# IN SEARCH OF MORE READERS AND HIGHER PROFITS: THE TREND TOWARDS TABLOID JOURNALISM

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**Abstract**

*The growing complexity of life (falling real income, daily struggle for existence etc) makes life more hectic. This situation leaves insufficient time for newspaper reading and full digestion of commentaries and features offered by newspapers. Even those who care to concentrate rarely have enough time to cope with the news deluge.*

*Additionally, the influence of the cinema and allied entertainment continues to draw people away from books, newspapers and magazines that require time and effort to read.*

*These reasons combine to make newspaper readership superficial or even indifferent. Newspapers, operating in an intensely competitive environment, know they exist on the goodwill of readers.*

*Therefore, Tabloids, by connecting with the people, humanising their news and serving their stories entertainingly, are winning. And their big rival, the Broadsheets or Qualities, are copying. This paper examines how.*

## 1. Introduction

Newspapers play a vital and influential part in the daily lives of many people. They inform and educate. They question and challenge. And of course, they entertain. People cannot cope with the overwhelming realities of life. Therefore, they need a diversion, an escape, even if temporarily, to provide a relief from the dull, dreary drudgery of everyday existence not for all, but for most people.

For many, life is full of tensions and temptations. Daily, they are looking for a way out. Being either shy or strictly secretive, most of them would not share their problems with others. Instead, they turn to the impersonal mass media for solutions to their mountainous life problems. They search out for personal and intimate columns like "Life and You", "The Short Story", "Stories that Touch the Heart", Writing Clinic" (like the ***Daily Sun's*** "How I Write", "Me and My Books", "Literati" etc), "Friday Sermon", "How to Make and Save Money" etc.

Newspaper publishing is a business. And business is about detecting a need and filling it. Therefore, this pleasurable reporting, called Tabloid Journalism, has arisen in response to readers' needs. In their grope for more readers and increased profits, Tabloid newspapers serve compelling stories and un-put-down-able features. They use a style of writing that affects intensely, by employing the imaginative technique of specific details to paint pictures and evoke emotions.

Thus the meaning is heart-felt.

## 2. What is Tabloid Journalism?

The Tabloid is a newspaper of human voices, capturing the unpredictable and the unexpected rhythms of life and existence; the daily heart-felt beat of humanity, in lucid and crisp prose.

It is a mirror that reflects reality with fresh, bloodied brazenness. And like a good mirror, it reflects life from all nuances politics, economy, crime, religion, sports, arts, culture, lifestyle, the rich, the under-privileged, the stars and the ordinary, the sinners and the saints, warts and all.

A tabloid mirrors the totality of people's actions or inactions in bold and dramatic language that may draw blood occasionally. All over the world, Tabloids are closer to the people than their serious siblings, the Broadsheets. Tabloids connect more with the people because they humanise, empathise and elevate the oft-neglected concerns of the people into the plane of national discourse. And so they sell in millions more than the rest. They say it as it is and attract a broad spectrum of readers.

## 3. Words, Wit and Worth

Words and wit (a readiness of thought; a facility of expression; a quick conception and an easy delivery) combine to give the Tabloid reporter worth. As Williams Hazlitt observed in 1819, wit is the salt of conversation, not the food. In the case of the Tabloid Journalist, facts of the story are the food and the writing style is the salt to season the food. With his infinitely fine prose, he rhymes himself into readers' favour.

Under Tabloid Journalism, news writing is uplifted to the more creative and colourful playing-with-words leads. They are three, namely: the Literary Allusion Lead, the Familiar Saying Lead and the Parody Lead. Using them, the Tabloid reporter delightfully spices the introductory paragraph. Wallowing in words, he weaves precious gems to provide aesthetic excitement.

According to Rabiu (forthcoming), since the playing-with-words leads employ words and language that are praised and celebrated, they are also called Epigram leads. He adds that worldwide, readers like memorable

phrases and famous sentences, hence the attraction and affection of these leads which add extra impact to writing.

Though the playing-with-words leads make the reader work a little harder, they do what literature, at its best, does: provides pleasure and diversion and offers stimulation and enlightenment. Epigram leads demand more time and attention from the reader, compelling him to read actively and alertly because, in the end, they have more to give.

## 4. Exemplifications

Following are two examples each of the three playing-with-words leads:

### a. The Literary Allusion Lead:

Here, the reporter refers, in his lead, to literary works (books, films, drama, poems etc). Allusion serves as a kind of short hand, a brief reference to a well-known idea, situation or picture that needs no further explanation.

i. ***"Both honour and disgrace come from talking"***
– ***King Solomon, in Ecclesiastes***

The Minister of Information, who was sacked from office yesterday for a verbal indiscretion, tasted the bitter truth of the above Biblical words.

The president dismissed Chief Garrulous Maibaki after he undiplomatically told the press "like the president, I also receive gratification".

ii. ***"Words are but empty thanks"***
– ***Colly Chibber, 1697***

Their minds occupied with costly and colourful material gifts, victorious members of the Flying Eagles yesterday came out of Aso Rock disappointed and dejected, after the president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, only shook their hands and thanked them for their "patriotic feat".

### b. The Familiar Saying Lead:

Here, the Tabloid journalist weaves in a proverb, a maxim or an aphorism: a short phrase or sentence that says something true or wise.

i. ***"Words will not fill your purse"***

Probably adhering to the wisdom of the words in this Polish proverb, a 30-year-old beggar in Kaduna went to work, and today two years after he is a proudly married man inhabiting his own house and owning a car...

ii. ***"Small cares make many words, great ones are mute".***

This German proverb was recently recreated when a grateful 25-year-old nouveau riche, riding on the crest of multimillion Naira business successes, handed the keys of a N20m mansion and a N15m jeep to his 55-year-old childhood benefactor and the dumbfounded recipient stood and stared expressionless.

**c. The Parody Lead:**

Parody is a humorous imitation, like the parrot mimics the human voice. Accordingly, in this lead, the Tabloid reporter parodies well-known songs by music stars, to create a light touch.

i. The late King of Raggae, Bob Marley, sang: ***"who the cap fits let him wear it".***

And the Ooni of Ife, Oba Sijuade Okunade, capped governor Abdullahi Adamu of Nasarawa state as the Aare Obateru of the Source in Ile-Ife yesterday.

ii. Like the line from an old musical album "Lean On Me". Said ***"Sometimes in our lives we all have pains, we have sorrows"***: a Lagos multimillionaire businessman recently had a rude re-awakening to these words when he lost his N25m jeep and a cash sum of N50m to armed robbers on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway.

**5. Discussion**

From the preceding explications and examples, it is obvious that Tabloid Journalism shatters the traditional conventions of news writing. It showcases imagination and invention. Already, the century-old inverted pyramid formula of news writing has been criticised by Dominick (2002) for being too predictable and old fashioned. And then Fedler and others (2005) add that reporters who use alternative leads, also known as "soft leads", sometimes report the facts more cleverly than the competition.

Drawing from literature, the Tabloid reporter orchestrates key literary elements to achieve a specific emotional response on the part of readers. Like Rabiu (2006) observes, the Tabloid news writer tests the frontiers of language and shows extreme cases. The kinds of ingenious, creative openings generated by Tabloid newsmen are labelled "principle of literature" by Sarler (1999), herself a former London Tabloid reporter who had also worked for a London Broadsheet.

As Aldous Huxley observed in 1940, words and the meanings of words are not matters merely for the amusement of linguists and logisticians, or for the aesthetic delight of poets; they are matters for the profoundest ethical significance to every human being.

In the 1923 words of Rudyard Kipling "words are, of course, the

most powerful drug used by mankind". Any wonder why multitudinous readers are drugged on Tabloids, wherever they exist?

In Nigeria, a research outfit, Nigeria Media Facts, has confirmed the ***Daily Sun***, as the most widely read daily newspaper in the country (4.43%), followed by the ***Punch*** (4.05%). The research findings published in 2005, however observed that 79.78% of Nigeria's 131million population does not read or look at a newspaper.

In a front-page story headlined "Daily Sun is 3 Today", on Friday, June 6, 2006, the Tabloid celebrated its success thus:

> ***"Today, just 36 months down the line, courtesy of our teeming readers, we are the nation's largest selling daily newspaper.***
> ***"As we turn 3 today, we salute the market, which has indeed crowned us Nigeria's king of the Tabloids. And we make our vow afresh, the pledge we gave three years ago: we are bout people, people, people. Wherever the people stand, that is where you will find us. When you are happy, we will roll out the drums, felicitating with you. And if anyone attempts to afflict you, as witnessed on the political scene recently, we will afflict the person. People are the centre of our world".***

## 6. Conclusion

Tabloid Journalism is rich. It is vibrant. It delights and it relishes. Tabloids give nourishment to the mind by the use of words so ingeniously applied.

However, the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs understanding. Therefore, it takes high literary skills to produce elegant and enchanting prose in Tabloid news writing.

Sometimes, life is more fun when people deviate from the norm, when rules of the game, in this case, journalism, are broken.

Tabloids feed their readers with remarkable stories. They not only tell what happened but more importantly, Tabloids show how it occurred by providing an "atmosphere" or a "context". Inevitably, this style induces an emotion of either excitement or sadness, shock or amazement. They give an intense expression to experience.

Not surprisingly, Tabloids keep roping in more readers and reaping more profits. Hence, their big rivals, the Broadsheets, are learning to borrow some of their winning ways. They are introducing more people friendly columns and they are increasingly serving their stories warmly rather than coldly.

According to Carol Sarler. a British journalist who has worked for both the Tabloids and the Broadsheets in London. competition is forcing the Broadsheets to absorb from the Tabloids. And so. T***he Guardian*** of London now reviews popular music. reports the divorce of a popular singer or scandals in the British royalty. It also serialises the biographies of stars.

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