



**Herman Wasserman.** *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa: True Story!* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xvi + 218 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35492-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22211-4.

## TABLOID JOURNALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA



Herman Wasserman

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### Recovering Tabloid Journalism in South Africa: The Failure of the Post-Apartheid State

In 16 years thousands of politicians failed to deliver to their promises but in 10 years one paper exceeded people's expectations. In 10 years poor people got rich. In 10 years voiceless people got a chance to speak out. In 10 years most notorious criminals got to where they belong, jail. Yes, in 10 years the SUN shined throughout South Africa and the World. Daily Sun, You are the best. Rapabi Boithatelo, a black South African citizen and reader of the *Daily Sun*, the country's biggest daily newspaper and also a tabloid, posted this comment to his Facebook page on June 13, 2012, to commemorate the paper's tenth anniversary.[1] While many South Africans share Boithatelo's opinion, others argue that the *Daily Sun* and other tabloids in the country represent the lowest standards of journalism. Tabloids' emphasis on sensational crime stories and focus on sex mean that they largely exist outside what is perceived as quality journalism. However, Rapabi Boithatelo's comment suggests that tabloids rather than mainstream newspapers are instrumental in speaking to the concerns of a poor and working-class black majority in post-apartheid South Africa.

Herman Wasserman examines the dramatic growth of tabloid journalism in South Africa and argues that its popularity is a byproduct of the sociopolitical changes brought on by the transition from an apartheid regime to a democratic government. In his multidisciplinary book, Wasserman expertly explains why newspapers matter to South African readers like Rapabi Boithatelo when they are perceived as less and less important in other areas of the world. His study is also an admirable recovery of tabloids as a subject of scholarly analysis and a challenge to the professional journalism community to consider their political significance for readers and tabloid journalists in South Africa. Wasserman's work makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussions and debates about changes in South African culture and society due to the end of apartheid in 1994.

Wasserman opens his study by situating South African tabloids in a global economy and persuasively argues that any analysis of their consumption and production must consider globalization and the ways it changes the function of tabloids for South Africans. Wasser-

man informs readers in chapter 2 that alternative presses, which challenged apartheid and stridently critiqued the government for its failure to protect citizens, have all but disappeared. The seeming success of democracy has made them obsolete. In practice, Wasserman notes, democracy in South Africa has brought with it civil rights for blacks, which include the right to vote, laws against discrimination, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly. Democracy, though, has not brought with it material rights, which include rights to household food security, safe housing, employment, healthcare, and clean water.

Wasserman argues that the failure of a democratic government to adequately provide for the masses is key to understanding the rise and success of tabloids in South Africa. While South Africa is home to one of the world's biggest wealth gaps, a commercial press with advertisers eager for new markets of emerging middle-class black South Africans has risen to take the place of alternative newspapers critical of the former apartheid government. In this sense, Wasserman indicates that South African newspapers like the *City Press* and the *Sowetan* have failed to speak to the interests of working-class and poor black South Africans. Instead, tabloids, which were first published in 2001 with the *Sunday Sun* and became increasingly popular with the publication of the *Daily Sun* in 2002, have filled the void of news that resonates with the black masses. Tabloids take seriously the concerns of black South Africans and present news from their perspective. Simply put, tabloids give voice to the most marginalized groups in the country, argues Wasserman.

If this were his final analysis, one might object that Wasserman romanticizes and simplifies tabloid journalism. Instead, he reminds readers that these newspapers are white, foreign-owned commercial ventures that are heavily embedded in powerful socioeconomic structures. Accordingly, significant power disparities exist between tabloid owners and readers. This does not, points out Wasserman, negate the critical ways that readers might engage with and use tabloid coverage to organize and make meaning of their lives.

In this regard, Wasserman's survey of readers in chapter 4 is one of the most compelling aspects of the study and provides an opportunity to consider the experiences of readers who purchase and read tabloids in South Africa. Wasserman finds that black South African tabloid readers are discriminating readers with their own set of standards for how they interact with what they read. His claims here counter the commonly expressed idea that

tabloid readers make up the uneducated and uncritical segment of a given readership. Moreover, Wasserman suggests that tabloid coverage and consumption are not stable concepts but vary depending on a variety of conditions that include the type of tabloid, the reader, the environment, and the type of story that is presented. Analyses of tabloids, then, must take into consideration the contexts in which they are consumed and produced.

To make the case that tabloids's meanings are contingent, Wasserman skillfully uses coverage of reports of witchcraft in South Africa to critique conventional journalistic standards that privilege news media as an instrument for conveying factual details and operationalizing rational debates. Wasserman rejects a simplistic analysis of this coverage as being "true" or "false" or as a marker of African provincialism. Rather, he argues that readers's consumption of stories on witchcraft speaks to one way that poor and working-class black South Africans make meaning out of the ongoing inequity in a post-apartheid South Africa.

One specific concern about Wasserman's analysis of tabloid readership in South Africa arises from his comparative examination of mainstream tabloid journalism in Britain. He does not consider black tabloid journalism in the same vein. Wasserman does not discuss the *Voice*, the longest-running British weekly black tabloid newspaper catering to the Afro-Caribbean community. Its absence is particularly curious as Wasserman discusses the early black South African newspaper *Bantu World* in other areas of the book in an effort to document the predecessor of black tabloid journalism in South Africa. Even more, Wasserman reaches beyond the relatively facile explanation that black South African tabloids are British publications in black face and hints at the idea that tabloids in South Africa and other African countries may be just as rooted in traditional oral cultures as they are in Western ones. However, Wasserman quickly moves away from this line of thinking, preferring instead to view the emergence of South African tabloids as a manifestation of the transitions stemming from the end of apartheid.

Wasserman's comparison of South African tabloids with their mainstream British counterparts rather than the *Voice* becomes even more puzzling when he contrasts British readers with black South African tabloid readers. According to Wasserman, readers in the United Kingdom use mainstream television news as a barometer for measuring whether tabloid coverage is accurate or true, while black tabloid readers in South Africa demonstrate

higher levels of trust in tabloids than mainstream papers. This conclusion seems to overlook Afro-Caribbean British residents who might express higher levels of distrust of mainstream British media because of racially biased coverage. Consequently, Wasserman's omission of the *Voice* makes Britain tabloid journalism synonymous with whiteness and results in a missed opportunity to explore tabloid journalism in the African diaspora.

Wasserman ends his analysis by challenging the notion that tabloid journalists are the dregs of the journalism community. As with his survey of readers, Wasserman complicates a one-dimensional reading of South African tabloid journalists and identifies factors that separate them from their counterparts in other parts of the world. Celebrity and entertainment coverage appears far less in South African tabloids. There is greater emphasis on investigative journalism, which purports to address problems faced by various communities. As a result, tabloid journalists in South Africa are often viewed as leaders and trusted advisors whom readers believe they can rely on to relate news relevant to their lives. This, Wasserman states, demonstrates that the public often has widely different standards than professional journalists.

As a whole, *Tabloid Journalism* in South Africa is a must read for media historians, journalists, and perhaps just about anyone who is interested in ongoing questions about a post-apartheid South Africa. Wasserman's work deserves great respect for encouraging a globalized standpoint of tabloids in South Africa. Perhaps most importantly, Herman Wasserman's work shows that tabloid newspaper readers like Rapabi Boithatelo illuminate the failure of the post-apartheid government and mainstream media in South Africa to address the needs of all citizens.

#### Notes

[1]. Rapabi Boithatelo's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/rapabib>, accessed October 10, 2012.

[2]. Joseph Harker, "Our Black Youngsters: How Often Do You Hear the Good News?" *The Guardian*, June 20, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/20/where-is-good-news-black-youngsters?INTCMP=SRCH>, accessed November 5, 2012.

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