



Market Forces versus Professionalism: A Priority Dilemma Resulting in Departures from Traditional Layout of *The Standard* Newspaper

Benjamin Mbatia
Kabarak University

Abstract

The phenomenon of tabloidization entered the realm of journalism as an undesirable trend as early as 1833 when the “penny press” emerged in US cities. These tabloid papers wrote for semiliterate industrial workers who preferred heavily illustrated news stories that concentrated on sensation and not objectivity; the personal as opposed to the public, as well as scandal, lifestyle and human suffering in place of economic and political news. These tabloids built up a mass market that those in the elitist market started to eye with envy. The result was that mainstream spreadsheets started sneaking in a few tabloid elements, so as to get a bigger share of the readership, that had got addicted to the entertaining style and layout of the tabloid papers. This study aimed at assessing the extent to which *The Standard* newspaper, a traditional spreadsheet, has tabloidised its layout due to market pressure. The Standard is the second largest daily in Kenya in terms of circulation. Many elitist dailies have embraced elements of tabloidization in their layout, in order to get an edge in the competition for market share. The study found that the layout of *The Standard* was to an extent tabloidized. Among other things, the front pages were manipulated to increase the visual effect so as to create an urge to buy among the readers. Pictures chosen to illustrate some stories were too graphic and carried emotive semiotic messages. Some pages were crowded with tiny stories that lacked depth detail and analysis. Based on the agenda setting theory and the visual semiotics theory, this study used the qualitative analysis of layouts of pages of *The Standard*, as well as photographs from the editions of the paper, selected from the years between 1995 and 2015. The study confirmed the incidence of tabloid elements in the layout of *The Standard*.

Key Words: Tabloidization, Layout, Agenda Setting, Visual Semiotics Theory

1.0 Introduction

Tabloidization is the process of watering down news, in effect replacing serious, objective journalism with a populist form which “gives the people what they want.” Tabloidized journalism focuses on entertaining rather than informing the reader, (Mooney, 2008). This approach is aimed at appealing to the mass market (Brookes, 2000). Journalists writing in traditional spreadsheets are today tempted to deviate from serious objective items considered useful in helping citizens make informed decisions. Instead they have started including “juicier” issues, like scandal, tribalism, ridicule of personalities and voyeurism which in the past were found only in tabloids (Brookes, 1991). This article examines how this phenomenon which has been dubbed infotainment has encroached into the elitist press. The emphasis of this paper is not on content of the news items but instead it focuses on the way the layout and visual presentation has been manipulated and tabloidised in *The Standard* newspaper, an established, traditional daily spreadsheet. This paper has over the years practiced traditional, objective journalism, but in the face of a competition for a share in the readership market, that is getting more and more fierce, *The Standard* like



other spreadsheets is tempted to occasionally sneak in the more popular tabloid layout because the public has come to expect it.

Today (2015) the print media in Kenya consists of 14 regular papers, including The Standard, Sunday Standard, Kenya Today, Taifa Leo, Taifa Jumapili, Business Daily, Nairobi Star, The Nairobiian, Nairobi Newspaper, The East African, Coast Week, The Financial Times, Weekly Citizen and The People. According to Ali (2010), all the Kenyan regular papers are privately owned. Except for two, Taifa Leo and Taifa Jumapili, which are written in Swahili, all the rest are published in English. While the number of dailies has remained at 6 since 1990, the number of national weeklies has shot up from 5 to 9 between 1995 and 2005, including the addition of *The Weekly Citizen*, a gossip tabloid, Maina (2006). The mainstream newspapers have also introduced weekly tabloid editions to cater for those with a taste for the lurid, sensational and gossipy. A case in point is *The Standard*'s own publication, *The Nairobiian*, a best selling tabloid that concentrates on sex scandals.

Various reasons have been put forward to explain the increase of tabloidization and its encroachment into the traditional spreadsheets. Research done in Portugal shows that younger readers are more visually oriented and enter a page by first looking at a picture, as opposed to older readers who prefer written words to images (Coelho, 2007). Kenya has a young population with over 50% of the people being under 20 years of age. The bulk of the Kenyan readers would therefore be more comfortable with the tabloid layout which is easy to read and colorfully illustrated. Another explanation may be the fact that the elitist newspaper's analytical articles cater for the highly educated readership. Less than one fifth of Kenya's population have received college education. The bulk of potential newspaper readers fall in the category of the semiliterate American readers of the 1830's who popularized the "penny press".

This paper will examine three aspects of tabloidization of layout and assess to what extent the newspaper has allowed itself to dabble with them, for the purpose of satisfying those of the baser taste, who, unfortunately for the elitist journalist community, make up the majority of the reading audience. These three aspects include the manipulation of the front page layout, use of emotive pictures and the use of a layout of print, that favours the scanner at the expense of the serious reader.

Objectives of the study

To establish if the front page layout of *The Standard* newspaper has tabloidized elements.

To assess the photographs used in *The Standard* newspaper to see if they have any tabloid elements.

To evaluate the prevalence of news items that are rendered brief and shallow due to the tabloid layout used to present them.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories guided this research. The first is the **Agenda Setting Theory** (McCombs, & Shaw, 1972) This theory states that the media has the ability and the tendency to set agenda for the reading public, in so doing influencing them on what to think about and what to treat as important. Media influence also tilts the general public's opinions about certain issues. This theory explains the thinking behind the tendency to sensationalise and



scandal monger which is the stock of trade of tabloid journalism, part of whose purpose is to sway public opinion in a certain direction, vis a vis objective presentation of facts.

As the paper is dealing with the presentational and visual aspects of layout, the second theory that applies is the **Visual Semiotics Theory** which assigns paralinguistic characteristics to communication that do not involve the use of words, for example the passing of messages through pictures, which use visual grammar to make statements through the way people, places and things are depicted. Seassure (1922) believed that all ways in which human beings communicated could be analyzed as if they are languages. Seassure called the method of studying all non verbal signs (including pictures) *semiotics*. The visual semiotic theory is relevant to this study because in tabloidized journalism, pictures are used as semi veiled mechanisms to contribute to the intended meaning.

Research Methodology

The study entails the analysis of three aspects of layout of *The Standard* newspaper, studying the editions selected from the years 1995, 2005 and 2015. The three aspects are: analysis of front page arrangement, analysis of photographs used to illustrate news items and the arrangement of news items in the inner pages. Front page analysis was aimed at assessing the use of eye catching gimmicks, designed to attract the attention of potential buyers. The photographs used to illustrate the news items were analyzed to assess the extent to which the semiotic messages they put across deviate from the objective and factual and lean towards the emotive and subjective. Thirdly, the arrangement of news items in the inner page were studied so as to assess the prevalence of the tabloidization technique of presenting easy to read news items that are devoid of depth, detail and analysis. Those above elements were subjected to qualitative analysis.

Analysis

Following below is the analysis of the tabloidized layout elements in *The Standard* newspaper. The study has used a sample of three items. They include the analysis of the front page of *The Standard* of 9th March 2015. Here, the researcher looks at the use of eye catching gimmicks meant to push up sales as well as lend undue prominence to certain issues. The picture on page 8 of the *The Standard* of 10th March 2005, that illustrates a human suffering story, is analyzed for its tabloid elements; in particular the emotive semiotic messages it contains. Lastly, an inner page (page 7 of *The Standard* Friday, March 11th 2005) will be analyzed to assess the arrangement, size, alignment and crowding of news items, a tabloidization technique designed to achieve an entertaining, easy to read kaleidoscopic effect.

The front page in a traditional spreadsheet has a simple format, like a brief and concise headline. This is usually followed by a sub heading which with the heading occupy at most one tenth of the page space at the top of the page. The story is usually accompanied by one picture that will occupy not more than one quarter of the page. The picture is usually on the left side of the page, below the headline. The story appears on the right of the picture, occupying at least two columns on the front page. Whatever part of the lead story overlaps into the inner pages will be less than half of it. A minor story will be placed at the bottom of the page, arranged in short columns. The figure below shows the highly



tabloidized layout of the front page of *The Standard* of Monday, March 9th 2015 which differs from the traditional front page layout:



On the sample above the headline is long and descriptive. It reads: “How the first lady led top team to the finish line .” This large headline creates an emphasis that is intended to create the impression that this story is of paramount importance. The sub heading is as long and descriptive, lending credence to the Agenda Setting Theory. This story concerns a personal interest, the hobbies of the first lady, Margaret Kenyatta. To justify it’s placement on the first page which should carry a story about a burning political or economic issue of national importance, the writer has to go out of the way to campaign for it, so as to make it appear important enough. The sub heading is not directly related to the front page story but invites the reader to see a related picture on page two. It reads : “ Margaret Kenyatta runs with Deputy President and a host of top athletes in historical 21 km half marathon.,” This sub headline is more of a lead . It’s purpose is not to inform but it is a marketing device meant to encourage the reader to buy the paper and see the stories promised, that lie in the inner pages. Most notably, apart from the long headline and equally long but superfluous subheading accompanied by an oversized picture, there is no main story on the front page. The picture is used as an eye catcher and provides very little information that can be categorized as news, for example where the marathon was taking place, why the first lady who is not a top athlete in Kenya was taking part, who the organizers were and who won the race. The first lady is only reported to have finished the race.

A Semiotic analysis of the picture on the front page above :The use of celebrity figure
This front page picture portrays prominent personalities including the first lady, Margaret Kenyatta, as well as some of the world famous Kenyan athletes. These are role models, prominent in the public eye and admired by many. Apart from using the celebrity status of the persons in the picture for competitive advantage, the image is also used to send a



semiotic message. The message is: “Running for this cause is so important . Even the most prominent personalities in the country are involved. It may make you as famous as them. Why not try it ?”

Color

The picture uses a variety of warm colors. The first lady and the athletes are dressed in orange costumes. Orange is a warm color that inspires the feeling of hope and vivacity. The picture also has streaks of crimson which is the color of excitement; white, the color that is associated with purity and black, the neutral color that denotes a down to earth situation. The semiotic message here is that running for charity is a natural, exciting, necessary, and down to earth activity.

Body language

This is a still photo in which it is difficult to trace body movement and gestures. All the same ,the relaxed look of the athletes and the smiles on their faces shows that they are happy and proud of their activity (running a marathon to raise funds for charitable causes). The inset photo of President Uhuru Kenyatta giving the first lady a congratulatory hug is more expressive. This inset sends the message that the first lady is engaged in a romantic, family friendly, and pleasurable activity.

Gaze

Gaze can be defined as the use of facial expressions to communicate an idea or feeling without necessarily saying a word (Kress, & van Leeuwen 1996). The gaze in this picture is manifested in the form of the eye contact and smiles directed at the reader (the targets of the gaze). The gaze is used as a communicative strategy in which facial expressions are used to invite the reader to share in the joy, excitement and sense of achievement about the activity portrayed, as well as prodding them to explore , interpret and respond to the story.

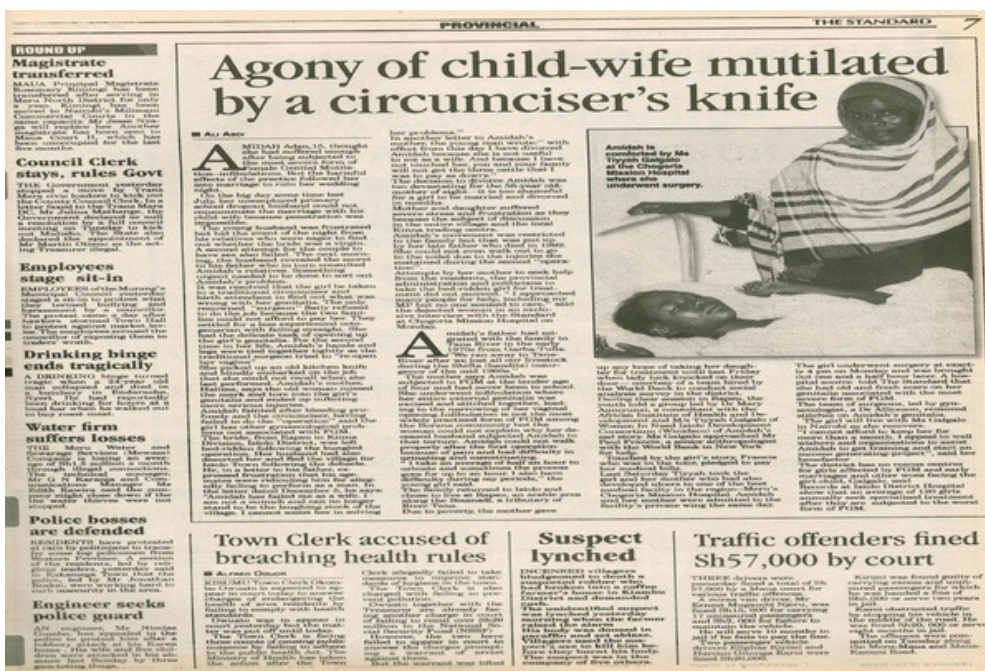
Writers of elitist spreadsheets are careful in their choice of photographs to illustrate their news items. They choose informative pictures that complement the information given in the script, but such pictures should not portray grizzly details, for example, bloody scenes in accident or violent crime situations. Critically injured, mutilated or dead persons are not directly shown. The accident is implied by showing the mangled vehicle and death by showing grieving relatives. Tabloid journalism throws all these cautions to the wind. Pictures in tabloids play with the reader’s emotions by showing naked persons, dead bodies, accident victims before they are removed from the crash scene or badly injured parts of human bodies, oozing blood.

In a human suffering story entitled “ Accident victim seeks help to restore his intestines ,” *The Standard* of Thursday the 10th March 2005, page 8, uses such a picture.



The composite picture above shows on the one part the pink loop of the intestines of a Mr. Mutisya, grotesquely bulging out of a gaping hole in his stomach. This picture is intended to elicit shock and sympathy for Mutisya from the readers. The other part of the composite picture shows Mutisya in a despondent and pensive mood, biting his middle finger. The use of this picture in the Standard may be justified by the fact that it is meant to move well wishers to donate funds to offset Mutisya's hospital bill. Otherwise its use violates traditional spreadsheet practices. induces shock. Such a picture would be expected in a tabloid paper, but not in a traditional spreadsheet like *The Standard*.

Analyzing the semiotics of this picture, the grizzly portrayal of the displaced intestine passes a hidden message : “ Do not sit comfortable enjoying yourself when Mutisya is dying and needs your help.” The pink colour (the colour of living tissue) of the bulging intestine evokes the feeling of shock about Mutisya, who is alive but dying. Mutisya's gaze is in the space and not making an eye contact with the reader. The message is (Mutisya is saying without saying);, “ Unless you act quickly, I am not with you, I am a gone case.” The other aspect of the tabloidization of layout is the cramming of many tiny, unrelated articles into one page. This unconventional style was adopted by *The Standard* newspaper from around 2005, as exemplified by the example below, from page 7 of *The Standard* of March 11 which uses the kaleidoscopic approach.



The below the

table analyses

kaleidoscopic effect caused by the multiplicity of brief unrelated articles on page 7 (shown above) of the Standard of Friday 11th March 2005.

| Item No. | Story Titles | Story length |
|----------|--|--------------|
| 1 | Agony of Child wife mutilated by circumciser's knife | 3 Columns |
| 2 | Town clerk accused | 1/4 Columns |
| 3 | Suspect lynched | 1/6 Columns |
| 4 | Traffic Offenders fined | 1/10 Columns |
| 5 | Magistrate transferred | 1/10 Columns |
| 6 | Council Clerk stays, government orders | 1/10 Columns |
| 7 | Employees Stage Sit-in | 1/10 Columns |
| 8 | Drinking Binge Ends Tragically | 1/10 Columns |
| 9 | Water firms suffer loss | 1/10 Columns |
| 10 | Police Bosses are defended | 1/10 Columns |
| 11 | Engineer seeks police guard | 1/10 Columns |

The articles on the page shown above are brief and numerous. Only one of them meets the length requirement of a news item(the article titled Agony of Child wife mutilated by



circumciser's knife) as it is three columns long. The rest of the news items are only a tenth of a column each. These brief articles do not go beyond the lead. They lack a setting, detail and analysis. Such articles, resemble the brief Facebook or Twitter postings and cater for the type of reader who has no time for details, a scanner who is looking for something entertaining.

The entertainment factor is enhanced by the multiplicity of the mostly unrelated articles, like the images in the children's plaything of the sixties, called the kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope is a stereoscopic viewing device with a slot to insert a disk containing color picture slides. The pictures can be seen by the child who changes them at will by pressing a lever. The kaleidoscopic effect here refers to the tabloidization tactic of juxtaposing many varied, unrelated news items on the same page. The reader jumps from one article to the other, sampling the kind of variety a child enjoys as they move from the picture of an elephant to that of a dragon, all in the kaleidoscope. The articles are sketchy and do not go beyond the lead, each containing thirty words or less on average. This tabloidization technique is apparently a strategy aimed at striking a balance between the declining population of older readers who loved the elite press and were interested in detailed, well researched news, with the increasing younger readers who are apolitical and are therefore not interested in national news but go straight to the sports pages and then possibly to Lifestyle and Celebrities sections. Moreover, these youthful readers are more inclined to get information from other sources apart from the print media, such as the social media, via the internet. A full, analytical news item is expected to occupy at least three vertical columns of a page while the figure and table above show that the page referred to has small news items occupying on average one tenth of a column. It is worthy noting that the kaleidoscopic technique was absent in the 1995 editions of The Standard, but appeared in 2005 and increased in 2015

4.0 Conclusion

This study has established that though the Standard is basically a traditional broadsheet, it employs tabloid tactics in layout. The purpose of this deviation is evidently double edged. A human suffering story is for example illustrated with a graphic grizzly picture. Such a picture will help the subject to get public sympathy and possibly financial help from members of the public, while the paper also benefits by getting more consumers from a public that is addicted to the tabloid layout. A similar symbiotic relationship also exists between the government departments and personalities whose policies benefit from the agenda setting effect of tabloidized items that favour their policies. Tabloidization of layout therefore seems to be a necessary evil that the elitist press has to occasionally engage in , so as to stay afloat in the turbulent newspaper market.

Ali, Y. M. (2010). *Globalization: It's Impact on the African Nations' Media Systems: Thecase of Kenya'*.

Brookes, R. (2000). "Tabloidization, media panics and mad cow disease." In Sparks, C., & Coelho, Z. P. (2007). *Front page layout and reading paths : Influence of Age on Newspaper Reading*. University of Munho, Portugal: Communication and Society Research Centre.

Mooney, A. M. (2008). *Tabloidization of the Irish Press Media: An analysis of how the Irish*



- independent press reacted to the introduction of British tabloids*. University of Leeds.
- McNair, B. (2001) (2nd Ed.). *News and journalism in the UK*, London: Routledge.
- Nordin, K. D. (1979). The entertaining press: Sensationalism in the 18th Century Boston newspapers. *Communication Research*, 6(3), 295-320.
- Tullich J. (Eds.) *Tabloid Tales : Global debates over media standards*. (pp 43-62) Maryland: Rowlands and Littlefields Publishers Inc.
- Whitby, G. (1982). "The penny press and the origins of American journalistic style." In *Studies in journalism and mass communication: A review from the Texas Journalism Education Council Annual Conference*. (pp. 23-34)