not have passionate interest in mainstream newspapers. Against this background, the sections that

follow discuss the very reasons why the readers are drawn to the tabloid pleasures of *uMthunywa*.

6.4 Meanings obtained from the textual content of uMthunywa and their appropriation to the readers' everyday lived realities.

Remaining rooted to the specificity of Bulawayo's socio-cultural and political context, this section considers the interplay of text and context in understanding what the content of *uMthunywa* means to its readers. The paper's content can roughly be evaluated as relevant to the readers according to the reality it produces through its content and the social relations or identities it promotes through its form.

Although the reading of *uMthunywa* varies, its regular readers share some common experiences, defined at least in part, by their class and a feeling of alienation from dominant ways of thinking. The paper is seen as an alternative way of knowing about the world that is not offered in other media, particularly the state-controlled press. Although it is difficult to take a broad view from the limited interviews conducted, a crucial point that emerged from this study is that men and women read *uMthunywa* in slightly different ways. Women appear to use the tabloid content to negotiate their personal world, one female university student noted thus:

Nothando: Some of the stories are not just comical, but they carry a certain lesson with them. For example, you might relate with the person in the story and feel their sadness and you just wonder why things happen the way they do.

Interviewer: Which story do you particularly remember from your readings?

Nothando: Its the story of a juvenile girl, she was 13 or 14 I think, who after sleeping with her boy-friend immediately went and told her grandmother that she was pregnant.

This extract reinforces Chodorow and Gillian' view that the socialisation of women tends to produce an attitude that values interpersonal relationships and places more importance on how events affect people, whereas men are encouraged to develop a sense of autonomy and an awareness of the importance of abstract principles (cited in Bird 1992: 138-139).

On the other hand, a central male reading strategy seems to position the tabloid's content as 'news' or 'information' that helps them find out about the world around them.

Men appear to relate less personally to the stories, rather than moving them, the stories inform them. The following extract involving taxi drivers highlights this:

Interviewer: Why do you read the paper?

Dube: I read to be informed. Sometimes you may discover that your relative was involved in an accident or some kind of crime. This has happened to me before. I discovered through *uMthunywa* that my long-time friend had been stabbed to death in Tsholotsho.

Interviewer: Do the stories in *uMthunywa* reflect your lived circumstances and cultures?

Mthunzi: Oh yes! When you see a story associating particular people who live at a specific place with witchcraft, you will avoid the place and the people. My brother, imagine if you rent a room in a witch's house and you discover it after sometime [pause] you won't even get to sleep I tell you. If at all you sleep you will always sleep with lights on and it's not good. So the information we get from *uMthunywa* is important. We should not take these stories for granted.

Dube: Witchcraft is there, so this story of a Donkey found fast asleep in someone's bed should not be doubted. These things happen and we need to know about them.

Although, it may be difficult to generalise, as noted earlier, it seems apparent from the extracts above that men read the stories as informational: they provide information about their immediate surroundings. Women on the other hand, react to the stories personally empathising with the subjects.

It emerged from the interviews that readers generally enjoy reading the 'human interest' stories about family crises, freak births and strange phenomena. Of interest was the fact that while tabloid critics describe the papers as sleazy, vulgar or sensational, the readers interrogated in this study never used these terms. Instead, they characterised the style of *uMthunywa* as fun, exciting or entertaining precisely because, among other things, it carries stories they enjoy – stories which enable them to 'symbolically escape' from the stringent conditions of their day-to-day lives and view it from a different perspective provided for by the stories. The readers explained that the sensational and bizarre stories were uplifting and made them feel good about their own lives and were a welcome change from the depressing news in regular newspapers. Leaning on Thompson's ideas, there is a sense therefore, in which one can argue that the textual content of *uMthunywa* provides a platform for 'symbolic distancing' (imaginatively taking some distance from the spatial-temporal conditions of

everyday life) (see Thompson in Strelitz 2005: 79). This is particularly so in the light of the fact that the participants in this study expressed unequivocal fatigue with the mainstream press, a scenario compounded by their general disillusionment and feeling of neglect by the 'power bloc'. This was clearly articulated in the following personal interviews with two readers, Sibekezele and Ndlovu respectively:

Interviewer: Looking at the copies of *uMthunywa* that we have with us here, which particular stories do you have interest in?

Sibekezele: I like stories that provide humour and are bizarre, like this one which talks of a father in law who flogged his son-in-law for spilling his illicit opaque beer, also this one which talks of a woman who stripped naked when she lost her bucket in a water queue in eNtumbane. You can't avoid laughing after reading such stories. I also like Zenzele Ndebele's column 'Asixoxeni ngezomculo' (lets talk about music), it highlights the biases in the Zimbabwean music industry in a very humorous manner, particularly the skewed support given to the industry by the government... Zenzele also graphically describes what happens at musical shows, you amazingly find your self cruising in the gig, picturing all sorts of happenings – you know what I mean! This is what you don't find in the other papers.

Interviewer: Say a little bit more about these stories.

Sibekezele: As I said the stories in *uMthunywa* provide comic relief, after reading them I'm always – in some way – relieved from stress or problems that affect me on a daily basis. For example, the economic hardships and politics bedeviling everyone these days, these are issues that I think of on a daily basis, but *uMthunywa* provides temporary space for me to think of the other side of life. This is where it differs with other newspapers, like *The Standard* and the *Chronicle*, which always tell us about the obvious issues like, fuel shortages. *UMthunywa* helps relax my mind – at least I can afford to laugh and temporarily forget about my woes.

Interviewer: Tell me what do you find interesting about *uMthunywa*?

Ndlovu: ... *uMthunywa* has great entertainment value; the humour in the stories is just spontaneous. Look, it's not like the information I read will help me tomorrow, these are just stories about things that have happened elsewhere, like this other story of a family that carried a corpse on a wheel-barrow, or this one about the woman who publicly asked her unfaithful husband what's wrong with her own sexual organ. The stories are more entertaining than informing. Fine, I think about the contents of the stories but this honestly happens subconsciously and it quickly fades off my mind. It's more of the entertainment than the informing part.

Interviewer: So what after the entertainment?

Ndlovu: It's important, I laugh and temporarily suspend all irking problems and that's important. The reason why I don't read some of these newspapers is because they are

more on the critical side... No! Life can't be politics, food shortages or economics all the time; we've got to think about other equally important issues as well.

In this way, one notes that the textual content of *uMthunywa* is popular because (among other reasons) it provides entertainment. This resonates with the cultural populism tradition's celebration of consumption for pleasure as discussed in Chapter 3. Theorists rooted in critical theory, however, question the political efficacy of simply focusing on pleasure as noted in the extract above. They warn of the 'dangers' of populism, arguing that it militates against the proclaimed civic goals of journalism through stimulating irrationality (see Spassov 2004 and Berger 2000).

In exploring the ideology of pleasure, Strelitz cites two perceptive complimentary views rooted in the critical theory tradition, calling for the need to critically interrogate pleasures drawn from the reading of media texts and the social relations they help to uphold. Thus Williamson argues that it is critical to examine how personal needs feed into popular pleasures without assuming that they are a 'good thing'. Taking the argument further, Gray posits that the often uncritical acceptance of the aesthetic preference and pleasures of readers require interrogation, not only on their effects, but also their origins (cited in Strelitz 2005: 16).

Another dimension of the reading of *uMthunywa* is that readers who enjoy the paper's celebrity coverage naturally wished to know intimate, personal details about celebrities. The closeness that they feel to celebrities is underlined by their perception that stars are public property, whose lives can and should be scrutinised by their fans. Some, however, felt that the paper goes too far in its intrusion into celebrities' lives, and claimed that there should be limits.

Interviewer: Do you think it's okay for *uMthunywa* to write about people's personal lives, for example, this story titled "What kind of a man is Kapini? [Kapini is the goal minder of a prominent Zimbabwean football team, Highlanders]

Mthunzi: We should know about their personal lives. When you become a celebrity you should be prepared for all the hassles that go with being popular. They should know that their lives interest us. It's just interesting to know Kapini outside the football pitch.

Tshuma: If you can't stand the heat, you should get out of the kitchen. If you can't cope with being a celebrity, then you shouldn't have been one in the first instance.

When you are a celebrity, you should know that people look up to you and you should watch your back – you should be exemplary morally. What Kapini is doing beating up people and so on, is morally wrong and it's our right to know the person he is.

In support of the views above on celebrity coverage, Connell (1992: 81-82) argues that the tabloid press's coverage of celebrities is important as it fulfils important journalistic functions by helping the audience to metaphorically see the world they live in via such personalities. The inequalities of social privilege are presented in concrete, rather than abstract terms. For Connell (1992: 82), the focus on personality and privilege is one of the ways in which these inequalities and tensions are represented as recognisable rather than remote to the people.

It also emerged from the readers that the content of *uMthunywa* reinforces their already existing beliefs about different kinds of issues, like witchcraft and other kinds of paranormal phenomena they 'live-with' in the townships and other spheres of their social lives. This confirms Rosnow and Fine's insight that "truth is only accepted when it is consistent with one's frame of reference" (cited in Bird 1992: 121). Fiske (1989a: 127) concurs with these sentiments, arguing that:

The pleasure [in popular texts] derives both from the power and process of making meanings out of [the audiences'] resources and from the sense that these meanings are *ours* as opposed to *theirs*. (emphasis original)

Two of the interviewees, Dube and Sibekezele aptly captured this scenario, reflecting on how *uMthunywa* 'mirrors' their personal lived-circumstances.

Dube: The stories do reflect our society and I believe they are true. Sometimes I hear of the stories before they even appear in the paper. If you remember well, I said in our discussion the other day that I witnessed the story of the brothers who came all the way from Tsholotsho to ferry the body of their deceased sister for burial on a donkey-drawn cart. It's also the same about this story of a traditional healer who does his job over the phone. I know someone who can testify. I think I get access to these experiences because of my background; I was born and bred in Magwegwe Township, so I'm a township boy. The stories covered in *uMthunywa* are really true, and they constitute our daily talk and experience in Magwegwe.

Sibekezele: I like the Lokitshini-Culture [township culture] in *uMthunywa*... I identify with most of the stories, the township issues it exposes. Some time ago, I read a story about an old man who got married to an under age girl and it reminded me of my 15

year old cousin sister in Nkayi, who went into a forced marriage with a 37-year-old man, so these things are really part of our experiences.

In the same line of thought, the majority of the readers hardly expressed disbelief in the paranormal occurrences covered in the paper. For them, these constitute real experiences in their day-to-day lives. As seen earlier in this Chapter (section 6.4), Mthunzi and Dube noted that whichcraft is part of their culture and so when they read about these stories, they are not at all taken aback. Instead for them the stories alert them to tread carefully.

One important theme that emerged from the interviews is the apparent influence of the folkloric tradition that runs through most of the stories in *uMthunywa*. The readers noted that the stories follow the narrative conventions and formulae they already knew from their cultural repertoires and this was instrumental in attracting them to the textual content. One reader, Nobuhle stated thus:

I really enjoy reading stories in *uMthunywa*; they make me feel as though my grandmother is telling me a story because of the way the stories are written. The stories are written in a different way, it's as though you are going through a folk narrative.

This conception of the stories in *uMthunywa* finds space in the fact that traditional folk narratives are "... part of the Ndebele oral tradition which has stuck together for ages and has not been distorted" (Bozongwana 1983: 52). Further to this, these stories make reference to society's values: what the people value; what they laugh at; what they scorn; fear or desire and how they see themselves (Bozongwana 1983: 52). In this light, it is reasonable to argue that part of the reason behind the popularity of *uMthunywa* is that it draws and feeds on the array of narrative conventions already known by its readers (see Coles 1989). In support of this view, Dahlgren (1992: 13) argues that narratives have ingredients which culturally competent audiences can readily recognise and classify, and these pre-structure and delimit the likely range of meanings which also help foster cultural integration. The patterns and structures of stories also work toward cultural cohesion as communities are built up by members sharing the same stories. This view is closely tied to the readers' affirmation that they closely identify with the paper because, it is in their language and therefore revitalises their culture, as one male reader Ndlovu, put it, they "are proud that there is a Ndebele paper to voice [their] tradition and culture... in the fascinating and captivating way that *uMthunywa*

does.” The fact that the stories read in *uMthunywa* circulate and constitute part of the popular daily discourses of the readers is fundamental to the cohesion of their marginal group-identity. This premise finds testimony in the fact that the readers sometimes read the paper in groups, laughing together and drawing parallel examples from real life experiences. This was clearly articulated in the following interview extract:

Nothando: *UMthunywa* has a closer relationship to my life than the *Chronicle*, its specific to my daily experiences and yet the *Chronicle* is that kind of read that tends to take care of everybody.

Interviewer: Tell me more, what do you mean exactly?

Nothando: I mean it has a closer relationship to the Ndebele specifically, I just realised that even among my friends, sometimes we buy a copy of *uMthunywa*, and it’s about six of us, then somebody has to read aloud a particular story and we laugh our lungs out. I remember, particularly this story of a juvenile girl, who after sleeping with her boyfriend immediately went and told her grandmother that she was pregnant.

Interviewer: So, what was so striking about this story?

Nothando: It’s like in real life, it takes a person about two months to know you are pregnant, but in this case just after having sex; the girl knew she was pregnant. Also, in real life you would first tell your friends or your aunt when you suspect you have fallen pregnant, but this one went straight to her granny – it doesn’t make sense to us.

The extract above shows that readers of *uMthunywa* reflect on the content, they are not docile receptacles of the content. This finds support in Thompson (1995: 42)’s view that media messages are commonly discussed by individuals in the course of reception and consequently elaborated discursively and shared with a wider circle of individuals, who may or may not have been involved in the initial process of reception. In this and other ways, media messages can be relayed beyond the initial context of reception and transformed through an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation. For Thompson (1995: 42) this process may take place in a variety of circumstances and may involve a variety of participants, the extract below further validates these views:

Interviewer: Do you talk about some of the stories you read with your friends, relatives or colleagues?

Dube: You should see us talk about some of the stories we read in *uMthunywa* at Egodini taxi terminus. I remember one letter to the editor requesting taxi conductors

to bath before work. It caused an outcry. Some of our colleagues were really taken to task for not bathing before work. Even in the taxis themselves, people talk about some topical stories in *uMthunywa*. One morning people were discussing this story of a man who chased his father away from his funeral. Questions were being asked how he had done it when he was dead and it turned out that he had written a letter before his death accusing his father of bewitching him and advising him not to attend his funeral.

In the light of this extract, it is noticeable that the stories in *uMthunywa* provide a narrative framework within which individuals recount their thoughts, feelings and experiences, interweaving aspects of their own lives with the retelling of the stories and with their responses to the messages retold. According to Thompson (1995: 43), through this process of discursive elaboration, individuals' understanding of the messages conveyed by media products may itself be transformed, as the message is viewed from different angles, subjected to the comments and criticisms of others, and gradually woven into the symbolic fabric of everyday life.

One may conclude this section by arguing that the appropriation of *uMthunywa*'s textual content into the readers' day-to-day lives is variable. Some readers, particularly male readers, see the paper as a source of news about the world around them as to merit publication on a daily basis. For many though, the paper is a source of humour, humour that they readily identify with in their daily-lived experiences. The next section explores the political significance of the reading of the paper.

6.5 The political significance of the reading of uMthunywa.

Although, no overtly political questions were asked in the interviews, some political views did emerge. Most of the participants in the study, especially women, claimed no interest in politics and national issues. In fact, this was one of the reasons why they preferred *uMthunywa* to other state-controlled newspapers (see section 6.3 above). In the interviews, the readers, however, often made comments that showed a particular political attitude – distrust of and alienation from the establishment. As discussed in section 6.2 above, this political attitude is deeply rooted in the readers' relationship to the broader political formation. Many of those who discussed politics expressed a strong belief that the government had a negative attitude towards the people of Matabeleland; some even expressed surprise that the government had decided to resuscitate *uMthunywa*.

Sibekezele:... everyone knows the government has long neglected this side of the country. In fact, it's shocking that the government has finally decided to resuscitate *uMthunywa*. Interestingly, we all like the paper in my family and I think our ethnic identity is certainly of the essence to our reading of the paper – this is the reason why I don't read *Kwayedza* in the same manner I read *uMthunywa*.

Many other comments reflected a sense of alienation from mainstream politics; the sense that the government has its own agenda and is conspiring against the people of Matabeleland. This view was generally pervasive among the majority of the readers. In the light of this scenario, one can draw on Fiske's assertion that if the social distance between the 'power-bloc' and the people is wide then:

[W]e should not be surprised if the political energies of the people are directed more towards the micro-politics of everyday life than to the macro-politics of socio-economic structures, for it is in these micro-politics that popular control is most effectively exercised. (1992: 60)

Given the express feeling of discontentment and general lack of confidence in the 'power bloc' and its institutions among *uMthunywa* readers, it is arguable that the shift of the readers' attention to *uMthunywa*, in part, represents the failure of other societal institutions, among them the more prestigious news organisations and traditional political organisations, to address adequately issues of vital concern to members of the public (see Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 293). However, because of the limitations inherent in the discourses of *uMthunywa*, owing to its ownership, there is reasonable ground to argue that it comes up short if the goal is providing critical information about the political public sphere that its readers need to make political decisions. In the same line of thought, Sparks argues that "... while popular journalism would speak in an idiom recognisable by the masses as more or less related to their own, it would only speak of their concerns, joys and discontents *within the limits set for it by existing structures of society*" (1992: 28, emphasis mine). This however, is not to imply that *uMthunywa* has little or nothing to contribute to the lives of its readers. In fact, from the participants' views, it emerged that there is need to broaden our notion of what 'political' means, to include participation outside the arenas of traditional politics in-keeping with the revised conception of the public sphere as discussed in Chapter 3 (see Fraser 1992: 111 and Sparks in Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 293). In this way, more contemporary models of the public sphere characterised by smallness of scale and composed

of small interest groups are accommodated. The debates from these same small public spheres then feed into the larger mainstream public sphere. The need to broaden the scope of our notion of what ‘political’ means was implied in some readers’ responses as follows:

Dube... the paper hardly deals with serious politics, it deals with issues that occur in the townships and are *unfortunately* (emphasis mine) considered to be of lesser importance by some people. To me these issues are very important – it’s important for me to know if my neighbour is a witch, and these things are real by the way! If one is interested in serious stuff like politics they can always buy papers that concentrate on political issues, like the *Chronicle*.

Nothando:... those obsessed with politics ... will certainly not like *uMthunywa*, but as for me I’m not yet ready for politics, I do follow political issues but I’m not really apprehensive about them. In any case, if I feel I want to read about politics and business, I’ve the option of buying other newspapers – I do not want to think politics ... all the time. But to be honest with you [laughing] if *uMthunywa* was to include all the ‘noise’ and politics on its pages, I for one would not buy it.

These comments clearly point to the importance of tabloids as alternative mediated public spheres catering for specific groups who (by design or restriction) are located on the margins of the mainstream public sphere. In this sense, therefore, one may argue that *uMthunywa* is providing new opportunities for representation and recognition for groups ‘outside the mainstream’, thus creating a kind of ‘alternative public sphere’, where marginalised audiences are given voice. Again this represents only a part of the broader public sphere where issues relevant to the readers’ daily lives are reported, debated and discussed. As seen in Chapter 3, Ornebring and Jonsson (2004: 283) clearly articulate this view, arguing that tabloid journalism has positioned itself in different ways as an alternative to the issues, forms and audiences of the journalistic mainstream (see also Glynn in McDonald 2003: 59). In this case, the emancipatory potential of *uMthunywa*, as expressed by the readers, lies in the fact that it addresses issues previously not open to public debate and discussion, such as witchcraft and other paranormal phenomena – issues ‘political’ in ways that resonate with the lived circumstances of the readers. It is perhaps in this sense that Dube (cited above) asserts that issues to do with witchcraft and related paranormal phenomenon are important in his life. This way, *uMthunywa* challenges the structural elitism of the mainstream public sphere by providing representations that resonate with the readers’ lived experiences. It is thus important to heed Fraser’s assertion that “public spheres are not only

arenas for discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (1992: 124).

Further to this, there is a sense in which one may contend that *uMthunywa* offers ‘ammunition’ against what is seen as a biased establishment that denigrates the Ndebele people. It is important to note, as discussed in Chapter 2, that the frustrations felt by *uMthunywa* readers stem, *inter alia*, from their position in some kind of underclass that perceives itself as unable to do anything significant about events in the mainstream. The irony that emerges with the foregoing analysis is hinged on the fact that *uMthunywa* is state-controlled. This irony is equally veiled and embedded in the attenuation of the Zimbabwean print media, a scenario that has, among other things, culminated in the increasing popularity of the tabloid content offered by *uMthunywa*, notwithstanding the question of ownership and control. In fact, one reader, Mutshumayeli, 30, noted that at times he is struck by the fact that *uMthunywa* is state-controlled but the idea quickly fizzles into thin air as he gets absorbed in its stories.

In discussing the role tabloids could play in the political realm of their readers, Bird (1992: 131) argues that tabloids do seem to allow for an element of resistance against what is seen as the all-pervasive power of government. For her, this is possible *inter alia* through bringing to light in sensational ways issues that appeal to emotion and that directly affect readers’ lives. In this way, tabloid readers can at least direct their anger at the bureaucracy that brings them down. Machin and Papatheoderu (2002:47) further argue that texts dealing with personal problems can create among viewers a sense of proximity to their own lives and experiences. They are, in theory, important forms of knowledge, engaging audiences who might feel alienated by the more abstract forms that serious journalism represents. These views find support in one of the readers’ explanation of how the elderly readers interpret paranormal stories in *uMthunywa*:

Prosper: The elderly people believe [the stories] because through them, they find answers to issues they do not understand. For example, you hear them say there is no rain these days because people do all these bizarre and wayward things, which are abhorred by the gods, hence the withdrawal of the rains.

Taking into consideration Ornebring and Jonsson (2004)’s argument that political participation builds not only on rational processing of information, but also on emotion,

engagement and sometimes even outrage, it is convincing that tabloids like *uMthunywa* have the potential to provide this platform.

Clearly, the foregoing discussion points to the fact that the reading of *uMthunywa* is symptomatic of a deeper social malaise in Bulawayo and Matabeleland at large – precisely the political alienation experienced by the readers. This line of thought finds support in Sparks's view that "... the popularity of tabloids says more about the relationship of ordinary working people to the social and political processes that govern their lives than about the press" (cited in Strelitz & Steenveld 2006). In similar vein, Grisprud notes that the consumption of tabloids "... may be understood as a *choice* made [by people] on the basis of some sort of recognition of their social conditions" (1992: 92, emphasis original).

In concluding this section, it is important to make reference to a different kind of 'political' reading of *uMthunywa* which emerged with a few readers and exists within the dominant critical theory perception of tabloids as impacting negatively on society. This reading deviated radically from the reading experiences of the majority of respondents. These readers buy *uMthunywa* apparently as a type of 'self-conscious' joke that does not engage them to think critically about their situation. One of these readers commented thus:

Mthabisi: *UMthunywa* only fascinates us but it does not encourage us to have a serious outlook to life. The fact that it doesn't cover politics denies us a lot in terms of keeping pace with political discourses of the time – that is, partly the reason, why we are underdeveloped in Matabeleland. While the paper may be so appealing – which is the reason why we all buy it, we need to be cognisant of the fact that there are more serious issues that the paper can dwell on. We honestly need to be careful!

Clearly, this 'self-conscious' reading of *uMthunywa* dramatises the tension between the cultural populism tradition and the critical theory paradigm highlighted in Chapter 3. The reading renders contestable Sparks (1992: 42)'s view that while tabloids undoubtedly rest upon the mobilisation and organisation of the concerns of 'the people,' they do so in a way that prevents them from becoming aware of their status (see also Bourdieu in McDonald 2003: 57 and Spassov 2004). In Fiske (1992: 49)'s words, as discussed in Chapter 3, the last thing that tabloid journalism produces is a believing subject as it offers the pleasures of disbelief.

Having made an attempt at discussing the political significance of the reading of *uMthunywa*, the next section delves into the impact of the vernacular language that the paper uses (isiNdebele) in popularising its discourses among its readers.

6.6 The role of language in attracting readers to uMthunywa.

The fact that *uMthunywa*'s editorial content is published in isiNdebele, a local vernacular language is undoubtedly key to its consumption by Bulawayo readers, as language naturally locates individuals in particular cultures, placing them firmly in their own realities. According to Kramsch (1998: 65-66):

There is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity. By their accent, their vocabulary, their discourse patterns, speakers identify themselves and are identified as members of this or that speech and discourse community. From this membership they draw personal strength and pride, as well as a sense of social importance and historical continuity from using the same language as the group they belong to. (see also Wa Thiongo 1981: 13; Kramsch 1985: 3; Edwards 1985: 17; Thompson 1995: 12 and Matenda 2001: 34).

This point was widely acknowledged by participants in this study with one of the readers, Dube, commenting as follows:

You see what my brother, *uMthunywa* is in our mother language and traditionally, language is the carrier of culture. We, therefore, see the paper as reviving our cultural values through its use of pure isiNdebele and proverbs which explore issues that we, the poor of Matabeleland, experience. I think this is important because even my own mother at times asks me to read the paper for her, this has not been happening before – it's our paper and we should be very grateful for its availability and pray that it doesn't disappear again.

The language thus works towards the cultural cohesion of the readers as a group with a particular identity.

Furthermore, an important aspect that emerged from the readers about the language used in *uMthunywa* is the fact that IsiNdebele expresses some issues in a graphic and sensational way, which can hardly be matched by English. This attribute finds footing in the fact that the tabloid press has generally developed a form of language that enables various oral cultures to find resonances between it and their own speech patterns, and to find pleasure in relating the two. It achieves this largely through departures from 'official', correct language (Fiske 1989a: 106). One reader, Khanyile, observed that the paper re-invents

phrases and comes up with catchy and interesting ones like ‘Idlalichatsha’ (18 – 24 March 2005), used in the literal sense, as a euphemistic title for mischievous women who prey on married men. The extract below also highlights the foregoing view on the language used in *uMthunywa*.

Interviewer: What would you say about the language that *uMthunywa* uses?

Sibekezele: The language is good as it expresses views and opinions much better than English, at least for me. I think the paper would be much different if it used a different language.

Interviewer: How exactly, can you explain further?

Sibekezele: You see, isiNdebele has a certain way of portraying issues in a very brazen manner which English can hardly match. Take for instance, a headline like this one “Umhlolo batayi!” (What a disaster!), I can’t think of a more brazen and striking way of putting it across in any different language. The other thing is that isiNdebele is my first language; I can easily understand it much better than any other language.

What also emerges from the above extract is the fact that language gives people an identity and therefore a particular citizenship. From the extracts, therefore, it can be noted that *uMthunywa* as a vernacular tabloid is a rare treasure among the Ndebele speaking readers; this is particularly so given the long-standing marginalisation of the people of Matabeleland from mainstream-issues, including mediated discourses, as discussed in Chapter 2. This view finds support in Kramsch’s observation that:

Members of a group who feel that their cultural and political identity is threatened are likely to attach particular importance to the maintenance or resurrection of their language. (1998: 75)

It is arguable, therefore, that language has been quite instrumental in popularising *uMthunywa*. But even more obviously, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to partake in the discourses of the paper, as one reader noted:

Dube: It’s not everyone who can read English; isiNdebele caters for everyone, the young and the old. My grandmother can read *uMthunywa*, and if any other old people are not literate enough to read, they can always ask their grandchildren to read for them and they will understand.

In this way, there is a sense in which it can be argued that by bringing on board a wide readership inclusive of non-English readers, *uMthunywa* allows more people to involve themselves in the public life of their communities. Similarly, Fiske (1992) argues that the conversational tone of tabloids, which forages on the language of its readers, sets up a more ‘egalitarian’ relationship between them and their readers.

The reading of *uMthunywa*, in part, points to the fact that people understand their world better if they use their own languages. As Matenda (2001: 35-36) rightly observes, full democracy can only be attained if people enjoy all of their rights, including cultural rights. They can speak confidently and express themselves clearly if they speak their own languages.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the main findings of the research under five different themes, preceded by a discussion of the content of *uMthunywa*. The themes are namely, the readers’ identities and relationship to the broader political formation; the readers’ newspaper preferences and reading habits; the meanings obtained from the textual content of *uMthunywa* and their appropriation into the readers’ everyday lived realities; the political significance of the reading of *uMthunywa* and the role of language in attracting readers to the paper. The discussion was underpinned by the theoretical and methodological framework informing the study – the Habermasian concept of the public sphere and reception theory. Different scholarly perspectives on tabloid journalism also informed the discussion. In line with the public sphere theory, this chapter has highlighted some possibilities and limitations associated with tabloid journalism, demonstrating that *uMthunywa* offers its readers something they do not find in other Zimbabwean media, particularly the mainstream press, as it deals with issues affecting its readers on a daily basis – township experiences – in their own mother language, and it does so through foraging on excessive formulaic and sensational style. The next chapter gives a broad conclusion to the whole study.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The tabloid charms its readers and beckons them into a world where life is dangerous and exciting. But when the journey is done, it soothes them with assurances that, be it ever so humble, there really is no place like home. (Bird 1992: 209)

7. Introduction

This chapter sums up the key issues that arose out of this study. The study has sought to explore the reasons behind the popularity of the tabloid *uMthunywa* through interrogating its relationship with its Bulawayo readers. It specifically sought to investigate the meanings obtained from the content of the paper, and their appropriation to the readers' everyday lived-realities through a comparative analysis of 'audience data' and 'content data' in a manner of examining reception processes which have a bearing on the use of the editorial content of the paper. It also examined how the reading of *uMthunywa* is tied to the vernacular language (isiNdebele) the paper uses for its editorial content and the possibility of it providing an alternative arena for public discourse.

In order to explore these issues, the study has primarily drawn on a qualitative research methodology with qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews (both group and individual) constituting the main research tools. The interviews have led to an appreciation of the complex manner in which Bulawayo readers of *uMthunywa* are attracted to the paper and how they appropriate its textual meanings to their daily lived-realities in which the reception of the paper is embedded.

Clearly, the study has established that *uMthunywa* offers the people of Bulawayo in particular, and Matabeleland at large, something they do not find in other Zimbabwean print media. The cornerstone of its attractiveness is plainly its excessively formulaic and sensational stories, and the fact that it deals with issues experienced by the people in their lived circumstances. In the same light, the vernacular language used in the paper is also pivotal in not only shaping the tabloid form of the paper but also in influencing the audiences' attraction to the paper as it enhances their understanding of the meanings embedded in the paper. It also emerged from the study that the paper constitutes an alternative way of looking at the world, which is valuable to the people of Matabeleland and

Bulawayo in particular, who feel alienated from the ‘power bloc’ and the dominant frames of reference. In essence, the popularity of *uMthunywa* finds space in the social conditions that have alienated the people of Matabeleland from the macro-political life of the nation. The study thus points to the need to revisit the concept ‘political’ if a more relevant and complex analysis of the political significance of the reading of *uMthunywa* is to be attained.

Of note also is that the study finds that there is a sense in which the reading of *uMthunywa* is gendered, with women valuing the tabloid’s concentration on the personal (private) more than men.

Although *uMthunywa*, like most state-controlled newspapers, is situated within the dominant ideology, it offers space within that ideology, through which the conventional ways of presenting reality are challenged. Against this background, the study finds that despite the ownership and control of *uMthunywa* by the Zimbabwean government, which structures its discourses, it plays a role in the lives of its readers by addressing the very issues that are of immediacy to them. This fact found support in the readers’ clear selection of *uMthunywa* over other mainstream newspapers, with suggestions that those with interest in mainstream political issues have the latitude to read other newspapers. So to dismiss *uMthunywa* as useless trash that has no place in the journalistic terrain remains highly contestable.

7.2 Summary

In summary, through this contextually rooted study of the consumption of *uMthunywa*, this study has shown that tabloid readers are no lesser than readers of mainstream ‘elitist’ newspapers, rather they are people who find space for tabloids which not only complements but fits within their day-to-day lived circumstances. They are, therefore, not docile receptacles that consume tabloid content without strong reason or reflection.

Against this backdrop, it is hoped that this study will contribute to a knowledge base from which other media scholars can draw in attempting to understand and further interrogate the role and function of tabloid journalism within the African context. This is particularly important in light of the fact that the predominant way of addressing tabloid newspapers in academic debates has involved a strong tendency to consider them less valuable for society and democracy compared to other newspapers perceived as respectable journalistic products. Thus suggesting an underlying value system, which is expressed

mainly in the binary tension between critics rooted in the critical theory paradigm and those embedded in the cultural populism tradition.

7.3 Scope for further research

While this research was largely exploratory in several ways, it leads to possible areas for further investigation on the consumption of tabloids in specific socio-cultural and political contexts. As indicated above, the study undertook a broad approach in investigating the popularity of *uMthunywa* among its Bulawayo readers. It interrogated the reasons behind the tabloid's popularity by examining its relationship with Bulawayo readers. It specifically sought to investigate the meanings obtained from the content of the paper and their appropriation in the readers' everyday lived-realities through a comparative analysis of 'audience data' and 'content data' in a manner of examining reception processes which have a bearing on the use of the content of the paper. It also examined how the reading of the paper is tied to the vernacular language (isiNdebele) it uses for its editorial content and the possibility of it providing an alternative arena for public discourse. In consequence, further research should narrow down focus to look at these aspects individually in order to provide a deeper insight into the consumption of tabloids (*uMthunywa* in this case) within specific lived circumstances.

Given that the study has established that debates on the consumption of tabloids pander broadly to the binary tension between the cultural populism tradition and the critical theory paradigm, it is vital that further research strives to resolve this tension through recourse to the notion of ideology (meaning in the service of power) (see Thompson in Strelitz 2005: 25). Central here is that ideology should retain its critical importance in unpacking the relationship between meaning and power. It is this 'critical conception' of ideology rooted in the concerns of critical theory that is relevant for the further assessment of the nexus between tabloid texts and the audiences. This way we guard against the uncritical valorisation of audience pleasures (populism) as they are not produced innate, but often support and naturalise relations of domination. This emerges from the observation that ideology operates as much by absence as by presence and that there may be new pleasures embedded in the tabloid texts related more to understanding than identification. As Thompson rightly proposes, symbolic forms are not ideological in and of themselves, but

need to be analysed 'in situ' in relation to structures of power that they may or may not help sustain (cited in Strelitz 2005: 27). Closely related to the foregoing research direction, is the critical need to reassess the standards and values by which journalism as a social practice is judged.

Perhaps a more insightful study will also have to explore the reception of tabloids in divergent/ multi-cultural contexts, thus unearthing whether the ubiquity that characterises the criticisms of tabloids forms has resonance in their reception by readers across cultures. The cultural comparison will thus highlight generic characteristics of tabloids across-cultures and also reveal cultural differences in the way tabloid readers appropriate meanings from tabloid content in their day-to-day lived experiences.

APPENDIX

Guide for focus group interviews

1. Politics

- How interested are you in politics - would you consider yourself politically active?

2. Political attitudes

- How do you view the current political situation in the country?
- How much confidence do you have on state institutions?
- Do you think government pays equal attention to all the regions/ provinces in the country?
- What do you think are the relations between government and the Matabeleland region?
- How optimistic are you about your future in the region (Matabeleland) and the country at large?

3. Ethnic identities

- Do you have a strong ethnic (Shona/ Ndebele) identity?

4. Frequency and importance of newspaper consumption

- How often do you consume different newspapers and magazines?
- What are your newspaper preferences?
- Is having access to 'hard' news and current affairs important?
- How much confidence do you have in newspapers as news providers?
- Which other media provide news in your life?
- Do you consume the same print media as your friends/ relatives - does the consumption of the media play a role in shaping how you relate to each other?

5. Reading of *uMthunywa*

- How often do you read *uMthunywa*?
- What other media (of the same mode as *uMthunywa*?) do you consume as an alternative to *uMthunywa*?

6. Pricing of *uMthunywa*

- If *uMthunywa*'s price is increased to the same level as that of its sister newspapers like the *Chronicle* and the *Sunday News* would you still buy it?

7. Content Vs Consumption of *uMthunywa*

- Do you read all the columns in the newspaper?
- Which stories are you particularly drawn to in the newspaper?
- How do the stories compare with stories you have read in other newspapers?

8. Language and writing style

- Which particular language are you most comfortable with in newspapers?
- Do you think the language used in *uMthunywa* influences your preferences and pleasures?
- Do you think the writing 'style' of *uMthunywa* has anything to do with your reading of the paper?

9. Audience's lived experience Vs content appreciation of *uMthunywa*

- Do the stories in *uMthunywa* relate to your lived experiences?
- Do you find the stories of any importance in terms of informing you on specific issues that relate to your day-to-day lived experiences?
- What meanings do you attach to the stories?
- Do the stories have a link with other aspects of your preferences and pleasures?
- Do you share/ discuss the content of stories you read with colleagues/ friends or relatives?

10. The political significance of the reading of *uMthunywa*

- Do you believe the stories you read in *uMthunywa*?
- Do you think the stories are of any 'political' significance?
- How useful are the stories in informing public discussion on the political experiences of Matabeleland (Bulawayo) and the country at large?

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