

**Tabloid Journalism
in Africa**

Brian Chama

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Tabloid Journalism in Africa

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-41735-6
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-41736-3

ISBN 978-3-319-41736-3 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017935866

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Cover illustration: milos luzanin / Alamy Stock Photo

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this book was first discussed at Roehampton University, United Kingdom, in May 2009. This book could not have been written without the support of colleagues, former colleagues, at Roehampton University and many other institutions. I extend special thanks to Professor Anita Biressi and Professor Heather Nunn for their contribution and guidance on tabloid journalism and practice. I am also grateful for the friendly support of journalists and researchers working in the field of tabloid journalism in Africa.

During the past few years I have been fortunate enough to have been given many opportunities to present this work-in-progress at conferences, symposia, and research centres, and have appreciated fellow participants' informed and insightful feedback. Special mention should go to Winston Mano at University of Westminster, Ola Ogunyemi at University of Lincoln, Julian Petley at Brunel University, Elke Weissmann at Edge Hill University, and Robert Picard at Oxford University for extending invitations to present research papers, accepting conference submissions, and offering feedback and personal encouragement and other invaluable support.

Other thanks also go to Palgrave's Felicity Plester and Sophie Auld who have both warmly supported this project. I am also grateful to Mwansa Yaasika Chama and Afua Ofosu-Appiah for their support and encouragement.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Very little is known about how tabloid journalists operate in Africa. Brian provides a timely and important summary of tabloid journalism in Africa which clearly shows how tabloids in the African context play a unique role in the democratization process. His book focuses on the global practice of journalism and then zooms in to tabloid journalism, and finally situates the discussion within the African context. In addition focusing on how tabloid journalism can be seen as part of the broader neo-liberal thinking in Africa in which democracy and freedom of expression is promoted but also looks at how tabloid journalism practice has been met with resistance from the alliance of forces. Brian draws on examples from across the continent looking at success stories and struggles at sometime within the infotainment genre. 'Tabloid Journalism in Africa' concludes that even though challenges exists, there is a strong case to suggest that the practice of tabloid journalism is being readily accepted by many people as part of the unique voices in democracy even those which might be shocking and yet true.

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Introduction: Tabloid Journalism in Africa

This book is a comparative work on tabloid journalism in Africa as a form of popular culture. It provides a window into the relationship between the media, society, and politics, noting that it is very difficult to make a meaningful statement about the origin of tabloid newspapers, partly because the meaning changes over time. Even though one can say that newspapers that were tabloids in physical size, measuring half the size of a broadsheet newspaper, presenting shocking journalism, emerged in Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century, such statements cannot take one very far towards understanding what kind of each tabloid journalism was. Additionally, tabloid journalism is presented by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2008:7) as a shadowy and dubious concept at the best of times, and is understood to have developed over time to refer to not only the changing formats in shifting historical and industrial contexts, but also to the attitudes and values commonly attached to these formats. In fact, tabloid journalism is now used in popular liberal culture to refer to shock radio and television and, conservatively, to newspaper formats that emphasise brief stories, large pictures, and sensational headlines (Gripsrud 2008:37).

Over the last two decades, Africa has witnessed a significant expansion in tabloids in both print and broadcast media. For example, newspapers that provide colourful pictures, brief stories, and sensational headlines have become attractive to both the highly educated and those with limited reading skills. However, they have also been met with resistance from some

sections of the communities as their front-page content is usually written in local jargon loaded with sexual innuendos and exaggerated headlines. In Central African Republic, *Le Citoyen* is a popular tabloid newspaper that plays a critical role in monitoring social and political affairs, especially the ongoing war between the Seleka rebel coalition and government forces – a conflict that emerged after rebels accused the President Francois Bozize government of failing to abide by peace agreement signed in 2007, which has led to several massacres forcing several Muslims to flee the country. Despite the country's constitution providing for press freedom, in 2000, the president dissolved the High Broadcast Council which was created to regulate the media in general, making it difficult for the tabloid newspapers to function freely and flourish (International Pen 2006).

The question is whether the tabloid newspapers in the Central African Republic are capable of peace building and conflict resolution. For example, currently the government controls the content of much of the media, and despite the 2005 constitution provides for press freedom, and abolished imprisonment for libel and slander, criminal penalties remains for any newspaper that incite ethnic and religious hatred, and moreover, publication of false news which could disturb the peace and good order is a crime. Therefore, the tabloid newspaper for example, instead of angering authorities, avoid printing sensitive information, a form of self-censorship, but also a sign of the challenges facing tabloid newspapers in unstable countries. In 2013, it started reprinting materials from *Radio France Internationale* rather than risk being arrested for angering military officers if they create their own original content.

Similar insights can be drawn from *Le Pays*, a tabloid newspaper founded in October 1991 in Burkina Faso, which is very popular for its harsh criticism of the government using sensational language, while providing information largely ignored by the mainstream media. Even though authorities periodically announce the need to respect press freedom, the Information Code of 1991 which provides for press freedom has serious exceptions to this freedom. In addition, critics argue that the government is oversensitive to even genuine and constructive criticism of its daily operations, as in the case when it abruptly revised the Information Code to allow all news outlets to be banned if accused of 'endangering' national security. Moreover, tabloid journalists are also arrested regularly if they criticise the government operations heavily. For example, in December 1998, Norbert Zongo, the publisher and editor of *l'Indépendant* tabloid newspaper was assassinated by unknown assailants, who burnt his body, after the tabloid

journalist began to investigate the brutal murder of the driver who had worked for the brother of President Blaise Compaore. Since his death, the tragedy was used by many tabloid journalists as a warning sign to all journalists and commentators critical of alleged government corruption and injustices (International Pen 2006).

Indeed, some critical voices of tabloid journalism still practice in Africa such as the Zambian scholar Francis Kasoma (1996:99) points out that the nature in which information is investigated and presented sometimes creates so many problems for tabloid journalists. In fact, it is usually a result of their tendency to engage in the sensational journalism of naming and shaming which exposes them to arrests:

African newspapers, particularly the independent tabloids in countries which adopted multi-party politics in the 1990s, have spared no one in their muckraking journalistic exploits libelling, invading privacy, and generally carrying out a type of reportage on those they report on, that can best be described as a journalism of hatred, revenge, and dislike against people in the news.

Other similar scholars with interest in tabloid journalism in Africa, such as Isaac Phiri (2008:15), view the evolution of anti-corruption journalism in Africa as creating a fertile ground for many tabloid newspapers now getting involved in investigations that exposes corruption, especially in countries where there are functioning governments that desire to curb corruption. Moreover, the African Union now has a convention to prevent and combat corruption, and there is a general agreement that the tabloid newspapers are playing a significant role in the fight against the mismanagement of public resources by authorities. However, the studies on exactly how far can the tabloid newspapers influence the decisions and actions of the public actors are very few.

For example, one can look at Nigeria's *The Sun*, which is a popular redtop and down market tabloid newspaper that provides culturally shocking news regularly as was the case on 19 January 2015, when it ran a controversial advert on its front page suggesting that Muhammadu Buhari, the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress was about to die in the office if elected president. The controversial advert was accompanied by pictures of Murtala Muhammed, Sani Abacha and Umaru Yar'Adua, all past Nigerian presidents who died in the office. It also had a Bible passage from the book of Deuteronomy 30 verse 19 stating that 'Nigerians should be warned to choose

between life and death', and requested the voters to choose life, claiming that the oppositional political leader, represented death while his rival, President Goodluck Jonathan, represented life. In addition, it printed a huge question mark placed over the picture of the opposition leader next to the pictures of the late leaders asking its readers not to allow history to repeat itself arguing that the country was tired of State burials.

This political advert was carried in the tabloid newspaper despite the Electoral Act 2010, Section 95 (1) prohibiting political campaigns tainted with abusive language directly, or indirectly, likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal, or sectional feelings, and Section 95 (2) forbidding abusive, slanderous, insinuations, innuendoes designed and likely to provoke violent reaction. It is within this context that Phiri (1999:62) observes that many tabloid newspapers in Africa are often characterised by numerous misleading front-page headlines, inaccurate reports usually retracted by an apology the following day, superficially researched articles, and untruthful reports:

This kind of recklessness has led to reduced readership and, a loss in the ability to influence the agenda of the nation. Many readers do not see them as a reliable source of information, and read the papers more for entertainment than substance.

However, despite the various criticisms, tabloid newspapers have continued to expand in many countries in Africa amid predictions that their days are numbered due to the nature of their reporting often seen as culturally shocking, provocative, and generally misleading. However, this has not been the case with Nigeria's *The Sun* tabloid newspaper which by 2011 had a print run of 130,000 and an average of 80 per cent sales and readership. Despite being incorporated in March 2001, and commencing as a weekly tabloid newspaper in January 2003, it became a daily in June 2003 and continued to attract mainly the young readers from 18 to 45 years, turning into one of the highest selling newspaper in Nigeria.

It is evident that the tabloid newspapers in Africa are growing and many readers are gaining access to wider varieties of information. However, their rapid growth has also led to divergent debates among scholars in tabloid journalism in Africa with a few arguing against their relevance in society, often framing them as the journalistic other that deserves no place in serious journalism, while others claiming that much of the criticism of tabloid newspapers is based on a distance interrogation of the reasons for

their popularity amongst readers. For example, Mabweazara (2006:14) gives an example of *uMthunywa* in Zimbabwe arguing that on 4 July 2004, it emerged with a new look and values of tabloid journalism, giving priority to immediate issues of daily life, gaining popularity as a paper that prints gossips and human – interest stories:

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.

Similar success stories of tabloid newspapers are taking place around the continent. In Ethiopia, for example, the new 1995 Constitution provides for press freedom in Article 19, despite offering limited protection for journalists. However, tabloid newspapers have at times enjoyed periods of popularity as evidenced by the weekly *Eyeta*, tabloid newspaper established 1992, published by Paulos Publishing House, and owned by Getachew Paulos. It enjoyed massive popularity at inception and circulated over 50,000 copies per week when it started, a number that quickly rose to 70,000 in less than a year. However, its owner started to face legal and political challenges including being accused at times of defamation and creating political instability, and was once fined Birr 13,000 and Birr 2,000 in succession, the treatment the owner saw as persecution and discouraging leading to its closure in 1993 (International Pen 2006).

Even though some critics of tabloid newspapers in Ethiopia have often pointed out that many tabloids lack a sense of responsibility, education, and experience, it is also important to acknowledge the legal challenges. For example, the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation gives powers to the government to arrest those deemed seditious, including tabloid journalists who step beyond the bounds of politically acceptable reporting. In fact, many tabloid journalists are usually held at Kaliti Prison outside Addis Ababa in regular crackdown by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front which has led to mass arrest of tabloid journalists by especially Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to consolidate power for about 17 years until his death in 2012. However, despite the challenges, several Ethiopian tabloid journalists have received international awards with CNN honouring Wubset Taye in 2013, while Reeyot Alemu was the recipient of the 2013 UNESCO – Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

Moreover, in Senegal, *Le Quotidien* tabloid newspaper exists in an environment of heavy threats of closure. Launched on 24 February 2003 in the capital Dakar, the tabloid newspaper has become a major daily newspaper. Its owner Madiambal Diagne, who is also its editor, also owns Avenir Communications which was set in the same year. It has become generally critical of the government as well as religious figures. For example, in July 2004, he was arrested by the government for publishing articles alleging fraud in the customs service and government interference in the judiciary. The arrest came from an alleged breach of Article 80 of the Penal Code, which mandates up to 5 years in jail for anyone convicted of acts that might compromise public security or cause serious political problems. However, he was released following international pressure and a press strike. The tabloid newspaper has continued to expand in readership, and in 2006 he purchased his own press facilities, freeing it from using government-owned printing facilities. It has not been free from controversies and culturally shocking stories. For example, in August 2008, it heavily criticised the government, religious and cultural leaders for their hypocrisy and intolerance towards homosexuality, a major taboo in the Senegalese society (International Pen 2006).

There is evidence that tabloid newspapers are becoming popular in many countries, and one explanation is that considering the high illiteracy levels in many countries, tabloid newspapers' use of brief stories in simple language, accompanied by many colourful pictures that often discuss personal and private issues, sex, and corruption scandals, loaded with heavy political and economic content with minimal pictures, have become more attractive especially to those with limited reading skills. In fact, tabloid journalism has emerged on the backdrop of colonialism, dictatorship, and authoritarianism system of government whose laws and political culture continue to hang over tabloid newspapers. In Cameroun, for example, *Le Messager* exists in an environment of suspicion and antagonism by the Gendarmerie, and its journalists regularly face harassment and violence. Despite the daily tabloid newspaper being founded in 1979 by Pius Njawé, its sensational content exposes its reporters to frequent arrests. Before his death on 12 July 2010, he was a subject of more than 120 arrests in his 30 years career, especially for being critical of President Paul Biya who often reacted with heavy handed response against any criticism that was directed at his nature of governance by the tabloid newspaper. For instance, in 1990, the tabloid was briefly seized by the government for its reporting on a riot, and in 1992, it was banned forcing its owner into exile to Benin. However, in February 1993, it

continued to publish despite its owner being regularly accused by the government of drug dealing, counterfeiting, and sedition. Finally, in 1996, its owner was imprisoned on charges of insulting the president and the members of the National Assembly. In 1998, he was further sentenced to 2 years in prison when the tabloid newspaper ran an article that suggested the president had a heart condition. However, he was pardoned after almost a year in prison, and went on to become the recipient of the 1991 International Press Freedom Award. In 1993, he also won the World Association of Newspapers Golden Pen of Freedom Award, and in 2000 he was named by the International Press Institute's 50 World Press Freedom Heroes of the last 50 years, calling him one of Africa's most courageous fighters for press freedom. His *New York Times* obituary described him as a symbol of opposition to the autocratic regimes (Federation of African Journalists 2010).

It can be argued that the international awards are a testimony that tabloid journalists are being recognised globally for playing an important role in information dissemination. However, critics of tabloid journalism practice in Africa point out that the tabloid newspapers need to do more to be taken seriously including paying attention to basic mistakes such as lack of source attribution in news, which is the major source of problems for many tabloid journalists, especially when blatant allegations are made against individuals and groups. For example, Kasoma (1997) cautions that if tabloid newspapers' sources are not willing to come out with proofs and face the people at the centre of their allegations, they should not make such accusations which they are not able to substantiate in court. In the Gambia, for instance, tabloid newspapers *The Point's* journalists are often attacked for criticising the government while others are censored into conformity. Since being established on 16 December 1991, and published in Bakau, its founders Pap Saine, Deyda Hydara, and Babucarr Gaye have faced many problems for their tabloid newspaper's hard line against government leading to regular crackdown of its operations. For example, on 14 December 2004, the country passed the Criminal Code Bill 2004 which allows prison terms for defamation and sedition, and the Newspaper Bill 2004 which requires all newspaper owners in the country to purchase expensive operating licenses and register their homes as security.

On 16 December 2004, one of its founders Deyda Hydara, after heavily challenging these laws in his sensational editorials, was assassinated by an unknown gunman while driving home from work in Banjul. He was shot

to death under unexplained circumstances, and his murder has never been solved. Following Hydera's death, Pap Saine continued to edit the tabloid newspaper, making it a daily in 2006, and becoming the country's only daily tabloid newspaper. However, arrests of its journalists continued due to its critical position against the government, and on 2 February 2009, Saine was arrested along with Modou Sanyang on suspicion of spreading false information. However, Sanyang was released with a warning, but Saine was formally charged and detained for refusing to reveal his source. The arrests was prompted by a story titled 'Arrested Gambian Diplomat Sent to Mile 2', in which the tabloid newspaper reported that Lamini Sabi Sanyang, an arrested official from Gambia's United States Embassy was transferred to Mile 2 Prison. Moreover, one week later, following another similar report, Saine was arrested again, interrogated at length, and given a second charge of publishing and spreading false information. Additionally, on 24 February, authorities accused him of being Senegalese and having obtained a Gambian birth certificate through false statements. He faced separate trials for each set of charges on 12 March in Banjul. However, on 9 April 2004, the charges of publishing and spreading false information were formally dropped.

The tabloid newspaper and its journalists continue to be a thorn in the government operations despite facing several arrests. It is within this context that in November 2008, the International Press Institute began a 'Justice Denied' campaign pressing for investigations into violence against tabloid journalists in the country, particularly focusing on the unsolved murder of Deyda Haydara. However, at the June 2009 press conference, President Yahya Jammeh disparaged the questions about the 'Hydara Investigation', calling the questions stupid, and asking journalists to go and ask the dead man who killed him. In reaction, the Gambia Press Union published a statement criticising the president's remarks inappropriate and insensitive to his family and friends in a statement which ran in the tabloid on 11 June 2009. In response, the government arrested its tabloid journalists Pap Saine, Ebrima Sawaneh, Sarata Jabbi-Dibba and Pa Modou Faal, and charged them with sedition and criminal defamation of the president. Since Dibba was the only woman, she was held at Mile 2 prison, while the rest were held at Old Jeshwang prison, and on 7 August 2009, they were convicted and sentenced to 2 years' imprisonment. However, in 2005, its founder Deyda Hydera was posthumously awarded the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award and the Hero of African Journalism Award of The African Editors' Forum in 2010.

In many African countries, it is evident that the tabloid newspapers operate in an environment in which the government restricts press freedom, and very often authorities pass laws with the purpose of silencing opposition voices. In addition, may struggle with prison sentences for libel, cancellation of printing licenses, and the abuse of police officers who often arrest and charge tabloid journalists on vague grounds. However, critics of the difficulties encountered by tabloid newspapers in Africa claim that despite the government heavy handed reaction to criticism from the tabloid journalists, the newspaper institutions at times have themselves to blame. In fact, Dumisani Moyo (2005:109) analysis of the banned *Daily News* in Zimbabwe shows that despite its closure in 2003 attracting many condemnations as government's intolerance of diverse viewpoints, to a great degree, and in various ways, the tabloid newspaper contributed to its own closure. It had, right from the beginning, inherent problems that conspired with the political environment leading to its closure. Since its inception in 1999 by Geoffrey Nyarota, its content was characterised by sensational stories. Its first issue which appeared on 21 March 1999 with its motto 'Telling it like it is' led to the tabloid newspaper becoming the country's most popular newspaper. In fact, within a year, it had a daily circulation of about 105,000 copies. However, problems started when the country's President Robert Mugabe started to accuse the tabloid newspaper of being a mouthpiece for the Movement for Democratic Change, a political coalition that opposed his rule. Even though it often asserted that it was independent and criticised both parties, its content often told a very different story.

During the editorship of Geoffrey Nyarota, he was arrested six times, and on 22 April 2000, a bomb was thrown into his offices, but no one was hurt, and he often alleged that agents of Mugabe's security forces had thrown the bomb. Moreover, in January 2001, its building was bombed again, destroying its printing presses. Despite winning several awards, such as the 2001 International Press Freedom Award, 2002 Golden Pen of Freedom Award, and the UNESCO's Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, the sensational mid-market tabloid newspaper was finally shut down by the government in September 2003.

However, based on his personal experience as a subeditor of the tabloid newspaper from January to September 1999, Dumisani Moyo (2005) pointed out that on 12 September 2003, when the police in Harare stormed its offices and shut the tabloid newspaper down, following the Supreme Court ruling issued the previous day that declared that it was

operating ‘outside the law’, it is vital to note that the newspaper had refused to register with the government appointed Media Information Committee as required under the new Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, whose constitutionality it was challenging in the courts. However, the Supreme Court threw out the tabloid newspaper’s challenge on the basis that it had approached it with ‘dirty hands.’ It was ordered to first register before its case could be heard. It was refused to be registered by the organisation citing among other things the expiry of the deadline and that the tabloid newspaper had operated illegally for 8 months. For those calling for intervention in the Zimbabwe crisis, this was yet another opportunity to be maximised. It is important to draw links between the closure of the tabloid newspaper, its shaky financial base, and its general sensational tone within the larger context of the changing political climate that was triggered by the controversial land reform and the resultant international campaign against the country’s leadership. The key argument is that there is a need to look at these as related events that led to the closure (Moyo 2005:124).

Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, *Le Reference Plus*, which is a densely written daily tabloid newspaper based in Kinshasa and launched in 1991 by its editor and owner André Ipakala, consistently criticises government operation. However, the advertisers are reluctant to use it due to its adversarial position on government making it difficult to stay financially afloat in an environment where there is minimal income. But it has continued to attract many readers and international recognition with political editorials exposing its journalists to legal challenges. For instance, on 14 March 1999, Ipakala was arrested by the government forces for publishing ‘false news’. On 24 March 1999, he was transferred from National Information Agency headquarters to the Court of Military Order in Kinshasa and placed under its custody. In fact, the Court of Military Order was established in 1997 by presidential decree law No. 019 shortly after President Laurent Kabila’s government seized power. Its mandate was to restore military discipline especially in the capital Kinshasa when criminality and dissent were on the rise. Moreover, Kabila also appointed its judges whose decisions could only be reversed by him as the supreme holder of executive, legislative, and judicial powers in the country. Since the journalist was not charged, the trials could not be appealed to a higher court (International Pen 2006). He was finally released by the military authorities after international pressure, but continued to work under regular arrests and intimidations. For instance, on 1 June 2001, Ipakala and reporter Valère Bisweko were arrested again for writing

about the rising crime rates in the capital Kinshasa after publishing photographs of decomposing corpses that ran with the title ‘Cut-Throat Murderers Terrorise Kinshasa’. In fact, the photos were taken from the archives leading authorities to accuse the tabloid journalists of alarming public opinion and were detained following instructions from the Office of the President.

However, the tabloid newspaper is often accused by its critics of carrying sponsored articles which are often placed by politicians and business people who want to promote a particular version of events and particular point of view. Generally, the tabloid newspapers usually criticise the government in editorials rather through the news that it reports. For example, in September 2004, its journalist José Wakadila was taken into custody and imprisoned in the western town of Matadi on defamation charges that were brought by two national oil executives. He was finally sentenced to 11 months in prison for defamation and the court ordered his tabloid newspaper to pay a fine equivalent to US\$600. In fact, the complaint came from a 17 July 2004 article that accused Mvuemba Ntanda, the president of the national oil refinery, SOCIR, and Jacobus Terrablanche, the refinery’s vice-president, of corruption and of conspiring with multinational corporations to reduce the company’s crude oil refining capabilities. He was also warned before the arrest in an anonymous phone call of the impending arrest and that he chose the wrong targets. Fearing arrest, he went into hiding in his hometown of Matadi, but was later arrested while boarding a bus to Kinshasa. Similarly, on 3 November 2005, its tabloid journalist Franck Ngyke was shot dead by gunmen inside the compound of his home in Kinshasa at 1 a.m. as he arrived from work. Moreover, his wife, H el ene Paka, was also killed by the same assailants whose exact motives are still unknown and the murder has remained unsolved despite the tabloid newspaper’s continuous critical position on government corruption (International Pen 2006).

On the other hand, the critics of tabloid journalism in the country argue that the major problem is that the majority of the tabloid newspapers are openly engaged in a propagandist frenzy. They are all and everyone sees it under the thumb of the best-paying candidates and of their interests. Sensational declarations that boarder on incitement to hatred and violence occur on a daily basis. Even though the constitution provides for press freedom, the government has restricted this right in practise. Arrests, murders, and other harassment of tabloid journalists are regularly reported. Moreover, many tabloid journalists are also subjected to the practise of *coupage*, where they are paid to write articles on behalf of

persons who are the article's actual subject. There are two significant impacts from this practise; it affects the principle of remuneration of some tabloid journalists, enabling the print media to make it difficult for tabloid journalists to earn a living from legitimate tabloid journalism alone. It also makes it easier to bribe the tabloid journalists, as much for partisan articles as for articles containing generally neutral information. Even though several tabloid newspapers are published, majority of them are biased either in favour or against the government.

INTERSECTION OF TABLOID JOURNALISM IN AFRICA

The changes taking place in many African countries of many established broadsheets moving into tabloid newspapers not only in the paper size but also in content, and those being established opting for tabloid genre have more or less led to many scholarly debates on role of journalism in democracy and particularly in society that puts information and entertainment at the centre stage. Many arguments are centred on whether tabloid newspapers can provide information of reasonable value, and on whether they are well positioned as reliable sources. However, the muckraking models of tabloid journalism practice have emerged in many countries, and they exhibit great promise in providing a framework that captures anti-corruption tabloid journalism in Africa today. In fact, many tabloid journalists are now becoming muckrakers and are able to investigate and unearth evidence of corruption. Moreover, many have become courageous exposing through their publications, many social and economic problems facing the continent today, and many of their actions are leading to a changed public opinion reflected in policy initiative by legislators and administrators (Phiri 2008:25).

Indeed, it is vital to look at *Le Soir d'Algérie* redtop tabloid newspaper based in Algeria whose content regularly exposes corruption in government since its inception in 1990. Its editor-in-chief Fouad Boughanim and its director Zoubir Souissi have made the tabloid newspaper very attractive over the years, reaching over 150,000 copies. It has become an ardent critic of the government operations creating many enemies in the corridors of power. For example, on 10 July 1994, its journalist Yasmina Drici and her friend were stopped by a group of men in police uniforms while driving home in the Algiers suburbs of Rouiba. She objected when the men removed her friend from the car, but the men discovered her press card upon searching their car. Her friend was released, but her body

was found next day with her throat slit. Generally, investigating corruption is often a very dangerous path for many tabloid journalists in Africa. In fact, death threats and frequent arrests are common especially among critical tabloid journalists. For instance, on 11 February 1996, its journalist Allaoua M'barak, columnist Mohamed Dorbane, and leisure section writer Djamel Derraz were killed when a car bomb exploded outside the tabloid newspaper's office in the Maison de la Presse Tahar Djaout building in Algiers. However, no group claimed responsibility, but Islamic fundamentalists were presumed responsible.

Similarly, on 22 September 1997, the tabloid newspaper caused government anger when it sensationally revealed that 53 villagers and mainly women and children were massacred by an armed group who slit open their throats in Guelb el-Kebir south of Algiers. In fact, the news came at the time when Algeria was hit by a wave of massacres since an Islamist insurrection against the military backed government took over power in 1992 after cancelling the elections. On many other occasions, authorities are very uncomfortable with the tabloid newspaper and its nature of reporting. For instance, in June 2004, its journalist Kamel Gaci was charged with failure to inform the police following the publication of his interview with an escaped convict from El Khemis prison in his column. The day after the article's publication, the Bedjaïa Prosecutor's Office brought charges against the tabloid journalist, and was placed under judicial surveillance pending the verdict of his trial (International Pen 2006).

Despite the tabloid journalists often accused of being irresponsible and insensitive by the government, its supporters argue that there exists a culture of intolerance in the country against opposition voices. For instance, in August 2003, the tabloid newspaper ceased publication after being suspended for failure to pay debts to state-run printing presses. In fact, the tabloid newspaper argued that a sudden call to pay the debts was part of the government move to stifle its operations due to its exposure of rampant corruption in the government of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika who was accused of being at the centre of embezzlement in an article that also implicated his brothers and some government ministers in the inner circle. Even though, officially, there are no censorship laws, the legislation states that those insulting and defaming government officials can face prison. However, despite the legal and political challenges, it has remained a popular publication in the country that has continued to play a major role in the democratisation process.

Many critics of tabloid newspapers in Africa however continue to contend that many papers need to be more responsible in their reporting, and even though it is crucially important for tabloid newspapers to provide checks and balances, that ensures accountability of elected officials and delivering of the service to the public as the fourth estate, these should be done while respecting the rights and freedoms of others. In fact, society extends an enormous level of trust towards the owners, editors, and reporters working in the field of tabloid journalism and granting them the presumption of professionalism that the information presented to them is factual and as objective as possible. But when the tabloid newspapers fail to deliver on these responsibilities, it is a betrayal of the public trust of the highest order. This is precisely the case among some tabloid newspapers where they often fall into disrepute under malicious and sometimes manipulative news. Even though tabloid journalists are entitled to their own opinions on matters of public interest, but at times their news smacks the worst kind of yellow journalism where innuendo replaces information, malice takes the place of reporting, and undisguised personal motives masquerade as public interest (Amsterdam 2012).

It is within this context that one can look at *The Chronicle* tabloid newspaper in Ghana which regularly uses a language that could be considered offensive and racist in some sections of the African society including insulting the country's former President Jerry Rawlings calling him a coloured bastard because of his mixed race to stress its point. Established in September 1990 as a daily tabloid newspaper in Accra with a circulation reaching 45,000 copies few months after its inception, it has become the biggest privately owned tabloid newspaper in the country. Owned by General Portfolio with veteran journalist Nana Kofi Coomson as its founder, it has been the most feared tabloid publication by the government over the years. It has also made significant contributions to the country's transition from dictatorship to democracy in its crusade for peace and reconciliation among citizens and against corruption (Karikari 2004).

Over the years, it has grown rapidly in information and entertainment dissemination, while demonstrating a hard line position on former President Jerry Rawlings who came into power through a coup d'état in 1979. Even though after initially handing power over to a civilian government, he took back the control of the country on 31 December 1981 as Chairman of the Provisional National Defense Council, and in 1992 resigned from the Armed Forces to found the National Democratic Congress in 1992, and was later elected president. He was again re-elected in 1996 for a further