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Tabloid Newspapers: A debasement of popular taste or an alternative public sphere? A case study to determine whether the vernacular tabloid, *uMthunywa*, is inciting critical and rational current affairs debate, as well as contributing to public participation in the political and economic discourses of the country.

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ABSTRACT

This study is a case study of the Zimbabwean vernacular tabloid newspaper, *uMthunywa*, to ascertain if the newspaper plays the role of inciting critical and rational current affairs debate as well as contributing to public participation, deliberation and expression on the political and economic discourses of the country, thus defying societal stereotypes and negative perceptions about tabloids. The study sought to determine whether, through its news style focus on narratives that highlight individuals and their concerns, *uMthunywa* is contributing to public participation, deliberation and expression.

The specific aims of the research were to investigate the type of content that *uMthunywa* serves to the public. To investigate whether *uMthunywa* acts as a public sphere by providing information about politics, economics and social issues, thus helping its readers make informed decisions. Investigating whether *uMthunywa* plays the role of watchdog in the public and private spheres was also one of the specific aims of this research. The other aim of this research was to find out if *uMthunywa* acts as an agent of representation for the ordinary people and other stakeholders and promoting public debate about current affairs.

A comparison was made between *uMthunywa* editors' and readers' perceptions of the role the newspaper is playing. Pro and anti tabloid scholarly views were discussed with the study heavily leaning on the pro tabloid theorists who want messages in tabloids not to be viewed with disdain. Anti tabloid theorists opine that they are not real newspapers and by concentrating on entertainment and celebrity personalities, they breach journalistic codes. Data was gathered using qualitative content analysis, and in-depth interviews. The study revealed that *uMthunywa* acts as an alternative public sphere, a watchdog and an agent of representation for all stakeholders. But in the quest to perform these roles, it was revealed that the tabloid newspaper is subjected to political interference and its poor distribution curtails it in performing its normative roles. However, there were views from readers suggesting that *uMthunywa*'s sensational style thwarts its ability to cover serious issues relating to politics and economics. They are of the view that *uMthunywa* indulges in infotainment at the expense of serious current affairs news.