

**The *Daily Sun*: Investigating the role of the tabloid
newspaper in the new South Africa.**

Desiray Viney (BA Hons)

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to investigate the role of the tabloid newspaper, *Daily Sun*, in contemporary South Africa by exploring the meanings that readers of the newspaper appropriate through their engagement with it and the uses to which they put these meanings.

This audience-based study is informed by theories that relate to:

- Revised conceptions of the public sphere
- The potential uses of the media in development contexts
- Debates over the tabloidization of the press.

The qualitative data, collected through focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews conducted with township dwellers, workers and the unemployed with low English proficiency, is designed to reveal the role played by the tabloid for its target market.

The conclusion of this study is that the *Daily Sun* plays a positive role in the lives of its readers and that this role can best be understood through a combination of perspectives that incorporate the concept of multiple public spheres, culture as development and a revision of the traditional tabloid debate.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 A personal note on the rationale for the *Daily Sun* study

I was lecturing and tutoring a first level module, *Introduction to Media Studies*. Areas covered in the module included the role of the media, the concept of the public sphere and issues of post-modernity. One of the tutorial tasks was to explore how the academic ideas were at play in ‘the real world’. One of the media examples for study was the tabloid, the *Daily Sun*. Students were given examples of front page stories from the tabloid together with articles written by two media commentators, one vehemently criticising the tabloid, the other taking a slightly more objective stance, and one by Deon Du Plessis, the publisher, justifying what the *Daily Sun* does. Despite the fact that this tabloid was selling in excess of 300,000 copies a day I had, in fact, never read one and was quite prepared to recite the usual criticism of tabloids: gory pictures, sensational nonsense, not real journalism, etc. But what emerged from our discussions was that a number of the students themselves felt very strongly that the criticisms were unfounded because the critics did not know the readers and their circumstances nor how they would interpret the messages and stories. They suggested that the critics “get a life!” This I interpreted as: get out of the old mindsets and frames of reference and see what the readers think of the stories and the way the *Daily Sun* communicates with them. So I did just that. I set out to explore why people read the *Daily Sun* and what the readers found useful in it. My preliminary explorative exercise took place in Pietermaritzburg where the *Daily Sun* had only been in circulation for eight months. I conducted random interviews, with the help of a non-structured question schedule, with people at the city’s *Freedom*

Square taxi rank. Because of the nature of the site, respondents were generally in a rush and could not engage with me at any length, but were willing to briefly answer questions and discuss their opinion of the newspaper with me. I found that most of the people approached still chose *Isoleswe* and *Ilanga* for language reasons and because the *Daily Sun* stories were mainly from Gauteng and Limpopo. However, those who did read the *Daily Sun* found it very interesting, and useful in terms of relevant information and in developing skills to cope with their lives. That was the crucial feedback which motivated me to explore further.

I was so encouraged by the preliminary responses that I decided to do more explorative work. I interviewed the editor of *The Witness*, John Conyngham, who, I assumed, would be in opposition to the tabloid and its contents, but found that he too had undergone a ‘paradigm shift’ in realising that different markets need different things. (Incidentally, *The Witness* has recently diversified into producing a community newspaper, *The Mirror*, in tabloid-format; changed its own presentation style and publishes a *Weekend Witness*, becoming more tabloid-like to broaden its reach to readers other than its previous target – middle class, white-collar workers.) Conyngham felt the *Daily Sun* was doing “good work” (Conyngham, 2005) in its constituency. He related anecdotes told by the editor, Themba Khumalo, about readers becoming so absorbed in the issues raised by the newspaper like violence, crime and the police’s inability to deal with these, that they (the readers) were telephoning the newspaper directly to report, comment on and even to urge reporters to go and investigate crimes taking place at that time. What these stories and anecdotes pointed towards, in my view, was a possible mobilisation of a group of people

who were previously powerless, voiceless and passive towards a position of taking action to improve their lives, albeit at an unsophisticated level.

I went to Johannesburg to interview the publisher, Deon Du Plessis, to get first hand background on the birth, development and growth of his 'baby', the *Daily Sun*. Although his primary motivation for establishing the tabloid was commercial, he believes that the success of it lies in the fact that the target market was in great need of, and more than ready for, the messages the tabloid would convey. I also interviewed a well-known media and social researcher and planner, Jos Kuper, who had done much research, prior to and after the *Daily Sun*'s inception, on the media in South Africa. They both gave me a strong sense of the unique political, social and economic context in which the *Daily Sun* was being produced and consumed.

Moreover, because the newspaper had been in circulation for a number of years in Johannesburg and it was there that the sales had reached record highs, I decided to conduct a pilot study there using a non-structured question schedule to explore why readers thought the newspaper was worth reading. Soweto, and other townships, would have presented ideal settings for my research but because of time and, for me, a certain reservation regarding my safety and lack of knowledge of the area, I chose to spend five days (9 am to 2 pm) in the Johannesburg General Hospital Out-patient waiting area. I found people had the time to talk to me there and I interviewed close to fifty people. The answers I got to the questions I asked convinced me that a thorough study of this newspaper would be extremely valuable, not only for my own work, but also for the

national debate that was so vigorously engaging media commentators, academics and journalists around this tabloid and its effect on the South African media landscape.

1.2 The *Daily Sun* in perspective

The *Daily Sun* was launched in Gauteng in June 2002. The publisher's goal was to offer an alternative to the "boring, serious, expensive, elitist, formal, difficult-to-read" newspapers in South Africa (Du Plessis, 2005). It was aimed at reaching its target readership (township dwellers – workers and unemployed with low English proficiency) and at presenting informative, entertaining and relevant news that

- offers an element of empowerment packaged in a good read
- has a basic morality to offer its readers
- offers educational and 'social skilling'
- initiates unsophisticated debate amongst its readers which could lead to something deeper (like an alternative public sphere?) (Kuper, 2005).

These goals were explicitly set within the framework of a developing democracy in which a certain group of people were needing to be informed and empowered to become part of the new citizenry. By September 2004 the *Daily Sun*'s circulation had reached over 300, 000 copies per day. This piqued competing newspapers, and raised heated debates amongst journalists and academics, particularly regarding the newspaper's gory and sensational content which some viewed as unethical. The *Daily Sun* is now the highest selling newspaper in the country with around 480,000 sales daily (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2005) and this fact demands answers to the questions: What is it about this newspaper that keeps so many people reading its 36 pages, and is it all useless trash?

On the surface, the *Daily Sun* may appear simply to be in the business of selling newspapers and ‘giving the people what they want’. Its headlines are certainly attention grabbing and there is no doubt that it breaks some of the social rules of traditional journalism. But, on studying a large number of the newspaper issues, I found evidence of a more important civic motive: the pages of the *Daily Sun* engage the readers in a way that could contribute to self-development in terms of literacy (*Speaking English* column), knowledge acquisition and “social skilling” (Kuper, 2005). Apart from the daily news, there are regular information features that include *Looking at Africa and the Rest of the World*, *Sun Snaps* – news bites from around South Africa – and *Daily Sun Heroes*, a bi-monthly history feature. The ‘socialization’ function includes regular articles on how to manage personal finances and start a business (*Sun Money* and *Streetwise*), know the law and your rights (*Sun Solutions*), improve your home (*Mr Fixit*), letters to the editor (*Speak Up*), and articles calling for feedback. One example (on 10 October 2007) is headlined, *Big Yellow Buses! Should we follow the US way of transporting school kids safely?* There are regular government communication features informing readers about matters of health, people’s rights and labour. There is even the ubiquitous social page, *Sun People*. This lends credibility to the publisher’s view that the *Daily Sun* is directly relevant to the people who read it and suggests that we need to rethink the role played by tabloid media especially in a developing democracy such as South Africa (Du Plessis (2005); Fourie (2001); Wasserman (2005b)).

In my research, I would like to investigate

- whether, and in what way, the *Daily Sun* could be contributing to the development of democracy, or reflecting this democracy, in South Africa;

- whether the ‘conversations’ or discourses generated by the *Daily Sun* could be said to be facilitating the emergence of an alternative new public sphere;
- whether the *Daily Sun* is in any way addressing the needs and influencing the identity of a “subaltern” (Fraser, 1997: 123) social group in a productive way and so contributing to the transformation of the South African citizenry; and
- whether the *Daily Sun* is representing a new kind of journalism by playing a role in the above domains.

The findings of this investigation could be of great importance in the South African context in that the answers to the above questions could influence our understanding of the role of journalism in a developing democracy. However, it is very important to appreciate that the *Daily Sun* is, after all, a newspaper trying to perform a commercial service for profit (as all businesses do) and not give the impression that it is some benign philanthropic agent of positive change.

Chapter 2 The *Daily Sun* and the South African media landscape

Within the South African context, it is important to investigate how a tabloid newspaper targeted a group of people comprising mainly blue-collar, semi-literate township dwellers, a voiceless mass that in 1994 was “battered by the reality of the ‘old’ South Africa” (Du Plessis, 2005). With an immense “capacity to read popular sentiment” (Harber, 2006: 1), it provided them with stories they could relate to, issues they could identify with and information they could use and benefit from in becoming active citizens of the new developing democratic culture. This investigation is important because it explores the link between the media and freedom and democratization in South Africa. It begins by asking: To what extent is the *Daily Sun* helping to mediate the varying competing interests and values within a plural society and, in doing so, “enhancing the responsiveness of the system and providing ‘training grounds’ for anchoring democracy in the experiences of lived reality” (Dahlgren, 1995: 3)?

Under the apartheid regime, the white minority controlled the media – both English and Afrikaans – with only a small select group of regular newspaper readers. The so-called ‘quality’ newspapers served to inform, educate and comment – very much under the watchful eye of the government. The then Nationalist government funded Afrikaans newspapers and used them for propaganda but fined or banned newspapers (usually from the independent English press) that criticised its policies. A very small number of black-owned, independent (both English and African-language) newspapers like *UmAfrika* started up but few survived.

It is not surprising, then, that by 1989 “English newspapers were in trouble” with “stagnant” readership and circulation (Diederichs, 2005:1). Ken Owen, then editor of the *Sunday Times*, said that newspaper readers want “to see their own views and emotions reflected in newspapers. They want a voice to speak for them much more than they want to be informed” (in *ibid.*). They wanted a “user-friendly product” that was quite different from the “serious broadsheet newspapers” that existed (in *ibid.*). However, media groups continued to produce traditional newspapers aimed at a select few and circulation continued to stagnate. The advancing technology also had an impact on the market as traditional newspapers failed to come to terms with having to make a ‘paradigm shift’ to provide new ways of competing with website publications.

The emergence of the *Daily Sun* in 2002 – with its sensationalist style and ‘human interest’ stories about ordinary people, for ordinary people – changed the face of newspapers in South Africa. Under apartheid, black people were not interested in reading about a society they were not part of. The end of apartheid saw “a surge of newspaper reading” (including the *Daily Sun* and a number of African-language newspapers like *Ilanga and Isoleswe*) since black people were no longer alienated from mainstream culture and politics. “That had changed – this is their country now.” (Alan Dunn in Harrison, 2005: 2). It is ironic, however, that the previously English-owned Independent Group (now black-owned) turned down the offer to start the *Daily Sun* and the previously Afrikaans group, Naspers, took control of it and now owns “the leading papers in the country today” which are “independent, party-politically unshackled papers to serve the buying public” (Vosloo, 2004: 152).

An investigation such as this should consider the specific social, political and economic system within which the tabloid (as a cultural product) is produced, distributed and consumed. The target market of LSM (living standards measure) 4 and 5 has quadrupled its income since the end of apartheid and the launch of the *Daily Sun* “has coincided with that realisation...[and]...the political power of this market is equally explosive” (Bloom, 2005: 3).

The success of the *Daily Sun* has had a significant effect on journalism in South Africa. It seems to have initiated the process of “turning South Africa’s traditional newspaper model on its head” (Bloom, 2005: 2). The mainstream newspapers themselves only reacted to the paper when it started to hit record sales and posed a commercial threat. Their first response was to “resort to tabloid bashing” (Bloom, 2005: 2), criticising the ‘trashy’ tabloid and accusing it of unethical, bad journalism, and pandering “to the lowest common denominator of public taste” (Strelitz and Steenveld, 2005: 1). These days, other newspapers like the *Son*, *Sunday Sun*, *Daily Voice*, *Sowetan* and *Citizen*, are copying its format (though the latter two do not classify themselves as typical tabloids). While media analysts are vigorously engaged in discussing “paradigm repair” (Frank, 2003: 442) of the mainstream media (that is, introspection into its role and purpose) and moving towards accepting tabloids as a new kind of journalism in a South African democracy. There is agreement that a proper understanding of the tabloid newspaper will contribute to the development of journalism in South Africa (Wasserman, 2005) and in the process, one may ask, Could this trashy tabloid, the *Daily Sun*, be playing a more socially acceptable role in a developing culture?

Harber's comment encapsulates the ambivalent attitudes towards the tabloid in the new democracy: "What an irony: apartheid and its repression brought us some courageous, outspoken, probing journalism that won international admiration and few readers; democracy and normality have brought us popular sleaze. The price of freedom is that the bottom feeders also enjoy it" (Harber, 2005: 2). On the one hand, the "snobbish moralists" (Harber, 2006: 1) are bemoaning the loss of mores and norms of good journalism; on the other, many are heartened by the idea of democratic freedom and the concomitant notion of millions of new readers, and the promise of new 'citizens'. This further indicates that the fundamental democratic ideas of people's right to information and freedom of the press and expression are in play in South Africa. The arrival of the *Daily Sun* and other tabloids has seen an increase in literacy in the country and, one hopes, this will result in millions of people being able to participate and "affect the quality of our democracy" (Harber, 2005: 1).

Consequently, "the *Daily Sun* has sparked a national tabloid revolution that urgently demands to be understood, contextualised, and the efforts of critics and academics look increasingly like protests: tabloids are peddling smut, degrading minority groups, fuelling obsolete superstitions.... Western or old school media values count for squat in this new world" (Bloom, 2005: 2). This highlights the move away from colonialism, domination and apartheid to a new and unique South African media culture. Many of the debates reflect the usual negative associations attached to tabloids. A review of the local debates highlights the following core issues regarding the South African tabloids:

- the content of the tabloids,

- the stereotypical assumptions made about the readers, and
- journalistic ethics and standards.

Regarding content, while the *Daily Sun* maintains it is giving readers stories that are relevant to their daily lives, struggles and beliefs, critics say it is sensationalising and debasing. Some critics say the tabloid readers (black people) are “presented as primitive, lust-driven and credulous” (Berger, 2005: 3). Regarding journalistic integrity, critics hint that the tabloids “do not subscribe to the press code of conduct [whereby] journalists have the responsibility to promote realism, not ignorance”: but both the publisher and many of the readers maintain that the stories amount to “harmless fantasy and fun” (Berger, 2005: 2) while the more serious stories act as ‘cautionary tales’.

On the positive side of the debate there are those who say tabloids are getting people to read by giving them something to read and talk about, adding some excitement to the usual “subdued mood” of mainstream newspapers (Berger, 2005: 2). Both the *Daily Sun* and the *Son* marry the “populist headline with a “*Son* gee om” (*Son* cares) vision that translates into rocketing sales figures” (*ibid.*). The *Daily Sun* daily sales figure is around 480,000 copies (according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2005; while All Media Products Survey (AMPS) 2005 gave the figure of 380,000) and, according to the research, a minimum of five people read each copy. “The potential of the South African tabloid is only just beginning to be unleashed. It may not be pretty but it’s getting more powerful” (Bloom, 2005: 3).

The traditional media criticise tabloids saying they do not contribute to the public sphere, but *Daily Sun* circulation figures, readers' feedback and letters to the editor suggest that it is offering something else apart from mere spectacle. As Strelitz and Steenveld (2005: 3) point out, "such an investigation does not imply an uncritical celebration of popular preferences, but rather points to a need to understand how they have come about, and what dimension of the social structure they either challenge or hold in place." This study aims to explore these matters and, in doing so, add to the academic literature on tabloids in South Africa.

Chapter 3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction: The research field and theoretical context

As suggested by Burton and Steane (2004: 120) I have tried to “search out and access key pieces of relevant research literature” for study and critique to enhance and strengthen the theoretical framework of my thesis. The overarching question in this research is, In what way, if at all, is the enormously successful (in terms of circulation figures) tabloid, the *Daily Sun*, playing a role in the new developing democracy in South Africa? In order to address this issue and to help understand the phenomenon of the *Daily Sun*, I draw on three distinct areas of theoretical discussion:

- Culture and development in emerging democracies. Here my starting point is Sen’s (1999) notion of *Development as Freedom* and the role played by culture in that development. I also refer to recent theoretical accounts of popular culture;
- Revisionist accounts of the *public sphere*;
- Analysis of the nature of the press and the discourse of *tabloids*.

In support of these basic perspectives, I use *Reception theory* to underpin this study. This approach, based in communication theory, looks at how media messages are encoded and decoded by communicator and receiver, respectively. I will be focussing on how media messages are interpreted by the recipients who are considered an ‘active audience’ in that they are free to interpret the media texts in whatever ways are relevant to their lives. This study therefore positions itself in the swing towards audience studies that has been of central importance since the 1980s.

In order to come to some understanding of the role that the *Daily Sun* is playing in South Africa I have chosen to analyse (through the eyes of its readers) what this tabloid, this media phenomenon, is doing. I probe this question by examining the responses of readers to the *Daily Sun*. I also develop sub-questions such as, How do people ‘read’ the *Daily Sun*; what meanings do they generate from it and how has it impacted on their lives? This should elicit more complex responses and perceptions beyond those of mere pleasure in ‘spectacle’. I then contextualise the responses in terms of the three theoretical perspectives to interpret the data.

3.2 Culture and development

“The link between press and politics remains powerful..... It is the historic claim of the newspaper press to be one of the central guarantors of political democracy.... the chief agency for instructing the public on the main issues of the day. The self-definition of the press as the ‘Fourth estate’ points in that direction..... recognizing the direct link between press, liberty and the extension of political democracy” (Sparks, 1988: 209).

This study examines the *Daily Sun* and its impact on the lives of its readers and must be seen against the backdrop of an emerging democracy in South Africa. In order to explore the relationship between the *Daily Sun* and the new South African democracy I will discuss Sen’s (1999) work on development as freedom, recent work in Cultural Studies and the question of identity, as they relate to the role played by the *Daily Sun*. I use Sen’s (1999) ideas and those of other theorists to explore the *Daily Sun*’s role in the new democracy and I ask in what way, if at all, this tabloid is contributing to the creation of a new social identity for its readers.

3.2.1 Sen on *Development as Freedom*

In *Development as Freedom* the Nobel prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, argues that development cannot be severed from the “process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen, 1999: 3). He believes that freedom depends on a range of determinants such as access to the economy, education and health facilities, as well as political and civil rights. From this perspective, violation of freedom not only deprives people of their political and civil rights but also of participation in the social, political and economic life of their community. Thus Sen maintains that what is needed for the development of democracy to take place is removing the “sources of unfreedom: poverty, tyranny, poor economic opportunities, social deprivation, intolerance or overactivity of repressive states” (Sen, 1999: 3). Sen further argues that individual agency is central to addressing deprivations (*ibid.*, 1999: i). Although economic and political freedoms are both extremely important, Sen argues for “the pre-eminence of basic political rights over economic needs” (*ibid.*, 1999: 40). He proposes that once people attain capabilities that include political and social participation, they will be able to address their economic needs through enhanced participation in debates and decisions in their community. In this study, I focus on social opportunity – defined by Sen as “instrumental freedom to exchange words, goods and gifts” (*ibid.*, 1999: 6) – and I explore the extent to which the *Daily Sun* is providing its readers with a social opportunity and, in so doing, empowering them to become “active agents of change” (*ibid.*, 1999: iii).

Sen argues that, in developing democracies, there is a need to get beyond **formal democracy** (such as having the right to vote) to actual participation in that democracy.

The relation between individual freedom and the achievement of social development depends on the “enabling conditions” (*ibid.*, 1999: 4) offered by the social opportunities. For example, by giving people social opportunities, such as access to information, their basic freedom will be enhanced and, by exercising their freedom, through participation in social choice and making public decisions, that is, by having ‘free agency’, their development can progress. This notion of ‘participatory freedom’ is crucial to Sen’s theory of development – “The issue of participation is central to the force and reach of developmental theory” (*ibid.*, 1999: 31). Sen views freedom as both (a) the “*primary end*” and (b) the “*principle means*” of development. In the case of (a), Sen expresses the “*constitutive role*” of freedom in development – which relates to the freedom to enrich one’s life (by developing ‘capabilities’ to avoid ‘unfreedoms’ and enjoy education and participation). In the case of (b), he integrates the “*instrumental role*” of freedom in development – which refers to the interrelatedness of “different kinds of freedom in general” (Sen, 1999: 38) – political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. These two roles complement each other and contribute to the general capability of the person to live more freely.

According to Sen, freedom “involves both the *processes* that allow for freedom of actions and decisions, and the actual *opportunities* that people have, given their personal and social circumstances” (*ibid.*, 1999: 17). I interpret the *processes* as democratic changes taking place in a post-apartheid South Africa, such as the right to vote and equality for all citizens, and the *opportunities* as greater opportunity for access to literacy, information, choice (in media products) and the concomitant reactions and decisions of the people to

these opportunities. In viewing development as “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” Sen argues that this “expansion of capabilities” (*ibid.*, 1999: 18) is central for people to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value. A person’s capability refers to “the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve” (*ibid.*, 1999: 75). Capability is thus a kind of freedom – to make life choices; and this implies expanded opportunities and choices. Having greater freedom to do the things one has reason to value is significant in itself for the person’s overall freedom, and important in fostering the person’s opportunity to have “valuable outcomes” (*ibid.*, 1999: 19). Further, this expanded capability and freedom impacts on an individual’s ability to help himself and influence others and hence to achieve a degree of social effectiveness. This, in turn, affects the individual’s sense of ‘agency’ and hence his identity or self-concept as a participant in his community.

Sen’s theory of ‘capabilities’ has been applied internationally in the areas of economics, politics and social development, particularly in third world countries. Kuper (2002) also made use of Sen’s *Capabilities Theory* in her research into the decline of the mainstream press in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Kuper transfers Sen’s theory to the use of newspapers in providing information for “knowledge skilling” and “social skilling” which contribute to the achievement of “enabling freedoms such as social opportunities, political freedoms and transparency guarantees” (Kuper, 2002: 11). As a result, she proposed suggestions to revitalise the press in the new South African democracy, particularly in respect of the section of the society that was previously overlooked by the mainstream press. Kuper argues that if we shift our attention from an exclusive

concentration on “income poverty” to a more inclusive idea of “capability deprivation” (*ibid.*), we will better understand the poverty of human lives and lack of freedoms. She maintains that greater freedom enhances people’s agency – the ability to help themselves and to influence their world – central to the process of development.

Many writers do acknowledge the democratic potential of popular cultural products and the relation between “emancipation and consumption” (Fourie, 2006: 334). People value the right to participate in social and public activities and decisions. Freedom in South Africa has supposedly brought with it the removal of previous deprivations of social and public involvement. The readers of the *Daily Sun* may have achieved ‘political freedom’, as in the right to vote, but that is only the beginning of the development process. Citizens like these, in developing democracies, do not emerge “seemingly out of nowhere, fully socialized and acculturated, with mature cognitive and moral facilities” (Dahlgren, 1995: 138). There are still many issues in their everyday lives that need to be addressed and they need to use the opportunities given to them through their new freedom to progress towards agency. How do they do that, given their limited opportunities? Dahlgren maintains they need “a blend of direct and representational mechanisms” to participate in a democracy. While the representational mechanisms could refer to the media, the direct elements involve face-to-face relations, and together “provide ‘training grounds’ for anchoring democracy in the experiences of lived reality” (*ibid.*, 1995: 4).

Within this thesis I also explore additional issues that Sen raises which relate to the notion of participation and how people in emerging democracies respond to their new

freedoms. In this regard, Sen asks firstly, “Are citizens of the third world indifferent to political and democratic rights?” and secondly, How do these developing societies deal with “the conflict between the preservation of tradition and the advantages of modernity” (Sen, 1999: 31)? In addressing the first question, this project will explore the enabling role played by the *Daily Sun* in respect of its readers, as citizens (readers’ responses will indicate the extent to which they are indifferent or responsive to their newly acquired rights). The answer to the second question should also come out of discussions with the participants in this project. How people deal with this conflict calls for participation by all involved in the development process in this country in order to blend the traditional and the modern to allow for “altered forms of involvement” (Dahlgren, 1995: 312). It should not only be for the authorities (political, religious or other) to decide on traditional values and culture and how they merge with the new ways of thinking and doing things; decision-making requires education and therefore opportunity for knowledge acquisition is an integral part of “participatory freedom” (Sen, 1999: 31 - 33). We will explore how readers of the *Daily Sun*, through their increased ‘knowledge skilling’ and ‘social skilling’, are dealing with issues raised by the above questions, and how they are perhaps developing new hybrid identities which both retain elements of the traditional (still accepting old rituals and beliefs, witchcraft etc.) while at the same time adopting a kind of agency regarded as typical of citizens in a modern democracy.

3.2.2 The Cultural Studies perspective: the high/low culture divide

If Sen's work draws our attention to the importance of agency for democratic development and, therefore, of the need to consider the role of the *Daily Sun* in the establishment of subaltern agency amongst its readers, the perspective developed in contemporary Cultural Studies alerts us to the need to refrain from applying established (and often class-based) criteria to the understanding and assessment of popular cultural forms.

Following in the footsteps of the Frankfurt School, theorists like Murdock (1999) continue to criticize popular or 'low' cultural forms such as the tabloids because they are populist and commercial and do not contribute to developing culture and identity. Murdock raises problems around increased popular media consumption: he sees it as "the open horizons of a populism which celebrates common sense as the only sense worth having and presents audience size as the only valid criterion of communicative success" (1999, in Gripsrud, 1999: 14). He maintains that this "aggressive promotion of ordinariness fits snugly with the political economy of the new commercialism" (*ibid.*) and contributes to "undermining citizenship by delivering predictable pleasures with niche marketsconfirming their marginal status" (*ibid.*). In 'high culture', public broadcasting and mainstream media consumption in South Africa, for instance, the media have used a normative, even paternalistic, approach. The problem with paternalism is that it was based on a contradiction in that it aimed to foster 'ordinary people's' participation and inclusiveness within the body politic by "excluding them from its own processes of production" (*ibid.*, 1999: 15). However, proponents of Cultural Studies argue that culture

refers to “all of those activities, or practices, which produce sense or meaning” (Tester, 1994: 13). Another useful view sees culture “as a contested and conflictual set of practices of representation bound up with the processes of formation and re-formation of social groups” (Storey, 1996: 2). In Cultural Studies, the everyday culture is regarded as political and thus holds promise for emancipation. This highlights the importance of culture in social development, particularly that of the subordinate class. Hall’s notion that “popular culture matters” and his concern to “think culture politically” (1981, in Storey, 1996: 2) also plays a role in this investigation. Some writers, including McKee (2005: 193), argue that a cultural change is, in itself, a real political act of cultural politics and “the very act of talking can itself cause political change”. Dahlgren argues that consumption of culture is part of the political process and that even participation in the mass media as an audience may count as acting as a public and hence as political participation (Dahlgren, 1991: 17, and 1995: 120, in McKee, 2005: 197). The advantage of such a ‘post-modern’ approach is that it allows one to explore the interaction between the individual and the media without preconceptions.

According to Storey, “the intellectual project of cultural studies is always at some level marked by a discourse of social involvement” (Storey, 1996: 5), implying that audiences make their own meaning through involvement in the discourse generated by their cultural products like the media. Cultural studies and the study of cultural practices and texts “involve practices, institutional structures and the complex forms of agency they entail as well as a particular multilayered semantic organisation” (*ibid.*, 1996: 2). The Cultural Studies view of culture acknowledges that people ‘read’ texts according to their own

context which makes readers more than recipients, and sees development as agency. Therefore, it is possible to see consumption as more than a passive activity. Media consumption is 'political' through talk and use. It is an act of collective and discursive engagement and therefore readers are not passive. Subsequently, in trying to understand media representations, we need to realise that "there can be no privileged or correct reading" (*ibid.*, 1996: 2). There is the view that people in a developing democracy, once they begin to participate in decisions about their everyday lives, start to expand their thinking and 'capabilities' towards the 'political'. The aim here is to try to understand rather than prejudge the agency of the *Daily Sun* readers. In this context I will also rely on descriptions of culture as democracy, and of the capacity of ordinary people to construct a shared, meaningful 'popular' culture that is valuable to them even "in the face of high cultural disdain" (Barker, 2002: 71).

The position I shall adopt in this thesis is one that hopes to move beyond the normative, or even paternalistic, views of theorists such as Murdock, focussing on recent work in Cultural Studies and providing further assistance in understanding how the development of agency works. In my investigation of the role of the *Daily Sun* in the new South Africa, I ask questions about the relationship between the readers and the *Daily Sun*. The intention is to provide a better context for the workings of the *Daily Sun* and a better understanding of how it is absorbed into the everyday lives of its readers and how the readers use it in their lives.

In order to provide a previously deprived, excluded group with the “material basis” for social participation, access to “relevant symbolic resources and competences” must be granted (Dahlgren, 1995: 124). This access can be achieved through institutions like the education and media systems. Through engagement with these institutions, citizens’ cultural rights can be realized – rights to information, experience, knowledge and participation. However, the concepts of *democracy*, *citizenship* and *civil society* are not static; they are continually evolving and contestable in “post-modern conditions of social change” (*ibid.*, 1995: 124). Murdock argues that, in a capitalist democracy “social entitlements of citizenship are as important a condition for progress as the opportunities for individual choice in the marketplace” (1999, in Gripsrud, 1999: 8). He defines these entitlements of citizenship “as the right to participate fully in social life with dignity and without fear and to help formulate the forms it might take in the future as well as rights that have been extended to new spheres of social action and to new social groupings” (*ibid.*, 1999: 8). In a multicultural society, the politics of identity – the struggle over forms of belonging, loyalty and solidarity – involves issues around the right to enjoy “freedom to belong to an identity and contribute to its definition” and the conditions that “enable individuals and social groups to be recognised for what they are or wish to be” (*ibid.*, 1999: 8). Although Murdock’s rather old fashioned (but ‘modern’) notion of citizenship supports the view of the ‘old school’ of normative thought, it nevertheless serves as a starting point for moving towards a more inclusive idea of citizenship which allows for the important issue of difference and recognition. In terms of the ‘modern’ versus ‘post-modern’ divide on social and cultural issues, the modernists argue for a ‘right way’ while the post-modernists offer more perspectives, acknowledging difference,

recognizing identity and different levels of recognition. It also leads us to examine issues of “lifestyle politics” which represent evolving notions of citizenship and the contribution of the popular media to “opening up the boundaries” between the public and the private realm “to mobilize engagement, even in non-traditional ways” (Dahlgren, 1995: 312).

In assessing the contribution of popular media consumption in developing culture, we need to widen our definition of ‘civic culture’ to include the circulation of attitudes to social order and politics through these popular discursive practices rather than only through formal organizations (municipal or government). We should also reassess the notion of ‘materialist politics’ and move away from “the idea that it is only [about] jobs, pay and citizenship – the resources that politics distributes include not only physical things but also immaterial, but real, things like feelings, self-worth, inter-personal relationships” (McKee, 2005: 195). Not all media theorists agree. We could extend Murdock’s concerns to tabloids, like the *Daily Sun*, but his concerns may not necessarily be based on the reality of particular cultural products working for and meeting their specific audiences and their needs. Other writers argue positively for the relevance and validity of ‘ordinariness’, identity and recognition as vital factors in popular culture.

With the recent movement towards greater access to current affairs through the popular media – with ordinary people talking about matters at the centre of their lives, matters that traditionally were not included in the public sphere – we could now replace the restrictive normative elements with ones of inclusion, participation and recognition. Jensen (1990) argues, “audience-publics can transcend the role of recipient” by taking the

step to act as citizens and start being producers of “political talk and action” (in Dahlgren, 1995: 122). This could imply a recontextualization (of audience identity and culture) at a conceptual level, but are they, the audience, conscious of this?

The publisher of the *Daily Sun* maintains that it provides its readers with an opportunity to engage with issues of common concern in a way that gets them to think, talk and act. They begin the process of participation in an informal, uncomplicated manner through discussion of issues raised by the tabloid in their community. This study explores whether the *Daily Sun*, as a cultural or media product, could contribute to “the resources of information, experience, interpretation and explanation required for the exercise of full citizenship” (Gripsrud, 1999: 12). The *Daily Sun* readers discuss issues in order to work out what their general position is and, as discussions spread throughout their community, a sense of public opinion is developed by “individuals engaged in overlapping discussions” (*ibid.*, 1999: 13). These discussions (informal, but critical) could take place face-to-face or through the media (via articles, phone-calls, letters to editor etc.). The participants in this process of communication are not passive and, for them, the topics discussed are relevant and meaningful as they engage in “collective sense-making” (McKee, 2005: 199) – even though, according to Habermas, “they aren’t doing it properly” (in *ibid.*, 2005: 200). Although Habermas was referring only to ‘quality’ mass media, this study will investigate to what extent it applies to popular commercial media consumption.

3.2.3 Identity and recognition

This shift in perspective brings new terms into the discussion, terms not used in unitary conceptions of culture and universal citizenship. Key amongst them are: ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’. Woodward (1997) describes the concept of identity thus: “Identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations... ..Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not” (in O’Shaughnessy *et al.*, 2005: 209). She emphasises the role of symbolic systems – the media, images and language – in contributing to our identities. “Representation as a cultural process establishes individual and collective identities, and symbolic systems provide possible answers to the questions: Who am I? What could I be? Who do I want to be?” (*ibid.*). Moreover, these questions are often answered in relation to others. In terms of general theory around intersubjectivity one must recognise ‘the other’ as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other’s presence. Added to this is the notion of recognition and the need for all groups, even subaltern groups, to be recognized within a multicultural society.

Given the context of South Africa and the specific nature and characteristics of the *Daily Sun* and its readers, my question is, How can this previously disenfranchised group of people become ‘citizens’ in the new democracy? This would have to involve a process and this process would see a change in their personal identities and hence in their identity as a group. Institutions like the educational system and the media influence the process of

developing a new identity, and therefore, the media that this group engages with is likely to play an important role in this process. Dahlgren (1995: 122) suggests we need to develop a notion of citizen as an “identity-in-process forged out of a set of contradictory and discursive forces”. Hence, the need to explore how the *Daily Sun* impacts on the lives, culture and identity of its readers. I draw on the work of McKee (2005), Fraser (1997), Hall (1996), Storey (1996) and others to explore this topic and the issues that it raises such as the arguments around popular culture and the issues that emerge from the process of developing a collective group identity. McKee (2005: 87) sparks the discussion by positing that “commercialized popular culture is in some sense a real working-class culture”. But in what sense? What’s the link between someone’s identity, the culture they belong to and the kinds of knowledge they possess? By relating this to the *Daily Sun*, a commercialized popular media product, and its readers – working class (many unemployed), predominantly black, urban dwellers – we could come to some sort of answer.

The literature shows that historically media as cultural products have always had some influence on the societies in which they operate. However, the conflicting attitudes regarding what popular cultural products *ought* to be doing, as reflected in the literature, point to basically two fundamental distinctions: a ‘modern’ versus ‘post-modern’ perspective. Critics, academics and commentators from a ‘modernist’ paradigm generally view popular or working class public culture as vulgar and sensationalist while those from a ‘post-modern’ one emphasise pluralism, participation and recognition. In fact,

Bennett (1981: 82) maintains that “pop cultureis an incitement to practical political action” (in Tester, 1994: 13).

If the *Daily Sun* is contributing to a cultural identity within one sector of society, how does this group interact or negotiate with other groups – ‘cut across identities’ – in order to address issues of a shared ‘rainbow nation’? For citizenship to develop in a new democracy, writers like Murdock (1999), Fraser (1997), Meijer (2001) and Dahlgren (2000) argue that public communication should take place in (according to Murdock) a relatively “open arena of representation” where different groups replace divisions with debates across “the widest possible range of identities and positions” and bring them into a common public sphere. Access should be given “to the widest range of relevant information [through] the greatest diversity of representations of personal and social experience” together with the right to participate in key debates in the contest of knowledge (Murdock, 1999, in Gripsrud, 1999: 14).

Fraser (2001: 22) maintains that to deny someone recognition is to deprive her or him of “a basic prerequisite for human flourishing”. She distinguishes between *redistribution* and *recognition*, where *redistribution* is the politics of equality or class focussing, for instance, on redistribution of wealth and resources from rich to poor, while *recognition* – of differences in ethnicity, race and gender, for example – represents issues in the politics of difference or ‘identity’. Instead of polarizing the two ‘political’ forces, Fraser argues that, “justice today requires *both* redistribution and recognition; neither alone is sufficient....however, the question of how to combine them is pressing” (*ibid.*, 2001: 26).

In the context of the new democratic South Africa, redistribution is taking place in the political and economic spheres, but people are also struggling for social and cultural recognition in order to benefit more meaningfully in terms of freedom and development. The “emancipatory aspects” of both should be integrated into one framework that offers people “participatory parity” within the society (*ibid.*, 2001: 25). In this way people, and their multicultural differences, are given recognition and social equality so that they can participate in all aspects of their society. The new group (mainly township dwellers) that I refer to in this thesis is struggling for recognition of its identity and its forms of representation, one of which is the tabloid, the *Daily Sun*. For this group it would be important to “legitimize popular culture” particularly as it considers its culture to be “a whole and distinctive way of life” influencing its identity and worthy of recognition by the broader society in South Africa (Barker, 2002: 68). Feminist writers maintain that in order to deal with the ‘personal’ social problems of certain groups (i.e.women), earlier activists had to work hard at trying to bring these issues into the public eye or awareness before they could be solved, for example, domestic violence had to be made public before it got the attention of legislators. It is through recognition of cultural difference that “domestic, emotional and relationship issues should be recognised as worthy of public discussion” (Fraser, 2002: 22 in McKee, 2005: 21). One could say the same for the group under investigation and the need to have their personal social problems made public with a view to resolving them.

3.2.4 The *Daily Sun* reader

Mainstream newspapers – assuming they play a role in providing authority and leadership in society – tend to believe they are writing for the ‘ordinary’ individual aspiring to

achieve the values and rationality of the dominant group. However, in a multicultural society, where there is acknowledgement of difference and recognition of multiple identities and varying forms of rationality, each newspaper may have a specific audience for whom it provides stories. The *Daily Sun* has clearly identified its target market – black, poor, uneducated and previously disenfranchised. It is useful here to note the sorts of news headlines found in the *Daily Sun*: “27 corpses moved due to power cut”, “Our bus journey is hell”, “DIY taps, pipes give brown water”, “School of mud”, “Death of a thug”, “Boy drowns in open hole”, “Fired after disclosing HIV status” (Harber, 2006b). For the *Daily Sun* readers such stories are articulating their daily lives and struggles, and it is unlikely they would see themselves similarly featured in the more traditional media. Part of the *Daily Sun*’s immense success can be attributed to the fact that readers recognise and enjoy the representations that they discover in its pages. What the *Daily Sun* is doing, in deliberately giving the readers what they want, and allowing them to contribute substantially to the content of the news and other sections of the paper, is giving the audience content that they can relate to and which they are able to interpret in terms of their own lives. Readers are looking at themselves as the subjects of what is happening in their environment, and through interpretation of these texts, are placing themselves in a position where they can make choices. One could argue that readers’ responses to this will help give them tools for personal empowerment – even if it is in as simple a way as knowing how to open a bank account. This creation of identity around the reader could be seen as an embryonic level of citizen journalism.

According to the *uses and gratification* approach media texts suit the needs of the audience and audiences have particular uses for their media. According to Taylor and Willis (1999: 161), “news media gratify the individual’s desire to glean and survey information about the society in which they live”. Burton (2005) maintains that people are motivated by kinds of ‘need’ in their engagement with the text: informational, maintenance of identity, social interaction, entertainment and diversion. The audience is actively selecting aspects of the text for its own use, taking their pleasures from the text and taking charge of the production of meaning “to work through interests and concerns” (*ibid.*, 2005: 83). In order to do this the media content has to have significance in the readers’ everyday lives. In his exploration of the active audience’s engagement with texts, Burton distinguishes between the “actuality of reader as an individual and the notion of audiences as a coherent group” (*ibid.*, 2005: 88) and implies that reading media content requires a process of cognition to make sense of the text from emotional response, to analysis and reflection. And through this process readers start “having access to a public sphere created by the media” (*ibid.*, 2005: 89). This process involves the notion of the active audience whereby readers (as recipients) interpret media messages and how they position them (as citizens) and then react accordingly. According to Wayne (1994, in Burton, 2005: 89), some theorists “conceive the popular as a realm of cultural self-making where the people reconstruct their identities and their sense of place in the world.” Some might use this to describe how, through their engagement with the *Daily Sun*, readers could be developing a new identity both individually and as a “new social movement” (McKee, 2005: 28). In his discussion of “identity politics”, McKee (2005: 28) mentions arguments on new social movements, from the ‘universalist’ argument that

a nation should have shared priorities for issues to be in the public sphere, to an ‘adversarial’ model where we acknowledge that “different groups in society have different experiences” (*ibid.*, 2005: 20). With the emergence of new social movements and counter-culture movements (e.g. gay, feminist, black and youth cultures), there is a need and a desire to have their own distinctive cultures recognised within the public sphere. The important point that emerges in the debates is that the “levels of identity that matter most are the ones that the people concerned think matter most in their own lives” (*ibid.*, 2005: 23). Some commentators find this notion problematic because the audience’s use of ‘spectacle’ in popular cultural products works against a project of rational communication, and thus against equality and democracy. However, the crux of the matter is that culture lies in everyday life.

Some thinkers also want to recover ‘Afrocentric’ ways of thinking about culture and find that spectacle is as important as the rational modes of communication. Consider McKee’s discussion of popular communication in the American civil rights movement and the role that certain popular modes, like rap songs, played in it. For writers who employ a ‘postmodern’ paradigm, accepting the arguments of new social movements, the appearance of such forms of spectacular communication about politics, playing to ‘short attention spans’, is a “positive development that adds to equality in the public sphere” (McKee, 2005: 107). In the same way that rap music “isn’t traditionally rational political communication and.... rappers don’t draw on the western tradition....they make their political points in emotional, embodied and spectacular ways” (*ibid.*, 2005: 106). My argument is that we need to look at tabloids, like the *Daily Sun*, in a similar way. And just as rap music is a form of communication for a socially and politically voiceless segment

of American society, so, too, is the *Daily Sun* for a specific group here in South Africa (McKee, 2005: 111).

3.3 Reconfiguring the public sphere

The concept of the *public sphere* has become one of the most interesting and productive in understanding the role played by the media in society. We owe the concept of the public sphere to the groundbreaking work of Jurgen Habermas who, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), argues that a properly functioning democracy cannot be limited to its formal characteristics, such as universal franchise, but must include active participation by the citizens of that democracy. Habermas (1984: 49) is quoted in Harrison (2006: 110): “By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.” According to Harrison, “The public sphere is a notional space, existing between civil society and the state. It is a social setting, frequently non-institutional, where individuals obtain information or education and undertake discussion and deliberation about contemporary events in all their diversity. It can exist formally (a town hall meeting open to the public) or in an informal setting (an internet chat site)” (Harrison, 2006: 108).

McKee (2005: 5) has developed a useful definition using the work of writers like Dahlgren (1995) and Fraser (1990): the public sphere as “a metaphorical term used to describe the virtual space where people can interact. It’s where each of us finds out

what's happening in our community, and what social, cultural and political issues are facing us. It's where we engage with these issues and add our voices to discussions about them, playing our part in the process of a society reaching a consensus or compromise about what we think about issues, and what should be done about them" (*ibid.*). The dialogues, debates, discussions and discourse all constitute "communicative action" (Fourie, 2006: 337) and, for writers like Hannah Arendt, "power is built on communicative action...a collective effect of speech in which reaching agreement is an end in itself" (in Gillwald, 1993: 68). It is through discourse that knowledge and power are created and a public sphere established. The public sphere is not created nor managed by government but through it the state is held accountable by the people.

In a diverse, multicultural society, one may ask, how does a large community circulate ideas, discuss possible responses and come to some kind of agreement on them? In society, people take much of their understanding from the media. Through the mass media people can come together to exchange ideas. Hence, the media play an important role as a means of dissemination and influence in mass communication in society. Writers like Dahlgren (1995), for example, have argued for the increasing centrality of the media as a public arena where the public can access societal dialogues. "As such, the media play an important part by providing this access, and it is relevant to talk about a mediated public sphere" (Dahlgren, 1995: 9). However, with the rise of popular media like tabloids, critics condemn them for detracting from the official public sphere. Other theorists like Keane (1995) have argued that there can no longer be talk of "a unified public sphere, but rather of several public spheres [which] arise in the conversational

relationships people can now be part of by using diverse communication technologies” (in Harrison, 2006: 108).

In order to connect the theory to my study one must place it in context. Prior to 1994 the *Daily Sun* readers, as a group, were socially, politically and economically deprived and therefore lacked access to the media (and the public sphere). In the new post-apartheid regime they now have the right to vote and with it an assumed opportunity for development, growth and identity, away from apartheid towards the new democracy, “laying claim to the Enlightenment’s most potent political legacy – the ideal of full and equal citizenship and its extension to the general notion of human rights” (Gripsrud, 1999: 7). One of the democratic rights, fundamental to this study, is the citizen’s right to information – achieved through a free press and free flow of information in the public interest. Many writers like Dahlgren (1995), Meijer (2001) and Gripsrud (1999) argue for the crucial role that the media can play in democratic societies: “Citizens should be able to (learn to) identify themselves with the moral and political principles of modern democracy.... the media can set the agenda ...to determine the issues that audiences think about ...enhancing democratic culture by making it concrete and visible” (Meijer, 2001: 19). This study attempts to shed light on the new culture that emerges with the concomitant citizenship in the new democracy. One could say that in the new South Africa the notion of an ‘ideal citizen’ is still in the process of being developed and contested, while the discrepancy between the equality of formal citizenship and the real social inequality remains evident and cause for concern and debate. Hence, in trying to understand the concept of a new citizenry, we need to explore the discourse of citizenship

and where this discourse takes place – in the public sphere via the media. I will explore whether discourses initiated by the *Daily Sun* could prepare *Daily Sun* readers, as citizens, for more “political involvement” (McQuail, 2002: 196).

This study also focuses on the recent move away from Habermas’s original (1984) concept of the public sphere to the idea of *alternative public spheres*. The limitations of his concept of the public sphere and its applicability to contemporary society have led some theorists to rethink the notion in ways that address the *pluralism of contemporary society* and *the commodification of the media*. In this specific study, similar problems arise that include: (i) the difficulty of using a Habermasian notion of the public sphere in South Africa’s multicultural society and (ii) how the public sphere functions in a developing democracy such as South Africa.

3.3.1 Habermas and the ideal of the public sphere

I would like to start the discussion with an exploration of Habermas’s (1989) ideas on the concept of the public sphere. His notion of the public sphere is a useful one for thinking about how modern liberal democratic societies function. In his view, this hypothetical ‘space’ between state and the (propertied) citizen is reserved for people to meet to discuss issues of common interest in a rational and critical manner. Habermas defines the public sphere as “a domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion [to] express and publicize their views” (Habermas, 1997: 105 in McKee, 2005:

4). Habermas argues that modern constitutions are based on the idea that “citizens come together to form a legal community of free and equal consociates” (Habermas, 1998: 203). Key terms around the public sphere include ‘legitimacy’ (*‘offentlichkeit’*), ‘citizenship’ (which is not really Habermasian, but used by subsequent theorists) and ‘rational discussion’. Debates include: What makes a legitimate (a true, lawful and proper) public sphere? When do people belonging to a community become citizens? What constitutes rational discussion? Is it only discussion conducted in a ‘civil’ (polite, rather than antagonistic) manner, using reason (as in clear, logical thinking), with a view to reaching agreement on issues that affect their society?

One definition views citizenship as, “A status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to rights and duties. There is no universal principle that determines what those rights and duties shall be, but societies in which citizenship is a developing institution create an image of an ideal citizenship against which achievements can be measured and towards which aspiration can be directed. Through the historically changing interpretation of ideals of rights and equality... the expectations are rooted not only in a specific political culture of a nation state but also an awareness of universal human rights” (Andersen, 1997: 38). This presupposes the notion of individual rights (*‘subjektiverrechte’*) and so one should be able, within the public sphere, to deal with struggles for recognition through adequate articulation and assertion of collective identities. Habermas views the public sphere as a “deliberative rather than just an informational forum” (Harrison, 2006: 108) and thinks that “only critical rational discussion can really be public” (1997: 106 in McKee, 2005:

113). The central idea is of a community of individuals who are “united by their participation in rational-critical debate” (Fourie, 2006: 335). This traditional notion of the public sphere assumes that citizens’ use of reason and intellect is paramount in making decisions and judgements within the public sphere. Any appeal to the emotions is considered contrary to the ideas and values of enlightenment because, as some writers feel, “emotional appeal targets the person’s unthinking reactions and so attempts to bypass the critical questioning and logical assessment normally characteristic of reasonable dialogue” (Walton, 1989: 82 in McKee, 2005: 112).

Habermas (1989: 165) later bemoans the public sphere’s decline and the role of popular culture in this decline. He believes the public sphere has lost its legitimacy because commodification of the media has altered the bourgeois public sphere to one within which the public behaves like consumers characterised by an “aspirational” instrumental reason or rationality rather than citizens engaged in critical-rational debate. He maintains that the commodified news influenced the public through “non-rational persuasion” (Harrison, 2006: 110). Many who conceive of the public sphere in the ‘traditional’ Habermasian way also express concerns about the decline in the public sphere. McKee (2005: 2) identifies themes common to the popular culture and academic debates about the public sphere. Academics worry that the public sphere is becoming too commercialized, just as journalists worry that ‘the media’ is becoming too commercialized. Academics also worry about other aspects of the public sphere: trivialization, spectacle (rather than rational argumentation), and citizens becoming too apathetic about public issues. They maintain that fragmentation of the public sphere

through “[the] demands of various niche audiences and identity groups, [is] breaking up the common national cultures” (McKee, 2005: 2). Meanwhile media commentators say the same things about ‘the media’. The public sphere is bigger than just ‘the media’. We use more than the media when we engage with ‘matters of public interest’ – we talk about issues at the pub, via email, with friends, through talk shows, letters to editors etc. However, the media do play a central role in the public sphere.

Regarding debates about ‘trivialization’ and ‘commercialization’ in the public sphere, Calhoun (1992) argues that popular media chasing after ratings and sales is a negative construct, for it leads to a loss of quality (in McKee, 2005: 59). However, in terms of commercialization, ‘dumbing down’ could lead to making media more accessible and so, for some, there is something to be said for the importance of trivia. McKee suggests that ‘dumbing down’ is another term for ‘making accessible’ (2005: 67). Other positive views about popular media consumption include arguments that the working class audience do not passively accept the content, they interpret it in their own ways and make unexpected uses of it. This is seen as a “hopeful sign of increasing popular access to the public sphere” (*ibid.*, 2005: 87). Hence, from a post-modern perspective, embracing relativism, more commercialized ‘trash’ in the public sphere is a good thing for it makes ideas and debates accessible to “those citizens who are trained in popular forms of culture” (*ibid.*, 2005: 94). In conceptualising modernity as enlightenment – “a move to equality, justice, freedom and comfort” (*ibid.*, 2005: 9) – with the more ‘liberal’ social structures emerging, the ‘private’ realm of individuals’ lives is acknowledged. Individuals can now use the public sphere to discuss issues (like crime, poverty, etc.) and then turn to the state

to deal with them. The public sphere also provides a forum for individual citizens to discuss and assess the performance of the state.

In his more recent work, Habermas contends that, with the emergence of popular media forms, “a public sphere stripped of its literary garb began to function. Its subject was no longer the educated strata but the uneducated people....but [it] remains oriented toward the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere.” He also allows for “variants of the public sphere, each at a distinct stage of social development, charged with different functions” (Habermas, 1989: xix). He acknowledges, “The development of ‘late capitalism’ has indeed led to the atrophy of the classical public sphere, but this has been replaced by a politicization of other areas of what was previously ‘civil society’, with the consequence that there has been the development of a number of different public spheres concerned with particular areas. ... politicization of the apolitical” (Habermas quoted in Sparks, 1988: 215). Here Habermas signals a move away from his original work on the public sphere which was far more exclusive and elitist. He begins to accept that the different basic rights of democracy give rise to different realms in which debates take place and this could be his tacit recognition of the possibility of alternative spheres: the political, the public and the private. He also separates “masses” (as in popular ‘commercialized’ culture which is trashy and sensational) from “educated audiences” (as in mass ‘commercial’ culture which could be quality, like paperbacks of classics) implying, perhaps, that that could lead to situations where the “market preserves the emancipatory function” (Habermas, 1989: 166). This too suggests a slackening of his initial rather rigid approach. We should note Habermas’s more recent shift from his original ideas. Because

of his personal background, he had had little direct knowledge or experience of working-class culture. He admits, “I was too pessimistic about the resisting power and above all the critical potential of a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public.....I had to rely on the research tradition that was...individualistic-behaviourist...I confess....that after reading Bakhtin’s “Rabelais and His World” my eyes opened to the inner dynamics of a plebeian culture (Habermas, 1992 in McKee, 2005: 96 - 97).

3.3.2 Revisionist conceptions of the public sphere

Many have argued that the ‘classical’ concept of the public sphere needs revision, partly because it has never really existed in the ideal form that Habermas proposed and partly because of changed historical circumstances. Fraser (1997) maintains that Habermas’s limited form of the public sphere “is not wholly satisfactory... his analysis of [it] needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction” (in Calhoun, 1997: 111). It appears his notion of the public sphere is no longer feasible in the 21st century. This discussion resurrects an earlier dilemma – “can everyone be accommodated within one and the same public sphere?” (Dahlgren 1995: 17) – suggesting that through the creation of a multiplicity of public arenas the exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere may be overcome. I explore some revisionist theories of the public sphere, using the work of McKee (2005), Fraser (1997 and 2001), Garnham and Calhoun (in Calhoun, 1997), Rosen (1999), Burton (2005), Örnebring and Jönsson (2004) and others to develop a notion of the public sphere that is appropriate to my discussion of the *Daily Sun*.

Many people have accepted that the claim that there is an “ideal public sphere” is wrong and that it never actually existed (McKee, 2005: 26). In trying to present alternative accounts of the public sphere, I will show how a number of distinct ideas and concepts have emerged. These could be grouped as (i) the idea of multiple public spheres and the presence of subordinate groups in society; (ii) the idea of cultural difference and the importance of recognition; and (iii) the idea of rationality as one rhetorical mode amongst other counter-discourses. I will try to deal with these separately but, generally, they cannot always be discussed discretely. Some theorists focus on only on one of the ideas, while others merge them all into their own discussion of the public sphere.

Rosen (1999: 63) notes that Habermas’s notion of the public sphere was “a dangerous mythit had never described our actual history, which was a record of conflict and struggle, not a series of civilized debates”. He acknowledges that something was wrong when it was not inclusive, and the public was not the same thing as a mass audience. Rosen also allows that a newspaper is a commercial venture not a public service and the idea of an “omnicompetent citizen was a joke”, so the idealisation of the public sphere is not viable in the reality of everyday lives of ordinary people where at times “public opinion is itself an irrational force” (ibid., 1999: 63). He views democracy as a system based on principles of individual freedom and faith in the people’s capacity to make decisions and to contribute towards solving problems. According to Rosen “a public is a name for people who share certain problems and a common stake in the resolution. Publics come into their own when this is understood and talked about, in a fruitful way” (Rosen, 1999: 64). He goes on to ask, “How can experts know what the rest of us want?”

And how can we ourselves know unless we join in serious conversation about the public good? Democracy must begin at home and its home is the neighbourly community” (*ibid.*). This emphasises the argument that people learn from information that is talked about in such a way that they begin to feel a sense of commonality of issues and problems with others. This forms a foundation of a public sphere.

Örnebring and Jönsson (2004) provide a useful argument for multiple public spheres and recognition of difference. They point to the role of the public sphere as an arbiter of cultural recognition, and use Fraser’s (1997) argument for recognition of subordinated groups as a basis for conceptualising alternative mediated public spheres as being “alternative” in four different, but related ways:

- Alternative might be taken to mean that the discourse itself takes place somewhere else other than in the mainstream mediated public sphere;
- It might be alternative in the sense that participants, other than those who normally dominate media discourse, have access to and a place in the debates and discussions taking place;
- It might be alternative in the sense that other issues than those commonly debated in the mainstream are discussed; and
- “Alternativeness” may derive from the use of ways or forms of debating or discussing common issues other than those commonly used in the mainstream, for example, forms that encourage citizen participation and non-parliamentary direct action (Örnebring *et al.*, 2004: 286 - 287).

Örnebring and Jönsson use “alternative” to indicate criticism and questioning of the political, economic and cultural elites and the societal status quo and the possession of some kind of ‘emancipatory’ potential. Hence, they propose that tabloid journalism can help effect social change by addressing issues not previously open to debate, including new publics and using new forms – thus introducing new areas of discourse into the mainstream mediated public sphere. They point out that whereas the central struggle in the bourgeois public sphere was the struggle of one particular class to find a new place in society (by criticising traditional authorities and power elites), the central struggle in the mediated public sphere is the struggle for *visibility*, the struggle to be seen and heard in the first place. “This struggle for visibility seems to indicate that there might not be just one mediated public sphere, but instead the media landscape could be described as consisting of a mainstream and a number of alternative spheres – spheres from which marginalised groups strive to gain access to, and representation in, the mainstream” (*ibid.* 2004: 285).

3.3.2.1 Modern vs post-modern conceptions of the public sphere

I find McKee’s (2005) work extremely useful: he divides the differences in attitudes to a changing public sphere into two groups – ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern’ – and uses this distinction throughout his discussions. In terms of a ‘modern’ perspective, “a commitment to equality demands that all citizens be equally addressed in the best form of public communication but these citizens belong to formally educated audiences” (*ibid.*, 2005: 97). This implies one ‘right’ way of social and civic communication and hence adherents to the ‘modern’ persuasion see the changing nature of the public sphere as “the

degradation of the bourgeois public sphere” (*ibid.*, 2005: 16). Habermas can be seen as a modernist who is explicitly interested in the Enlightenment project of modernity: spreading “equality, justice, freedom and comfort” (*ibid.*, 2005: 27). However, McKee adopts a ‘post-modern’ approach to judging the public sphere and, according to this perspective, commitment to equality demands that the public sphere be open to the forms of culture with which different members of the public are familiar. Writers on both sides – modern and post-modern – are committed to “the unfinished project of modernity” (*ibid.*). For some, though, seeing more commercialized culture in the official public sphere represents a loss of those values; for others, like Fraser (1997 and 2001) and Örnebring and Jönssen (2004), it is a gain.

If we accept that commercialized, sensationalized culture can be as valuable as the quality culture of the educated audiences, then we can examine tabloids more constructively, “not symptomatically... to understand what they tell us about the failure of the public sphere, but exegetically... to see what worthwhile ideas they offer about the functioning of the public sphere” (McKee, 2005: 98). Tabloids and other ‘trashy’ forms of media offer an alternative perspective, and to consider the possibility that working-class (vulgar and sensationalist) forms of discourse can be valued for being more honest, open and informed about the realities of life than the restrained tone of ‘quality’ media.

In a multicultural society where pluralism demands that we begin to accept alternative media forms there will always be debates, particularly around commercialisation. According to Harrison (2006: 111), there are two versions of media pluralism. Firstly, a traditional liberal approach argues that free competition will necessarily lead to a

plurality of views, thereby serving a condition of democratic pluralism in offering a diverse range of information and news. Secondly, critics of this approach argue that plurality of news is superficial, producing limited choices. However, this does force one to reconsider both the tabloid and the mainstream media's effectiveness and relevance in a multicultural society.

Like Habermas, commentators using a 'modernist' paradigm have been concerned that if our public debates take on another, different form (as in visual, emotional and personal rather than logical, restrained, literate forms) it could lead to "inequality, oppression and domination" within the public sphere (McKee, 2005: 114). This culture of the common people apparently was "by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture" (Habermas, 1992 in McKee, 2005: 96 - 97). Interestingly, Habermas (1996) later also acknowledges a distinction between "institutionalised deliberative processes" and "informally constituted public opinions" where the former refer to parliamentary bodies of the political system and the latter refer to informally organised public spheres ranging from private associations to the media in civil society (in Fourie, 2006: 341). The latter, "weak publics" are responsible for identifying, interpreting and addressing social issues, and the "strong publics" are tasked with formal parliamentary procedures (*ibid.*). This strengthens the argument for a multiplicity of public spheres in multicultural, pluralist societies.

What follows is a general discussion of the two core issues at the heart of the debates on the public sphere and the inclusion of popular cultural and media products, rationality and

homogeneity. I use them to help gain an understanding of the public sphere that will enable me to argue for a more relevant, nuanced conception of it in South Africa.

3.3.2.2 Rational vs emotional discourses

The whole notion of the traditional public sphere revolves around the assumption that discussions and debates about matters of interest to the public are conducted in a rational and logical manner. This conception assumes a logical and intellectual mental activity without resorting to appeal to the emotions. There is, however, a problem with defining rationality as the fact that the emotion/rational opposition is itself the product of particular social circumstances and maps onto other social divisions such as female/male, child/adult, etc. This raises the debate around what constitutes ‘rationality’ and whose rationality is more valuable. Modernists prefer the ‘ideal’ paradigm, using logic and abstractions in public communications; post-modernists favour the ‘empirical’ or ‘experimental’ approach, looking at concrete realities of everyday practice.

A ‘modern’ approach accepts only one single correct form of rational thought and argument, in a ‘post-modern’ approach of a multiplicity of public spheres there will be acknowledgement of the value of an emotional dimension, seeing some element of rationality even in the more emotional forms of communication and accepting that different cultures have different kinds of rationality. This supports the view that, “biases that reflect the specification of respective locations can sometimes function as a resource, providing a diversity of perspectives [implying that] the non-rational parts of the psyche, such as the emotions....at times....even improve us” (Nicholson, 1999: 10 in McKee,

2005: 116). We could use “contextual rationality” to account for rational actions that “vary with the social context” (White, 1989: 10 quoting Peter Winch in McKee, 2005: 116). Audiences use their own type of rational thinking to suit their unique circumstances. Consequently, because different cultures use different forms of rationality (pluralist, emotional, subjective, various discursive practices, etc.), focusing on “one universalist version has a repressive dimension which may lead minority parties in a discussion to feel that their views are adjudged deviant” (Davey, 1998: 183 in McKee, 2005: 117). There are many writers who argue that a “weaker claim to rationality might ultimately be more fruitful for a highly pluralistic world where differences of race, class, and gender cannot be overlooked” (Hohendahl, 1992: 107, in McKee, 2005: 118).

This debate is also referred to as the “opinions versus experience” debate (Meijer, 2001: 195). Meijer (2001: 194) argues that if we perceive democracy as an issue of public life where only moral-political debates belong to the public sphere “to the exclusion of everyday life from democratic relevance” then we fail to acknowledge the political potential within the private and the popular. In her research on talk shows as popular cultural products, Meijer argues that we should see “dialogue [is] as worthy as debate” and that society needs to reconsider the “exclusion of emotionality” and start taking emotion more seriously as a means of gaining insight into democratic culture and “cultivating appropriate forms of emotion in media contexts” (*ibid.*). It would seem that in a pluralist society, “Neither is the single correct way to think about culture; and we can’t prove conclusively which is more important. Both are reasonable ways of making sense of the world” (McKee, 2005: 122).

However, there are two important points regarding the Western notion of rationality: firstly, one should understand that rationality is not the same as truth – an argument can be rational and wrong or untrue. Secondly, this form of rationality is only an ‘ideal’ to which we aspire, not a reality describing how a culture functions. The official public sphere is increasingly including multiple forms of rationality that have developed in different cultures. It is worthwhile to note that while contextual rationality certainly allows one to engage more fruitfully with other people’s discourses (as is appropriate in our pluralistic world), it does not entirely abandon the possibility of an ideal shared rationality which attempts to explain what may seem inexplicable or strange; in doing so it does suggest the possibility of cross-contextual norms.

3.3.2.3 The ‘homogeneity’ debate

The above discussion links to issues that may emerge from this study including, how does one account for cultural diversity in the public sphere? If each different group forms its own alternative public sphere, how do we account for the possible presence of ‘unacceptable’ elements (e.g. xenophobia) within it? We also need to recognise that the idea of multiple public spheres demands some account of the way in which they interact with others. The ‘homogeneity’ debate is, again, between the ‘modernist’ and the ‘post-modernist’ groups. Habermas, Garnham and others find the notion of diversity and difference in the public sphere problematic. Garnham (1992, in Calhoun, 1997: 369) insists that “it is impossible to conceive of a viable democratic polity without...at least some common normative dimension....cultural relativism and a democratic polity are

simply incompatible.” McKee (2005: 146 - 157) summarises the criticisms of a heterogeneous public sphere in what he calls the “consensus versus compromise debate”:

1. Diversity distracts from the more important issues of ‘nation state’,
2. People focus on their own group not on society as a whole,
3. If each group has its own ways of communicating, how can they communicate as a group in the official public sphere?

Fraser (1990) argues that different groups might have different, specific needs and interests which they can work on in their limited public spheres and then bring them to discussion in the national or official public sphere, and she calls their limited public spheres “safe places” (in McKee, 2005: 155). She also believes it is through “recognition of cultural difference [that] domestic, emotional and relationship issues should be recognised as worthy of public discussion” (Fraser, 2002 in McKee, 2005: 21). Fraser argues: “in an egalitarian, multicultural society we need to have a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate” (Fraser, 1997 in Calhoun, 1997: 126). These alternative arenas may then in turn allow for talk and debates across the different publics to form a “new post-bourgeois conception of a public sphere” (*ibid.*, 1997: 124) where issues that concern them all can be addressed, allowing for differences in culture. Hence, Fraser’s view may be used constructively as both a critique of Habermas’s original conception and as proposing the notion of alternative public spheres. Fraser discusses the notion of a mainstream mediated public sphere and argues that the type of structural elitism at play within this sphere in turn creates a need for one or several alternative public spheres, where different people approach and understand different issues in different ways. Fraser suggests that creating possibilities for alternative

public spheres to exist and thrive is a better way (than elitism) to promote democratic participation and open public debate: “This historiography records that members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and need” (Fraser, 1997: 123).

Although talking ‘across paradigms’ has always presented problems for academics, the mass media regularly communicate across demographic boundaries, finding ways to speak to men and women, formally and informally educated, black and white citizens, all at the same time. An ‘empirical’ approach across cultural communication is a post-modern idea where “each conversation is an act of translation....enlarging one’s interpretations...remaining open-minded [to] different cultures” (McKee, 2005: 156). We would not want “hermetically sealed areas” from which nothing seeps into the official public sphere: instead we would like to see “real-life resources...like willingness to hybridize [into] a rainbow coalition” (*ibid.*, 2005: 165) in which common goals are found experimentally, not theoretically. This discussion can be fruitfully applied to the situation in South Africa where the people, made up of different groups, are expected to work towards a common ‘rainbow nation’ identity. The *Daily Sun* scenario, for its readers, could constitute a ‘safe place’ where they can explore, discuss and test views on problems and issues.

Burton (2005) has reservations about the reality of a new type of public sphere. He argues that, although the “space” where information could be exchanged and debated by the public is provided by the media, in this century with “electronic substitutes” for Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, the idea is to try to redefine the functions and activities of the media. So, if the media could become more interactive and more genuinely plural, then something like a public sphere would be created. Unfortunately, the Internet is not accessible to all citizens and so they are not “equally free to participate in this public sphere” (*ibid.*, 2005: 95). Burton refers to the work of Curran (1996), Gripsrud (2002), Silverstone (1994) and Livingstone (1990), who studied the way in which television informs the collective dialogue of society and provides a cultural forum. He maintains that it does not “reflect the full diversity of society” (*ibid.*, 2005: 97). He argues that the “suburbanised public sphere is fragmenting as new technologies multiply” and can be described as “a domestic politics of self interest, conformity and exclusion. But the real power play happens elsewhere” (*ibid.*, 2005: 96). Although participation has been enhanced, Burton questions the terms of that participation and the possibilities of its realisation. The media continue to be consumed in the private sphere of the home; the content is predominantly entertainment; and audiences are treated as de-individualised groups of consumers. Audience members may interact in private discussion about what they have seen in the media but this discussion does not take place in a public sphere. According to Burton, the audience is unable to “make an impact on the conduct of political decisions” and hence, the media as public sphere “remains privatised and commercialised” (*ibid.*, 2005: 97).

Considering what these alternative views mean for the media and the public sphere, I would suggest that we look beyond simple normative conceptions of what the media ought to be and do. We need to explore the alternative publics, rethink the notion of the emotional/rational distinction, and consider media spectacle and the blurring of the public/private boundary in terms of ‘contextual rationality’. In this way, the above ideas can be productively discussed in relation to the *Daily Sun* and how its readers make sense of their reality using their own experiences, emotions, intuitions and common sense to position themselves as citizens of the new South Africa.

3.3.3 The *Daily Sun* and the public sphere

Having explored different notions of the public sphere I can now assess how these can help me look at the *Daily Sun* and how these new ideas around the public sphere can provide a lens, suggesting ways to look at the data that I have gathered. By exploring, rather than prejudging, how people use the newspaper, I could analyse the data for evidence or accounts of readers using their own ‘contextual rationality’ which constitutes not only ‘objective’ discussions of politics but also ‘personal narratives’. This could constitute a contextual rationality that is less undermining for readers than the rigid, traditional rationality can be.

Instead of only trying to compare and contrast the new type of public sphere with that of the traditional notion of the public sphere, one should also view the new one as a unique public sphere that comes about through the participation of a unique group of people in a particular socio-political and economic context. From the data, I will explore how the

Daily Sun could offer an alternative public sphere for its readers. In ‘normative’ terms, the public sphere should provide for a “citizen’s need for useful and relevant journalism [with] access to information [where] idealised pictures [may be] contrasted with current realities” (McQuail, 2002: 197). I am going to see if, by extension and contrast, there is more to understanding the workings of the tabloid and if what the *Daily Sun* offers its audience in terms of sensationalism is crucial to its functioning. I will also explore the possibility that newspapers like the *Daily Sun* can fulfil an important task by contributing to the development of an identity of citizenship in the South African democracy and thereby contribute to the functioning of the public sphere. They may “offer a different type of access to the public sphere” (Allan, 1999: 16), a nuanced notion of the public sphere where the irrational and the emotional offer an alternative way of conducting discourse for what may be considered a ‘counter public’.

3.4 The nature of the press and the discourse of tabloids

3.4.1 Introduction

The third set of ideas I draw on in this study involves discussions of the press in general and of tabloid journalism in particular. I begin with a general discussion of normative theory and what constitutes the ‘ideal’ role and function of the press in society, using McQuail (2002) and Fourie (2001). I then consider the uses and limits of normative theory and the changes and developments that have taken place in this area over the last decade, with particular reference to the media in the South African context. In order to deepen my understanding of tabloids I explore the discourse of tabloids and hope to show

that perhaps a particular approach to normative theory may be required in a more diverse society such as South Africa.

Although normative theory is notoriously problematic precisely because it invites consideration of values over which there may well be conflict, much of the discussion of the tabloid press has taken place in a normative context. This, perhaps, is as it should be because we do, in the end, need to make value judgements about the media; but we should also be clear about the basis on which we are making those judgements. In what follows I will look more closely at normative theory so that I can address the normative issues that are regularly raised in discussions of the tabloids such as the *Daily Sun*. Examining the discourse of tabloids will help me to understand the role they play in society. I will explore ‘elitist’ criticism of tabloids that has been present from Arnold’s (1887) comment, “new journalism...is feather-brained” (in Harcup, 2004: 88) through to the present time. I will also consider the anti-elitist view that argues for the positive role of tabloids as popular culture found in scholars like Nightingale and Ross (2003), Tester (1994), Sparks (1988 and 2000), Örnebring and Jönsson (2004), Meijer (2001), Fiske (1992), Dahlgren (1995 and 2000), Gripsrud (2000) and Strelitz and Steenveld (2005). Again, emphasis will be placed on the unique nature of the context and circumstances in which this particular tabloid, the *Daily Sun*, is functioning.

In considering the traditional criteria for ‘good journalism’, I will relate these to the *Daily Sun*, exploring how the newspaper communicates with its specific audience, how the audience responds and how this meaning-making process is taking place in a specific

socio-political and economic context. I then proceed to discuss how these ideas contribute to the argument that a new kind of journalism is what is needed to get this particular social group involved in the creation of an alternative public sphere in this developing democracy. An explorative examination (rather than an in depth content analysis) of the newspaper content and an analysis of readers' responses to a questionnaire will later serve as data and be used to give substance to this element of my discussion.

3.4.2 Normative theories of the press

Normative theory concerns what the press *should* be doing in society. McQuail argues that much of the theorising around the mass media has been driven by issues relating to “value commitments and ideas of potential benefit or harm to individuals and society” (2002: 166). He maintains that there is “no unified body of normative theory” because of the diverse values of the theorists. But what is common to these theories is that “publication is never a neutral matter” (*ibid.*, 2002: 167). This invariably leads to some consideration of forms of public communication and the linking of principles of democracy to those of freedom of expression (and of publication) on which normative theory is based. What follows on from this is the idea that mass communication should be for the betterment of society, but that sometimes it has the potential to cause social harm. Criticism of tabloids often centres on this and issues of public interest and public taste or preference. This tension illustrates the difficulty of constructing ‘a normative theory’ that could apply to a media system functioning in the context of a multicultural democracy. The term ‘public interest’ (itself referred to as ‘a muddled concept’ by McQuail) is a

contested one, but which can nevertheless serve as a mediating and guiding principle for how the media should perform in order to preserve or enhance the rights, values and tastes of the people, including minorities, as well as aesthetic values. In terms of the type and quality of information the press provides, debates centre on the distinction between ‘preference’ and ‘interest’, where some say the preferences of the majority may not necessarily be in the public interest, some that the interests of the majority is pivotal, and yet others maintain that “what is *of* the public interest is *in* the public interest” (McQuail, 2002: 166). Could one then deduce that, from a normative perspective, consideration of the public interest supercedes that of the information preferences of individuals? Is the press’s role in selecting information much more than just giving the public what it wants? “Critics have been pontificating about the salacious excesses of newspapers for generations; even mainstream news has always been torn between what practitioners see as a duty to inform, and their need to entertain and engage their audience” (Nightingale *et al.*, 2003: 67).

What the above discussion indicates is that analysis of a newspaper like the *Daily Sun* will always involve value judgment. In this study, for example, I have already been engaging explicitly and implicitly in the normative field as both the developmental perspective and the public sphere perspective invoke values. However, values may differ and my position is that the values of freedom and development, pluralism and individual agency should be regarded as normative.

3.4.3 Functions of the mainstream press

The function of the media and the press is very complex in a democratic society and involves the interrelatedness of concepts such as information; individual freedom; a free press; social order; and the government (as regulators of the rights and freedoms of the press and the people). In this section, I examine Fourie's extensive coverage of the usual, normative understanding of the role and function of the mass media. With this information, I will be in a better position to consider the extent to which the *Daily Sun* is able to perform normative functions and play a role within its constituency.

Fourie places his discussion within a 'functionalist' paradigm which views society as an "integrated, harmonious and a cohesive whole consisting of different social systems" (Fourie, 2001: 265). All the institutions (education, judicial, welfare, military and government) function together to "maintain equilibrium, consensus and social order" (*ibid.*, 2001: 265). The mass media form part of the social system in that they serve to circulate information and ideas through the education and entertainment they provide. Fourie (2001: 266) uses the models of Wright (1975) and McQuail (2000) to examine the 'ideal' **functions** of the media. These can be summarised as follows:

- *Information* – media inform about events and conditions in society and the world, about political developments and power relations, and about facilitating innovation and change;
- *Correlation* – media explain, interpret and comment about events and information; they provide support and guidance; they socialise; contribute to consensus; and set agendas or priorities;

- *Cultural transmission* – media express dominant culture and recognise subcultures and new cultural developments;
- *Entertainment* – media provide amusement, diversion and means of relaxation; and reduce social tension;
- *Surveillance* – media bring important issues to the attention of the community and criticise certain developments and decisions.

These functions can be for the benefit of the individual, society and subgroups and can relate to social, cultural and political objectives. However, according to Fourie, for the media to perform these functions effectively, they need to operate within a polity and an environment that recognise social pluralism and reflect this through diversity in their content and in the existence of different media (Fourie, 2001: 268). This suggests a move away from the implied audience of the past – made up of reasonably educated, politically aware and concerned citizens – towards an audience that includes the uneducated, and politically and civically inexperienced. In this study, I adopt a more pluralist view and use ideas such as Dahlgren’s on the function of the media: “To attract and engage the audience, to stimulate the process of meaning-making and critical reflection” (1995: 50). This implies that the media should function in a less prescriptive way and emphasises diversity, inclusivity and the active role of the ‘ordinary’ audience.

Significantly, this view foregrounds the idea that active audiences use the media in different ways and for different reasons. Jenson identifies four media uses, referring to “a broad range of social, familial and individual relevances which audiences ascribe to news and other media genre” (1992: 224 in Tester, 1994: 99):

- *Contextual uses* refer to social and cultural environments and time-markers in the daily routine.
- *Informational uses* refer to factual knowledge of issues and events relevant to the audience in a context of social action.
- *Legitimatising uses* place readers in the wider world in order to understand themselves and their place in the scheme of things. This relates to shaping personal and social identity.
- *Diversional uses* of media texts distract readers from the problems and boredom of everyday life.

As I proceed with the project, these categorises will prove valuable in determining to what extent the *Daily Sun*, as a specific media text, is serving its readers. This will enable me to examine the role played by the *Daily Sun* using the data collected from the readers themselves.

The normative perspective has also been developed to examine how different media systems operate in different countries and within different socio-political and economic contexts from autocracies to capitalist democracies. Theorists have developed these media systems by identifying the aims and functions of the media within, and in relation to, each social system and the socio-political demands of each social system and hence they can be adapted to the context of each society. In order to come to a better understanding of the role played by the *Daily Sun*, I will explore aspects of normative theory and the different media systems. I will then assess how these could be applied appropriately to the new South African situation – a new and developing democracy after

an era of authoritarianism that was characterised by government control of the media and very restricted freedom of the individual and the press.

To show how the theory relates to this project, I use Fourie's (2001) comprehensive account of the "media theory systems" (*ibid.*, 2001: 269) and the contributions of other theorists on this topic, Nordenstreng *et al.* (1997 in Fourie, 2001), who have attempted to overcome the limitations and restrictive elements of the normative perspective. They distinguish between 'ideal' (normative or prescriptive) theories and 'real' (sociological or descriptive) theories, and each media system, instead of operating within a specific theory only, fulfils a combination of roles within the framework of a specific paradigm (in Fourie, 2001: 269 - 279). This takes into account the diverse societies and circumstances in which the media operate, allowing for more inclusive perspective on appropriate and suitable media systems.

Within a *liberal-individualist* and *libertarian* paradigm, the media system emphasises democracy, freedom of the individual and press, and the media contribute to upholding these freedoms with minimal government interference. In this context there should be a free market of ideas and information with no censorship.

Within the *social responsibility* paradigm the media's contribution to the upliftment of citizens and society is emphasised whereby the audienceship is perceived as "active citizenship" (Fourie, 2001: 276). This approach stresses the need for the press to reconcile freedom with responsibility to the society in terms of providing information that

will create a platform for different viewpoints – reflecting diversity – while maintaining journalistic ethics and standards contributing to the ‘do no harm’ philosophy. The media need to meet “certain expectations of information and cultural performance” (Meijer, 2001: 189) as in the public service broadcasting model (although the original model did not include the element of profit-making) whereby the media belong to everyone and their function is to communicate with citizens from all walks of life concerning their role in society.

According to the *critical paradigm* the media can “emancipate the masses” and question “oppressive ideologies” (Fourie, 2001: 276). While the *cultural negotiation* paradigm emphasises “the rights of subcultures....values, anda real sense of community.... aiming at mediations through drama rather than news” (*ibid.*). Both *development theory* and *democratic-participant theory* fall within the *critical* and the *cultural negotiation* paradigms. *Development theory* is particularly relevant for developing countries, whereby national development, autonomy and cultural identity are promoted. Although individual freedom is valued there are times when national, cultural and language issues are given preference as contributing to ‘nation building’. This therefore allows for a measure of state subsidy and control (as with the SABC in South Africa). *Democratic-participant theory* embraces a new kind of “press-government-public relationship...developed in reaction to deficiencies” (*ibid.*, 2001: 269) in traditional democratic, free-market, pluralistic societies. Influenced by the characteristic trends of the capitalist media system (commercialism, concentration, convergence, globalisation, internationalisation, etc.) this theory focuses on the right of access to the media and the right to have one’s group needs

served by the media. In this way “small-scale, interactive and participatory forms of the media are regarded as more beneficial” (*ibid.*, 2001: 271) than major, mainstream media.

Within the various paradigms, Nordenstreng *et al.* (1997, in Fourie, 2001: 275) argue that the media can serve the following functions:

- *Collaboration*: media contribute to developing ideas of nation building and national interest.
- *Surveillance*: media act as ‘watchdog’ and “expose violations of the moral and social order” (*ibid.*, 2001: 276).
- *Facilitation*: media create and sustain public debate as in ‘public or civic journalism’.
- *Critique*: media engage the political and social order of a community by foregrounding public debate.

This elaboration of normative theory clearly indicates a shift from a restrictive to a more inclusive perspective that acknowledges diversity and recognises difference. What the above discussion also points to is that there is no single normative, function for the media. In addition, discussion around different perspectives and paradigms implies that from time to time there will be “paradigm shifts” (Frank, 2003: 442) as the media rethink their role in society.

This approach suggests that the role of the tabloid and, in particular, the *Daily Sun*, needs to be re-assessed. Sparks states: “the press has functioned as the chief agency for instructing the public on the main issues of the day... The Royal Commission on the Press, while noting the ‘entertainment’ role of the press, still took the ‘serious functions’

as the acid test of press performance” (Sparks, 1988: 209). However, mass consumption of the ‘quality’ press has been challenged or limited by the fact that it is generally expensive and it requires a “high level of cultural competence” to engage with and in it (*ibid.*, 1988: 210). This leaves room for the cheap tabloids to enter the media arena and perform a useful role in society. From the perspective of citizenship and democracy, both types of journalism are important. Gripsrud (2000) maintains that “totally intellectual or literary journalism is practically unthinkable and politically not desirable” (in Sparks and Tulloch, 2000: 289). Indeed, tabloids may well be liberating! The question asked in this thesis is how and to what extent does the *Daily Sun* serve its audience as a resource for active and informed citizenship?

3.4.4 The tabloid press

In this section, I look at the features of tabloids and consider how they engage readers and fulfil readers’ needs with regard to making sense of their world. I also explore some of the criticisms of tabloids and, in order to come to a better understanding of how the *Daily Sun* could play a positive role in the lives of its readers, I consider some of the characteristics of the anti-elitist view of the press.

3.4.4.1 Rise of the tabloid

In the development of the media, history has shown that tabloids throughout the world – from the ‘penny’ tabloids of the 1880s in the USA to the rise of the British tabloids in the 1980s – emerged out of changing political, social and economic conditions at specific times. They served the specific economic and social needs of their readers, thereby filling

the gaps that the mainstream media failed to fill. Fiske maintains that the popularity of the tabloids is evidence of dissatisfaction “among those who feel powerless to change their situation” (in Sparks and Tulloch, 2000: 286). The same could, perhaps, be said of the rise of tabloids in South Africa where, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the tabloids have succeeded in overtaking the mainstream press. In the course of this dissertation, I will try to understand the significance of this.

Gripsrud (1992, in Örnebring *et al.*, 2004) argues that well-known features of the tabloid press, such as sensationalism, personalisation and the focus on private concerns, parallel the main components of melodrama (sensational, exaggerated or overdramatic elements of story plots), a discursive form which developed in the 19th century as part of the gradual democratisation of Western European society. He argues that these elements of the tabloid press are popular precisely because they provide ways of understanding the world that are different from those offered in the so-called mainstream press. Gripsrud sees the melodrama contained in tabloid stories as a sense-making system to cope with “instability in society” because they carry “accessible, engaging information and diverse political perspectives” (in Sparks and Tulloch, 2000: 291). Tabloid melodrama presents the world in a “bottom up” way and helps to understand social change (*ibid.*, 2000: 297).

3.4.4.2 Critique of tabloids

Although there is no clear definition of the term ‘tabloidisation’, a storytelling style, a focus on personal narratives about individuals and an “increasing predominance of the visual image over analysis and rational description” (Sparks, 1992: 39) are widely taken

as characteristic features. It is precisely these qualities that are the basis for the main criticism of the tabloids. As McKee (2005) points out, the tabloids are often seen as ‘dumbing down’ and pandering to the consumer’s ‘short attention span’ by imparting ‘spectacle’. Such a view “suggests that citizen-consumers are being given flashy, showy forms of communication; visual presentations...rather than detailed and difficult written forms offering ‘affective’ pleasures which distract from the working of mental processes” (Habermas, 1989: 208 in McKee, 2005: 107). Secondly, spectacles are entertainment, “they’re easily consumed, undemanding and distract citizens from real politics and action” and thirdly, “spectacles encourage passivity in spectators – who watch for easily consumed pleasure” (Kellner, 2003: 4 and Groombridge, 1972: 71 in McKee, 2005: 107). According to Habermas (1989: 169), popular forms of media are “serving up the material as a ready-made convenience, patterned and pre-digested”, implying that people no longer use abstract thought to interpret and understand meaning and culture.

Criticism of the tabloid leads to polarizing it against the ‘quality’ press. This has been happening since the 1830s when tabloids first made their appearance. Commercialization of the press is said to have led to the trivialization of content in order to sell more newspapers – mass circulation for maximum profit. In cultural theory this view was most influentially proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt School. The work of Adorno and Horkheimer on the rise of popular culture in America can be used as a typical example of criticism that shows “surprise, distaste and contempt.....embedded in a series of assumptions about the meaning and significance of what culture *ought* to be about” (Tester, 1994: 35). This illustrates the inherent elitism

that is at the root of the ‘high vs low’ debate. They argue that popular culture contributes to the stunting of the mass-media consumer’s powers of imagination whereas high culture is that which “can inspire the contemplative imagination of different worlds and different conceptions of the good life” (*ibid.*, 1994: 40). According to Adorno, the popular media, instead of taking a critical stance to everyday life, have made culture part of daily life and “make money or entertain the audience by helping them forget about their everyday problems” (Tester, 1994: 38). Adorno argues that the masses are not getting what they want but what the media has decided to give them. He sees the popular culture industry as “barbaric in a cultural and moral sense” because the media, by telling people what to think and do, are “restricting the ability of the individual to think for himself” (Tester, 1994: 49). According to Adorno the popular media are engaged in “monologue” and thereby construct a “passive and conformist audience” (*ibid.*, 1994: 60). In the course of this study, I hope to offer some ideas on the ‘active audience’ vs ‘passive dupes’ debate, by relating it to the *Daily Sun* readers, their reactions to issues raised and their responses to the manner in which they are presented, showing that this type of “moralistic critique may be somewhat old-fashioned” (McQuail, 2005: 343).

One of the reasons people do not read ‘quality’ newspapers is that “political and economic power is so far removed from the real lives of the mass of the population that they have no interest...in monitoring its disposal” (Sparks, 1988: 217). I tend to agree that, although the elite press aspires to the public service function, it is perceived as dull and narrow in its social range.

Walter Benjamin takes a more positive view of the culture industry as a means to take high culture “out of the galleries” and give it a “wider circulation” by making it more accessible to all and thereby more democratic, “away from the self-proclaimed self-established elite groups” (Tester, 1994: 45). This view implies that the mass media can contribute to circulating culture – and with it, a sense of identity and power – to the people. Tabloids by their nature reflect the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘everyday’. If one uses the concept ‘culture’ to refer to all of those activities or practices which produce sense or meaning or as “all those things that make our lives and the world make sense”, then low culture and popular media may indeed have an important role to play in society (Bennett 1981: 82 in Tester, 1994: 13). This study will explore whether and how the *Daily Sun*, as a popular ‘low culture’ product, can provide distraction and enter readers’ material worlds in such a way that they absorb it without losing sight of their circumstances. Hence, through engagement with the *Daily Sun*, readers’ ‘real life’ problems may be “transformed” (Tester, 1994: 47).

3.4.4.3 An alternative Cultural Studies view

Here I continue with my exploration of the differing views on popular cultural products such as tabloids. The purpose is to try to develop an alternate view around tabloids that accepts diversity within the media. However, I argue that criticism of the tabloids, and the ‘good vs bad’ journalism distinction, needs to be re-assessed in terms of looking at the media from an audience effects perspective. We need to be able to see that both ‘low’ and ‘high’ types of journalism have value in a pluralist society because they both serve

their respective audiences but in a different way. This alternative view acknowledges that tabloids may have an important role to play in the lives of their readers.

Tester (1994) uses the work of Fiske (1989 and 1992) in his discussion of popular or 'low' cultural products which include television and tabloids. A Cultural Studies perspective presupposes the importance of the media as cultural forms and as "providers of meaning" (Fiske, 1989: 43 in Tester, 1994: 25). This particularly refers to the 'political' or ideological dimension of the media. Fiske discusses popular cultural forms as popular in two senses: "of the people" and "liked by many" (1989: 43 in Tester, 1994: 25). Through Cultural Studies, many of the assumptions behind the elevation of some matters and not others to the status of "proper" and "official" are revealed (1989: 47 and 1992: 161 in Tester, 1994: 25). Tester suggests that the word 'value' refers to "qualities of cultural goods developed in the debate between high culture and low culture" (*ibid.*, 1994: 3). The debates stem from the idea that popular culture is used to applaud the cultural values of those social and cultural groups identified as currently dominated and "understood as the constituent parts of a new and a more democratic construction of hegemony" (Tester, 1994: 30).

In discussing the tabloid debate, we should make use of James Curran's point that we must stop thinking and writing about some unified category of the 'newspaper'. Whatever the two may have in common in their production, the two ends of the press spectrum are clearly "different sorts of cultural commodities serving different sorts of markets and providing different sorts of satisfactions" (in Sparks, 1988: 221). If the

modern press is the product of the conditions of life in a stable democracy then perhaps in a developing democracy the tabloid can fulfil a useful role – that is, doing journalism differently in a different context. Hence, it would be advantageous to take the features and characteristics of tabloids and see whether and to what extent they are actually engaging readers in a positive way.

Fiske, focussing on the textual strategies of American tabloids, argues that they produce subjectivities that are different from those produced by the address of the mainstream press (Fiske, 1992: 46). The latter present information as objective facts, acting on the assumption that good, ‘objective’ investigation produces the truth. Their tone is serious, official and impersonal, aimed at producing understanding and belief. In other words, they address the reader from the position of one who knows and is providing information for those who do not. In contrast, the tone of tabloids is more conversational, using the language of its readers. They do not pontificate. In this way, they set up a more ‘egalitarian’ relationship between themselves and their readers, offering an alternative normative perspective on popular culture whereby readers can develop critical skills through their engagement with their media. For example, according to Gripsrud (2000: 298), the “populism of tabloid journalism often harbours a disrespect for authorities, which may well produce valuable challenges to those in powerful positions”. As ‘the other news’ and being about ‘us’ and our ‘everyday’, tabloids represent a link between the everyday and the political and economic affairs of the society.

Nightingale and Ross (2003: 66) see the reading of the tabloid style and tabloid consumption as “not subversive or transgressive but... neither a symptom of mindlessness either”. Rather they see audiences as active, selective readers. They argue that readers approach all kinds of news with the unstated question: What can I get from this information or this story? How does it apply to my life? and thus we seek to uncover what it is that the readers remember about the stories, text or media messages and what it is they actually use in generating some meaning. In this regard, narrative is important to the media industry. According to Taylor and Willis (1999), “media texts tell stories – they have a narrative [and] narrative devices are also central to the marketing strategies the media industries deploy for advertising their products to audiences. They are used to capture audience attention [while the] narrative image works to construct simultaneously a blend of both the familiar and the unknown” (*ibid.*, 1999: 69). Useful here too are Tulloch’s ideas that tabloids, as popular fiction, use simple narrative devices like brevity and simplicity as techniques “to reduce complexity [and] the tension between the narrative logic of the story and the messy unnarrative actuality” (in Sparks and Tulloch, 2000: 138). The blend of sensational or even tragic stories interspersed with jokes and snippets of information offers readers a sense of “self-improvement for ordinary people” (*ibid.*, 2000: 141). Although narrative is an important feature of tabloids (and part of a content analysis project not included in this study), I do not focus on it in any systematic way except to perhaps try to show how readers insert the news stories, as narratives, into their daily lives as a way of interpreting and using the media messages.

Another aspect of the tabloid style lies in ‘the power of the image’. Pictures contribute greatly to what makes stories memorable – a combination of “the vivid verbal and visual images” (Nightingale and Ross, 2003: 75). The debate about inappropriate tabloid images rages on: the tabloids are criticised for their explicit and attention-seeking pictures. However, some suggest that the ‘visual generation’ of today demands visuals – whether inappropriate or not, as a source of ‘meaning-making’. The work of the late Susan Sontag is interesting here (in Tester, 1994). She explored the rationale for focussing on the pain of others through photographs. She raised questions about which images should be published and about whose interests are served by their publication. The ‘shame’ factor is one of a number that serve as a measure of the useful purpose of ‘inappropriate’ images. When confronted with “bizarre and curious” content, readers are forced to ask, “Why am I being shown this? Why is this news?” (Tester, 1994: 71).

Tester also explores the ‘voyeurism vs conscience’ approach to the selection of pictures where he explores how people read and react to pictures of famine. Voyeurism refers to the sense of gratification some people get from seeing certain pictures, as well as the appeal and newsworthiness of pictures of an awful event, while the ‘conscience’ aspect refers to the development of a moral conscience and a reaction of wanting to do something positive about the awful events depicted in the media. In this way, the media can play a role in creating an “imagined community [where] ‘I’s’ find common identity in ‘we’” (Tester, 1994: 93) whereby readers, as subjects, become more empathic. This contributes to the notion that the media, by displaying shocking images and content, can be “agents of moral progress and of the communication of moral values” (*ibid.*, 1994:

95). One cannot be sure that they do in fact perform that role; however, this study seeks to ascertain whether readers of the *Daily Sun* do perceive it as doing so. Audiences *choose* to see and extract moral messages from media texts. Media texts do not assert their own meaning, instead readers give meanings to the texts – even different readings of the same text.

On the issue of tabloid sensationalism, some writers view elements of ‘spectacle’ in more positive way. Throughout history, “politically marginalised groups have consistently favoured easy visual and aural pleasure in their public culture.....they made sense of the worlds of nature, society and personal relationships using oral, dramatic and spectacular institutions of story, song, drama, myth, symbol, image, picture” (Hartley, 1996: 82 in McKee, 2005: 108). Today these marginalised groups are still “fighting for the recognition of the worth of spectacular forms of communication” (McKee, 2005: 109). Some theorists maintain that through tabloidisation “the popular conception of the personal becomes the explanatory framework within which the social order is presented as transparent” (Nightingale and Ross, 2003: 67). Fiske argues, “every headline on the [tabloid] page is a sensational example of the inability of ‘the normal’ to explain or cope with specific instances of everyday life” (Fiske, 1989: 116). However, as Sparks notes “if one broadens one’s notion of politics from the traditional concern with the state and its works to include a much wider range of life experiences, then....the popular press is indeed stuffed with politics” (*ibid.*, 1988: 216). This interpretation supports the notion that the ‘personal is political’ and that non-political issues too require discussion by people in order to help establish acceptable shared values in the society. Sparks maintains

that, “sports reporting is saturated with politics and does loom very large in the popular press” (Sparks, 1988: 215). This is evident in South Africa where government involvement in sport constitutes a contentious ‘site of struggle’. For example, in the attempt to transform sport through racial quotas in teams, this struggle is made public through extensive media coverage.

In developing a public identity, people incorporate what they learn from the cultural products they consume into their everyday lives. It follows that people who read these tabloids often tend to create part of their identity around what they read. In a South African context this is interwoven with different literacy levels and the widespread belief of the status involved in reading English language papers. So, although others may perceive their popular media as trashy, commercially driven products, they need not be seen as less worthwhile but simply as the culture of a different demographic group. This would allow for recognition, too, of the work of tabloids as alternatives to the mainstream press. I will investigate whether these ideas could appropriately apply to the content and the context of the *Daily Sun*.

3.4.5 The *Daily Sun* and its readers

In this section, I ask questions of the *Daily Sun*’s functioning and see how the answers could help to further the aim of this investigation into the role of this tabloid in the new South Africa. What is in the *Daily Sun*, and how do the readers use its content? What makes these readers buy this newspaper, a tabloid that displays reading matter typically described as sensational and crude? If audiences are active, selective readers who

approach all kinds of news with the tacit questions: What can I get from this information, or story? How does it apply to my life, and why should I pay attention? Then they clearly do assume that news should have a “perceived existential utility” (Sparks, 2000: 27) for them, making them want to spend their money and time on it. This utility is found in the tabloid stories that address issues that are of more direct concern to readers and are more easily understood than stories about remote economic or political matters. Herein, too, lies the popularity of the tabloid. The relationship between the tabloid and its readers is a complex one. Burton (2005) discusses this, claiming that reading the newspaper requires a process of cognition to make sense of the text, “from emotional, to analysis and reflection”, and in this way the audience is seen as “taking charge of the production of meaning and as taking their pleasures from the text” (*ibid.*, 2005: 88). Wayne (1994) adds to this by proposing that, “There has been a tendency to conceive the popular as a realm of cultural self-making where the people reconstruct their identities and their sense of place in the world” (in Burton, 2005: 89). Both these claims will be explored with readers in this *Daily Sun* project.

In the course of this study, I hope to gain an understanding of both the value and the “dangers of the tabloidisation trend” (Nightingale and Ross, 2003: 64) particularly by using the research data to try to determine what readers actually *do* with the tabloid content. In addition to the actual text, readers engage in discussions amongst themselves to help them make sense of their world and so they go about the process of constructing meaning for themselves based on the text, their own conversations and their actual experiences within a specific political, social and economic context. How audiences view

and define news also influences the notion that audiences do play a role in determining the direction in which journalism is going.

The following discussion will expand on the above ideas: it is assumed that some relationship of cause and effect, of action and response, exists between the media and their audiences and it is taken for granted that media forms are essentially involved in “the relationships, practices and procedures of a *dialogue*” (Tester, 1994: 58). This implies that media texts are dialogic in that they inspire or provoke responses in readers, viewers or listeners; and the question that follows is, does this make the audience an equal partner in the process? If so, they are not, as Adorno and others would have it, ‘passive dupes’ just soaking up what they’re given by the media “in monologue” (in *ibid.*, 1994: 59). This highlights the active role of readers as users, not ‘victims’, of the popular media. The work of Allan (1999) and others points to how particular newspapers use “a preferred language to represent ‘the world out there’ or mode of address in speaking to its audience” (Allan, 1999: 15). Hall maintains that a communicative event will ‘make sense’ only to the extent that it can be within “a range of known social and cultural identifications or ‘maps of meaning’ about the social world” (Hall *et al.*, 1978 in Allan, 1999: 16). I use this idea in my argument to emphasise the notion that the newspaper text has to be relevant to its readers’ knowledge, that is, readers have to identify with the content in order for it to be meaningful to them.

Critics are also “baffled” by the fact that readers do prefer ‘human interest’ stories that seem ‘trivial’. Perhaps we should look at changing the way journalists, critics and

audiences refer (and defer) to the 'transmission' view whereby audiences consume news to be informed about the world. Instead, we should accept that "everyday definitions of news focus more on how these stories are inserted into people's daily lives, growing and becoming the subjects of speculation and discussion" (Nightingale *et al.*, 2003: 68). Most of what the audience reads in the newspaper is either ignored or forgotten almost immediately; from the audience perspective, relevant news consists of stories that take on a life of their own outside the immediate context of the newspaper. This study hopes to explore what information is sifted out and found useful by individuals and whether "personalisation can be read here not as trivialisation but as achieving greater imaginative proximity to the life-world of the audience" (Tomlinson, 1997: 77 in *ibid.*, 2003: 72).

On the basis of previous research findings, the *Daily Sun* has attempted to address the specific needs of its target audience with empathy, giving them 'what they want' even if it is bad news. General media research shows that people want to know the "bad news" as it serves to provide them with greater control over their lives and over public choices. However, it seems that "negative information is best utilized when ...balanced with action being taken....and ...corresponding positive news...to enable individuals... to feel more able to avoid and deal with these dangers...as well as to sustain demands and campaigns for governmental action" (Kuper, A., 1997 and 1998 in Kuper, 2006: 15 - 16). In addition, research indicates that 'knowledge skilling' content constitutes an important supplementary media strategy to increase individuals' personal and political autonomy, and media that expose audiences to information and to views of fellow citizens tend to make their readers feel less alone and enhance readers' sense of "civic belonging" (*ibid.*).

In this study, I will explore how the *Daily Sun*, a tabloid, attracts its readers, using ‘gory’ stories and tapping into their own experiences, traditions, beliefs and fears. These specific readers come from an oral tradition of story-telling so this strategy should work. I will also examine whether the *Daily Sun*’s stories offer its readers other things that serve the purposes of information, education and entertainment and contribute to the creation of a more empowered readership.

3.4.6 The *Daily Sun* and normative theory

The writers and theorists cited have given me pointers and suggestions as to how I should map the data I collect. I will look for aspects of normative theory that seem to apply to and work for the *Daily Sun* and its readers. I will assess whether, in this transition, the *Daily Sun* can be seen as fulfilling any normative roles and functions and to what extent it fits into one or more of the functional media theory systems. Through my review of the literature and the analysis of the data, I will also try to come to a better understanding of how ‘other’ modes of address and discourse (as in tabloids) can nevertheless be empowering and liberating in a developing democracy. This will help me to explore whether and how the *Daily Sun* offers its readers opportunities to engage in different types of social and political actions.

3.4.6.1 A new type of journalism

It has long been recognised that the “power of the press can be used for good or ill” (Rosen, 1999: 74), and although much has been said of the ‘ills’ of the tabloid, here I

refer to writers who explore the practical usefulness of the tabloid's potential for fostering democratic citizenship rather than merely trivializing information and events. Strelitz and Steenveld (2005: 1) call for academics to "transcend the futile moralism" associated with criticism of the tabloids and to investigate the historical and sociological context in which they operate. The work of Rosen (1999) is particularly valuable in this discussion. He maintains that the perception of the mainstream, 'quality' press is that it is "arrogant [and] detached from the community" (Rosen, 1999: 29) and this, together with other factors, has contributed to a move away from it to the tabloids. It is therefore imperative that the tabloids, with their access to the masses, should use their potential to engage readers as citizens not merely "as audience for spectacle" (*ibid.*, 1999: 29). One of the ways to encourage a more public life is for the press to encourage "public talk" (*ibid.*). This directs us to the positive elements of a more civic approach within the tabloid format where journalists talk with readers rather than at them – indicating perhaps a move towards public or 'democracy-cultivating' journalism.

"Elite definitions of news and popular definitions are often at odds, in that news that would be dismissed as salacious gossip by critics may be perceived as useful information to [tabloid] audiences" (Nightingale *et al.*, 2003: 72), helping them discuss and deal with issues of morality, law and order, and so on, in their daily lives – in their own way. Giving the readers 'what they want' does not necessarily need to be a negative value. According to the culturalist position, people are not 'passive dupes', they are actively making choices about what to read and prefer to buy the popular tabloids and "find even

in the most uncompromising material elements which speak to their concerns and experience” (Sparks, 1988: 215).

Within the methodology of this project, I explore discussions and discourse engendered by newspaper content that could suggest a move towards the creation of social identity and morality, and a specific version of the public sphere. In other words, I assess the extent to which the content provided by the media (in this case the *Daily Sun*) contributes to a form of ‘social discourse’ – supporting Burton’s (2005: 52) view that readers’ “talk about the social system in which they function helps to define them.” Dahlgren (1992) argues that journalism “often *does* foster feelings of collective belonging yet this is rarely recognised. The conversations readers have about news stories serve to bind people together, and give them common topics of conversation in a world in which common ties are getting fewer and fewer” (Dahlgren, 1992 in Nightingale et al., 2003: 79). The argument against this is that “knowledge of trivia prevents people from learning about important issues” (*ibid.*, 2003: 79). Critique such as this, from ‘high journalism’, is somewhat paternalistic, making a distinction between what *ought* to be (ideal) and what *is* (real in practice). When critics talk of tabloids “dumbing down” content they are sometimes not taking the audience into account. We should not assume what people *do* when they are reading. We need to broaden our focus on the readership, delivery and needs when exploring the effects of media messages.

By now, it should be clear that the old ways of ‘doing’ journalism – “crime coverage that flows downward from cops, political news that starts with city hall – seem to be less and

less effective” (Rosen, 1999: 134). Journalism, particularly in South Africa, should be more about “reconnecting with citizens” (*ibid.*) by working education, politics, crime news and women’s or family issues into the ‘storytelling’. Readers should experience some sort of “moment of revelation” (*ibid.*) where they can identify with stories in such a way that they feel they have a “stake in the news” (*ibid.*) and want to talk about them and possibly participate in solving shared problems through “community conversations” (*ibid.*). The *Daily Sun* operates in a new democracy that espouses a free media system where it purports to fulfil surveillance, facilitative and critical-dialectical roles. In an attempt to relate the more ‘serious functions’ of the press to some of what the *Daily Sun* is trying to do, I wish to expand on, and possibly adapt, the concept of ‘civic’ or ‘public’ journalism. ‘Civic’ or ‘public’ journalism provides people with information and news that will allow them to function as citizens in a democratic society, rather than merely as consumers, and “to reconnect with the real concerns that readers have about things in their lives they care most about” (Fourie, 2001: 276).

According to Fouhy (2001, in Fourie, 2001: 277), “civic journalists broaden their agenda from the focus on political and governmental news to aggressively ferret out issues of interest to citizens who are not members of the elite.” That means things like the education of their children, the security of their families, and the economic future they face – an agenda set by the people. On examination of the content of the *Daily Sun* one might well detect elements of public journalism where readers’ attention is drawn to issues that are relevant to them both as individuals and citizens and represented in a way that would make sense to them in terms of using the information and finding solutions.

In the *Daily Sun*, I see a strong case for the “increasing move to the personal as a democratisation of news, a chance for all voices to be heard, and thus an opening up of public discourse” (Nightingale *et al.*, 2003: 72). The readers are people who were previously ignored and voiceless and see this medium as an “option for exposure” (Grindstaff, 1997: 196 in *ibid.*, 2003: 72). Instead of merely criticising them as readers with morbid curiosity or sensation seekers, we could adopt the approach of writers like Fiske. He suggests that they could be developing “sceptical reading competencies by which people control the immediate conditions of their everyday lives” (in *ibid.*, 2003: 66), and critical skills whereby they question things that are not working in their society. Sparks suggests that the tabloid style could be seen as subversive in that readers could use it to challenge the hegemony in society by taking a “reactionary stance” and offering a “critique of the status quo” (in *ibid.*, 2003: 64). Through interviews with readers these ideas will be explored and the data will be analysed for any evidence in this regard.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have contributed to building a general theoretical foundation on which I have structured my investigation. In this chapter, I present my research methods, including the research design, method of data collection, the research procedure and my approach to the data analysis and presentation. I begin with a short overview of the methodological framework that informs my particular audience research and discuss its relevance to my research goals.

Because my study involves people, not inanimate objects or natural phenomena, and the process of trying to understand how those people read, respond to and use the *Daily Sun* in their daily lives, I have adopted the *interpretive* position of a social and humanities researcher rather than the *positivist* one of a natural scientist. I follow Filmer's thinking that the social world I am investigating cannot exist, "independently of the social meanings that its members use to account for it and, hence, constitute it" (1972 in Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 7) as I explore how the readers use the *Daily Sun* to make meaning for themselves by constructing and reconstructing their social reality. This reflects a *constructivist* approach, which is well-established in the fields of cultural and media studies.

I also adopt a *critical realist* perspective when I situate this study in the specific and unique socio-political and cultural context of the new South African democracy. This

perspective acknowledges that “there are social and cultural structures that shape people’s options for action, but exist independently of their awareness of them” (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 10). In this study I use the *Daily Sun* to explore how an element (in this case, the media) in the changing structure of society can function as an agent for change – without the readers being conscious of this. In doing so, I argue for an understanding of the relationship between social and cultural structures and everyday activity that is “based on a *transformational* conception of human activity” (Bhaskar, 1989: 3 in Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 10).

4.2 Methodology

In order to achieve my objective of investigating and evaluating the role of the *Daily Sun* in contemporary South African society, I have used a mixed methodology. This combines insights derived from the theoretical discussion in Chapter 3; the use of a form of ethnographic research employing participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups and a basic content and discourse analysis of readers’ responses. In addition, I use interviews arranged with certain media workers, including the publisher of the *Daily Sun*, to ascertain the perceptions of both critics and supporters of this tabloid. As a result, a degree of informal *triangulation* is achieved in that I consulted a variety of sources to come to a deeper understanding of the issues and ideas under scrutiny. My research design allows for this sense of triangulation which Du Plooy views as “an appropriate methodology using two or more theories, sources of data, and a combination of data-collection methods [which] acknowledges the value of the opinions and thoughts of all people” (Du Plooy, 2002: 299). According to Deacon, researchers should check the full

range of available sources to build up the most accurate and comprehensive account possible, and the research should include “judiciously mixing methods in the interests of analytical enrichment and the triangulation of research findings” (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 29 and 135). Triangulation involves collecting data by multiple methods or from multiple sources and “will enhance the credibility of data you collect where various sources give you a mutually consistent picture of a particular event, process, relationship or concept [so that] the credibility and justification of your analysis and findings will be strengthened” (Burton *et al.*, 2004: 162). This, I believe, has been achieved in this study.

4.3 A word on ethnography

In ‘classic’ ethnography, usually used in anthropology and sociology, the researcher should ideally immerse herself in the society or social group that she is studying, becoming a part of that society to observe how it functions and how subjects behave in it. This is not always possible and so one needs to utilise an adapted version of ethnography in order to collect data that will “tell us much about what people think while using the media, their relationship with the media, how they interpret messages and the social context of the media use... by reading the situation” (Fourie, 2001: 264). The key consideration, for me, is that the ethnographic observation takes place in a ‘natural setting’ and for a time-period that is long enough to give the researcher a sense that adequate data has been collected. The ethnographic method has advantages: first hand information, immediacy, flexibility, and the opportunity to study the subtle nuances of people’s attitudes and behaviour. Disadvantages include the small samples, the problem of “participation hindering observation” (the difficulty of keeping one’s distance), and the

expense (Fourie, 2001: 278). Ethnographic reception studies address the qualitative nature of the audience and it investigates reception in its context and as a social activity. “This approach may include conversational engagement with respondents rather than questionnaires” (Burton, 2005: 89).

As Burton and Steane (2004: 121) advise, I wanted “to validate and pre-test” my measures before proceeding to the actual data collection. My preliminary pilot study showed that public hospital waiting rooms are fruitful sites for this research because large numbers of people are seen reading the newspaper and also they have time to talk to the researcher. These people offer a good sample and cross section of the readers who comprise male and female black adult township dwellers. It was also quite easy to blend in as an observer in the out patients’ waiting area. I watched as some people engaged with the newspaper and then talked to others about the stories. I am aware that this does not constitute authentic ethnographic study, which would have been extremely time-consuming and unviable given my work commitments and lack of resources. However, my experiences in the waiting areas were valuable in that they gave me insight into the lives of my subjects and, hence, an understanding of their condition and perspective.

4.4 Qualitative methods in Media Studies

The literature shows that qualitative research has proved more able to capture the nature of human and social behaviour within media and cultural studies than quantitative research. Although the latter has its merits, particularly in producing large quantities of

statistics via methods associated with the ‘objectivist scientific method’, such as surveys and laboratory experiments, the results cannot reproduce the nuances of social contexts and behaviour relating to the production, reception and interpretation of media messages where the unpredictable human factor is ever-present.

Quantitative methods of data collection and analysis have proved invaluable in the natural sciences but do not always fit well with socio-constructionist or ‘interpretivist’ methods used to explore the social and cognitive processes involved in ‘making meaning’ (Du Plooy, 2001). Social constructionism argues that knowledge is a product of symbolic interaction within social groups, and reality is thus socially constructed and a product of group and social life (Burger, 2004; Deacon *et al.*, 1999; and Mouton, 2001). This study accepts these points and adopts a qualitative, constructionist approach. According to Burger, interpretive research “aims to achieve a new understanding of people, clarify values in terms of what ought to happen in future, seek support within a like-minded community of scholars and reform or change society for the better” (Burger, 2004: 374). In this study, I wanted to derive insights into communication from the subjects’ or readers’ perspective and describe their reality in terms of meanings they attach to their communication experiences. I based the research process on inductive reasoning to understand patterns of observation and I also used multiple sources of knowledge (epistemology), for example, readers’ values, experiences and culture to explore, interpret and understand a subjective world. In terms of methodology, I used qualitative themes and categories as methods to explore and describe meanings communicated by readers in

this particular context; and my research questions guided the types of observations I made in order to understand this particular communication phenomenon.

With an understanding of the above factors, I sought to investigate the role played by the *Daily Sun* within a specific group in the new South Africa, aware that the subjects, the context, the culture and the meanings interrelating in this communication phenomenon could be “thematically and holistically” (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 9) analysed by means of qualitative methods. My field notes and transcripts of interviews were not analysed in a quantitative way because they involved the opinions, feelings, values and perceptions of real people in real situations. I was collecting ‘stories’ rather than statistics or ‘hard’ data and they required the more qualitative approach of exploration, description and interpretation. However, although this research is qualitative, I did initially make use of independent quantitative research done by organisations like *Futurefact* and *Kuper Research* to establish the readership demographic and the size of this audience, and to develop a general sense of the newspaper’s commercial impact on the South African media landscape. Information thus gained served as “a springboard for further investigation and analysis” (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 9).

4.5 Research design and data collection

In this section, I identify my research design – how I went about my investigation – and describe the methods used to collect and collate the data for the successful completion of this study. My objective was to collect information to provide concrete descriptions of the

impact of the *Daily Sun* and then to analyse this data in relation to the key theoretical topics identified in Chapter 3. After summarising the procedure adopted for this particular study, I will elaborate on certain key research methods: participant observation, interview schedules and focus groups. The following are the research tools I used within my research design and methodology:

- **Journal as field notes:** From the start of this project, I kept a journal of all my activities as a record of the research process. I jotted down my thoughts, ideas and actions as well as comments and quotes from people I engaged with on the study. I also made notes of my encounters with the *Daily Sun* readers in order to gain a better understanding of their context.
- **Literature review:** Once I established the specific issues I wanted to investigate regarding the *Daily Sun*, I accessed information, readings, theories and other resources on the relevant topics. This was to strengthen the theoretical foundations for the study and to build a framework around which I constructed my argument.
- **Pilot study:** In early 2005 I conducted a ‘pretest’ or pilot study in Pietermaritzburg which comprised interviews with people to explore the readership, perceptions of the tabloid and to assess the validity of such a study. In July 2005, I conducted a pilot study – individual interviews and an informal discussion or focus group with *Daily Sun* readers – in Johannesburg. I did not have a tape recorder then but recorded interviews verbatim in writing. In my study I make use of some of this initially-collected data and distinguish between this data, collected in the ‘pretest’ and ‘pilot’, from the data collected under more formal conditions and using stricter methods.

- **Sampling:** The population for this study included readers of the *Daily Sun* newspaper. The average daily sales figure is around 450,000 copies and the estimated daily readership is around a million. It was not within the realm of possibility for this study to select a truly valid and reliable sample via systematic sampling. However, as is the case with most qualitative communication and cultural studies projects, a sample selection was made based on the nature and limitations of the particular investigation. I initially used random sampling to ‘test the water’ in Pietermaritzburg and then again in Johannesburg (about 100 people in total). Once I had collated the data of the pilot study and gained a sense of the core issues of my investigation I used purposive sampling where respondents were identified as readers of the *Daily Sun*. I then used these selected readers as ‘desirable participants’ for my in-depth interviews (about 40 people) and focus group (10 people).

Although the sample numbers were extremely small in proportion to the population, the quality of the responses did contribute to the validity and credibility of the findings in terms of “making broader inferences” (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 43). The possibility of sample error was outweighed by the resultant “intensive insights” which are more “illustrative” than “representative” of the social and cultural processes involved in the study (*ibid.*).

- **Interviews:** Henning *et al.* (2004) see the interview as a discursive event and as a site for knowledge making. Throughout this study, I utilised “conversational engagement” (*ibid.*, 54) with all concerned – publisher, media workers and the readers. These included individual, face-to-face interviews – both explorative and in-

depth – and group interviews. The one-on-one interviews conducted with *Daily Sun* readers allowed them the freedom to express themselves without group constraints. For me, the researcher, they also offered an opportunity to witness reactions and facial expressions and thereby record the responses more effectively. For the pilot study I used conventional ‘standardised’ semi-structured interviews which involved a basic set of questions [see Appendix 1] to identify why the interviewees read the *Daily Sun*, how often and what they liked and disliked about it. Because I wanted to explore further certain issues, opinions and behaviour that emerged from the initial ‘pilot’ study, an adapted set of questions was used in the in-depth interviews [see Appendix 2], to focus on issues that had emerged from the ‘pilot’ responses and from my own theoretical interest. The focus group constituted a “discursive constructionist interview” (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 54), based on the same questionnaire [see Appendix 2], but where individuals were allowed to give meaningful and purposeful expression to their experiences and views.

- **Analysis of data** was carried out at various stages of the research process. I started with an exploration of the newspaper content – as a form of data analysis – to ascertain the scope and purpose, and to get a sense of the content in terms of the publisher’s goals, ‘what the reader wants’, what the critics hate and what the readers might get from it. This was, however, not a full content analysis – that would constitute an entire study of its own – but rather an exercise in exploring what types of stories would engage readers most. I collated and categorized content and then, after interviews and discussions with readers, I coded and matched responses according to the categorized content items.

The interview sessions, the informal discussion group and the focus group were followed by thorough examination of the data recorded and each time I was able to cluster, categorise and code information in a way that would advance the research process. I reformulated the original questionnaire at each stage based on common themes identified in responses collected to improve the data quality. I used a content and discourse analysis approach to “working the data” obtained from the interview questionnaires and the transcription of the focus group (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 104). I “reduced, condensed and grouped” the data using the “open coding” strategy whereby I identified and labelled certain words, phrases or expressions as units of meaning – or codes – based on my own interpretation of them in relation to my theoretical data. This may seem rather subjective but nevertheless it is descriptive and interpretive and part of the “inductive meaning-making process” (*ibid.*, 105). I then grouped related codes into categories which led to exposing certain themes that came out of the data. Through this “interpretation of content” the themes were related to the context of the study and helped me to see ‘the whole’ when discussing the broader issues (*ibid.*, 106).

4.5.1 Participant observation

According to Pitout (in Fourie, 2001: 274), participant observation requires that the researcher becomes part of a group for a time and observes the activities of that group to explore attitudes and experiences and this enables the researcher to obtain first-hand information about the topic being observed. Throughout this study, I use observation of ‘the lived experience’, both at a taxi rank and in a hospital outpatient area, to see how readers engage with the *Daily Sun*. Based on the view that observation, as ‘semi-

immersion' in a media event, is vital to this type of study I used it to collect descriptive and interpretive data. I observed readers unobtrusively from a distance and while I spoke to them. I tried, in all my dealings with the participants to be as reserved and unbiased as possible, encouraging free expression rather than influencing responses in a particular direction. Observation of 'the lived experience' gives the researcher the opportunity to collect different types of data, from numerical, to explorative, descriptive and interpretive. Ideally, for this ethnographic research, one would need to go into the township homes and observe the readers' engagement with, and use of, the *Daily Sun*. However, due to time and accessibility constraints, hospital outpatient areas proved satisfactory, useful sites of consumption for this research. I managed to observe workers and outpatients at the Johannesburg General Hospital for a week. People accepted my presence, welcomed my questions and were quite open with me in discussions. In the formal focus group, I spent about four hours with participants observing their reactions and interactions as well as facilitating and engaging in discussions.

4.5.2 The interview question schedule

I used this research method in the individual interviews (interviewer-completed with verbatim notes), the informal discussion group interview (self-administered by a group of hospital workers and facilitated by me) and the formal focus group (self-administered by a group of Soweto residents and supervised and facilitated by me). It served to capture the respondents' opinions, ideas and beliefs and these formed the basis for the findings. Throughout, I used informal, empathetic, open-ended questioning techniques to encourage

participation and “interactive dialogue” (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 65). [See Appendix 1 and 2 for the interview question schedules.]

For the ‘pilot’ study I used of a *semi-structured interview schedule* to interview the respondents both individually and in the informal discussion or focus group to elicit readers’ responses, attitudes and feelings regarding the *Daily Sun* content. For the second round or actual study, I used a reworked version of the initial *semi-structured interview schedule* for both the individual in-depth interviews and the formal focus group with readers regarding their experience of the *Daily Sun* newspaper. These interview schedules consisted of three sets of questions, each aimed at exploring (a) the readers’ initial terms of engagement with the *Daily Sun*, (b) readers’ responses to different aspects of the newspaper and (c) taking issues further in a way that would help assess the extent of the *Daily Sun*’s impact on the respondents’ social and working lives. Open-ended questions were used to get spontaneous information about readers’ attitudes, beliefs etc., in order to get a sense of the respondents’ lived experience or reality. By using ‘open response questions’ I was hoping that respondents would be able to articulate their own answers in their own words without feeling restricted. This, together with informal questioning techniques, offered the freedom to elaborate and rephrase questions, and resulted in responses that gave more insights into readers’ views and experiences (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 66).

Some would say that data elicited by interview may be problematic in that the interview process gives rise to an “interaction that cannot be completely neutral” because the

participants themselves contribute to the “subtext of the context” (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 54). For example, my role as researcher – a white, middle aged, female – could be seen in stark contrast to the young, black, male, unemployed interviewees. My participation, in prompting and encouraging interaction, in discussions could be construed as influencing the respondents. However, I see my role in the interviews rather as facilitator, “conduit” or “co-constructor” of meaning (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 57).

4.5.3 The focus group

Focus group discussions form an important element of the qualitative method used by communication and media researchers. They involve the systematic questioning of a number of participants simultaneously in informal and formal settings. According to Deacon, we seek information by asking questions and draw conclusions based on “what people say and do in other contexts for other reasons” (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 62) – circumstantial evidence. We also ask people questions directly about their activities and their views and “no question is asked in a social vacuum” (*ibid.*). Focus groups usually involve a group of subjects in discussion on a specific topic in the presence of a facilitator. The purpose of this research strategy – the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights – is to observe subjects in interaction in order to obtain information that could contribute to a better understanding of participants’ opinions, attitudes and behaviour regarding the topic under discussion. According to Henning *et al.* (2004: 52) “informal intersubjectivity” is established when the researcher “identifies” with the respondents’ experiences and this was achieved in this study through the informal, discursive nature of my discussions with the focus group.

The focus group method was used to investigate a reader-group's attitudes, meanings and responses to a media phenomenon (the tabloid). Usually focus group data reflects shared and negotiated ideas while one-on-one interviews elicit the individual's opinions. I used, firstly, an informal focus or discussion group (in my pilot study) and then a more formal focus group to discuss and explore more in-depth issues that emerged from the previous interviews, and they proved extremely fruitful. The first, informal, group comprised five workers at the hospital as they were available in one place at one time and this facilitated my capturing of data. The formal focus group of 10 readers was set up in the offices of an independent consultancy that helped me identify and select people (black, low-income group) from Soweto and allowed me to use their office for the meeting. The more formal focus group interview constituted an in depth exploration of issues to uncover readers' feelings, discover their ideas and explore their experience, hence the responses constituted verbal descriptions, qualitative data.

Both informal and formal focus groups could be considered "researcher-constituted" (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 67) because I brought them together based on their being readers of the *Daily Sun*. They served to provide me with a strategy for trying to understand the readers' attitudes and behaviour and for discovering the participants' meaning and ways of understanding the phenomenon of the *Daily Sun*. I was also given the opportunity to observe how the readers make sense of the *Daily Sun* content through their conversations with each other. The group context also proved conducive to more honest and spontaneous expressions of feelings and the interactions with participants produced

valuable data. My role was to guide the discussions, raise particular questions, clarify others, and encourage interaction through ‘naturalistic’ conversations about their everyday lives. My style was empathetic and cooperative in that I assured them of the “value of their contribution” (*ibid.*, 289) and thus tried to build rapport. Once this was achieved they began to feel free to express opinions and feelings on issues related to the broader social context and I was able to probe and “generate talk [in] guided conversation [and] open-ended dialogue” (*ibid.*, 303) that explored specific issues, like xenophobia, in more depth. The transcript of the formal focus group interview attests to that. This research method helped to explore how these readers appropriate the messages within the *Daily Sun* in “their natural surrounding as part of the interpretive communities to which they belong” (Fourie, 2001: 265).

I arranged to conduct the formal focus group at the offices of an independent consultancy in central Johannesburg. A group of 10 readers – five males and five females, aged between 23 and 60 years – purposively selected at a taxi rank in Soweto, were brought to the venue by taxi. These arrangements contributed greatly to the effective running of the focus group with conditions conducive to obtaining valuable in-depth information.

I welcomed participants with refreshments, general introductions and nametags, adopting a friendly approach that would put them at ease before proceeding. I then gave participants the consent forms to read and sign, clarifying the implications thereof. I also explained the importance of the tape recorder and how to use it to get a good recording (it was a manual recorder and I had to move around to get people to speak into it). I handed

out the interview schedules and explained the procedure for proceedings: I would go through the entire questionnaire with them question by question. Participants were asked to first write down their individual responses on the schedule (so that I would have a written, as well as taped, record) and then we would have a discussion around their responses before moving to the next question. My aim was to give respondents the opportunity to give me verbal descriptions that would express, clarify and question ideas as well as uncover feelings, and discover new detailed information. By writing down their individual answers first, participants were able to give their own responses without being influenced by what others said and also I would have a recorded response from each participant even though he or she may not have had a chance to verbalise it in conversation.

After a slow, tentative start, the discussions became insightful, interesting and sometimes very animated, revealing and exploring readers' opinions, feelings and behaviour. After nearly four hours, the outcome was an abundant stock of useful, descriptive ideas and viewpoints. Although the readers' responses, as data, are anecdotal and only circumstantial evidence, analysing and interpreting them would further the research process towards effectively clarifying and answering questions related to the role the *Daily Sun* is playing in their lives.

4.6 Data analysis and interpretive coherence

As with most communication research adopting a social-constructionist approach, I use analysis of everyday conversations (or 'discourse') to draw conclusions that will help

answer my research question. Analysing data involves bringing order to the data, organising patterns and identifying relationships. Interpretation of data refers to the process of attaching meaning and significance to what emerges from the analysis, leading to explanations and linkages between reality and theory. According to Henning *et al.*, 2004: 52) the aim of interview data is to give the researcher a sense of the respondents' "subjective reality". This data regarding the readers' experiences, when analysed, can be generalised to a larger group.

I transcribed the focus group tapes from verbal to type-written data and used the "open coding" strategy (*ibid.*, 52) to analyse this new text to capture the essence of the responses (as recorded qualitative data), and to identify common themes and ideas that could be categorised and linked to the core issues and theory that underpin this investigation. Analysis of the words, phrases and comments (verbatim quotations) from the focus group transcript and the respondents' written responses on the questionnaire sheet constituted my data analysis – a form of content and discourse analysis. I examined the data to see what emerges in terms of whether the readers' responses and experiences confirm or question assumptions made in this study, and to ascertain whether they answer the questions initially posed. According to Henning *et al.* (2004: 107), this is the stage of the research process when the raw data gets "rationalised" taking the "messy reality" of everyday life into the "domain of inquiry" by coding and categorising it into "thematic organisation" (*ibid.*) which is written up as text utilising the themes as the basis for argumentation and discussion. The points that emerge from this process constitute the

findings that are assessed in terms of the extent to which they answer the initial questions posed.

It becomes clear from this that the themes ‘ground’ the arguments and this ‘grounded theory’ tool is vital to the qualitative research process. Grounded theory methods consist of “strategies for focusing and expediting qualitative data collection and analysis” and they provide a “set of inductive steps that lead the researcher from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding of them” (*ibid.*, 109). Constructivists do not pretend to ‘discover’ data, they account for what the data ‘says’ by using the “worked data as evidence” (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 115) to build an argument from the ‘ground’ up to a more abstract level. This matches the approach I adopted.

Of special note: All my documents that constitute proof of the research done (the completed questionnaires, the signed consent forms, the data analysis and the reports on the three stages of the study, plus the tapes and photographs) have been secured with the Department of Media and Cultural Studies at UKZN, Pietermaritzburg. The analysis reports of the data, particularly the transcription of the focus group (over 100 pages), are large documents and, had they been included here, would have resulted in a far too bulky thesis. These documents are however available for perusal.

4.7 Research ethics

I obtained consent from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to pursue my research and completed the ethics clearance form to declare that my method did not violate the rights

of my participants. In terms of the ethical considerations, I obtained the written consent of all participants, recorded our conversations and took copious notes and photographs (in the focus group). I also gave participants the necessary information about the study and assured them that their privacy would be protected. This is a typical procedure for data collection in qualitative research and serves to show respect for the individuals involved [see Informed Consent Form in Appendix 3].

4.8 Limitations of the research

In such a wide, sometimes controversial, and changing field, this study cannot do justice to all the aspects of the topic and the issues arising from the findings. According to Mouton (2001: 169), “most discursive practices are context-dependent”, therefore, one cannot generalise the findings of this study to other broader studies, for example, to tabloids in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, in order to produce data that is totally valid and reliable, the cost of conducting a research study of this kind would be extremely high. I have tried to utilise the necessary qualitative methodology tools in such a way that the data and findings constitute a sound descriptive and interpretive investigation and, as such, further our understanding of the role played by the tabloid media in South Africa.

Chapter 5

Research findings: data analysis and discussion

5.1 Introduction

I divided my empirical research into three stages: a pilot study involving interviews in Pietermaritzburg and Johannesburg between April and July, 2005, including an informal discussion group in Johannesburg; in-depth interviews in Johannesburg in July 2006; and a focus group in Johannesburg in July 2006. The pilot study yielded encouraging responses and served as an impetus to take the project further. I then restructured the interview schedule to enhance the focus of the questions in order to obtain ‘thick’ descriptive responses, and proceeded to conduct more detailed in-depth interviews and a focus group. Each stage of the process delivered useful data that helped me, as researcher, progressively to focus my inquiry and effectively to relate the resultant findings to the general theoretical issues raised within the study. Each stage also articulated well with the others, in that I learnt from each experience and made adjustments to the subsequent interviews and encounters I had with the readers.

I wish to point out that in analysing and discussing the data I use the same format for the three stages of the research and I discuss each stage separately. Although it may appear unnecessarily repetitive, I do so to emphasise the progression of the research process and the increasing depth of the data acquired from pilot to focus group stage.

5.2 Pilot study

The pilot study consisted of interviews undertaken to establish why people read the *Daily Sun* and to gauge the perceptions of readers. These face-to-face individual interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire which included an informal ‘quantitative’ assessment of readership and content preferences. The more ‘qualitative’ questions (7a, 7b and 8) focused on how readers perceive the *Daily Sun* and its contents and how it impacted on their lives [see Appendix 1].

The first explorative ‘pretest’ or pilot study took place in Pietermaritzburg and involved 14 respondents. I interviewed them randomly at the central city Freedom Square taxi rank in the early morning and the afternoon. However, because people were rushing to and from work, there was not enough time to explore the issues that most interested me in any detail. For the second part of the pilot study, I chose the waiting area in the Out-patients Department of Johannesburg General Hospital, Jubilee Road, Parktown, where people had more time to engage in the interview. This stage involved interviews with more than 40 respondents, and an informal discussion with five female respondents who were on the staff of the hospital – four female clerks and a young intern counsellor.

5.2.1 Analysis of the pilot study data

I collated and analysed the data collected and, using an “open coding” method (Henning *et al.*, 2004), coded the responses into units of meaning (words and phrases) and then grouped or categorised these in order to construct themes that linked to issues within my inquiry. I wanted to analyse the data using the theoretical terms I had developed in order

to understand the media practices of the *Daily Sun* readers. My working theoretical assumption is that readers are active in their relationship to texts and my aim was to study what kinds of activities readers of the *Daily Sun* engaged in. What emerged from the coding process, was that the readers' engagement with the *Daily Sun* seemed to fall mainly into four but overlapping categories or types:

- readers regarded the *Daily Sun* as a source of information;
- readers engaged with the sensational or “tabloid” aspects of the *Daily Sun*;
- readers identified with the newspaper content and put it to use in their lives;
- readers linked the *Daily Sun* to specific kinds of social interaction generated by the content.

It is under these headings that I now discuss the data from the pilot study.

5.2.1.1 The *Daily Sun* as information

When asked why they like the *Daily Sun*, responses frequently showed that information was highly rated, as demonstrated in comments like: “News”; “It’s local news”; “Very informative”; “Tells me a lot”; “It helps to inform and tell the truth”.¹

When asked *why* they value its content, readers’ responses suggested three general themes:

- the range and veracity of information they are getting: “Because you get everything – features on sport, etc.”; “[There is] Information in it – without telling you the source – and observation and telling people where it’s at”; “Interesting. It

¹ Here, and for the remainder of the dissertation, all quotations are taken verbatim and my additions for clarity are in [square brackets].

doesn't speak lies". A 30 year-old single mother highlighted what she saw as the fearlessness with which "this newspaper doesn't hide what is happening".

- the local nature of the content: "It has more local news than Sowetan"; "It's topical, current, here and now"; "It's a pleasure to get news to know what is happening with people, family". At times responses suggested the complex nature of the 'local' as when one respondent commented that, "It's our culture and different cultures". While another suggested that the *Daily Sun* actually engaged with the needs and difficulties of local people, "It helps people so much, especially when they can't bury their loved ones they [*Daily Sun* workers] are there to help."
- the fact that they can learn from it: " [It tells you] How the community work – the parcel scheme – for Soweto."; "It helps me a lot"; "I gain a lot – it gives me vocabulary"; "Some things I don't know come from different stories and information to help me so I'm learning from it and sharing problems". When asked how the *Daily Sun* affects their lives, respondents included the following replies: "It makes me see life in a different way – it warns you about places"; "Helps me on how to solve my problems"; "It repairs my life. You want to read it every day".

Taken together these groups of comments suggest that readers of the *Daily Sun*, who live mainly in townships, are using the newspaper content to get information particularly of a local nature, to build their knowledge about their community. This suggests that it influences their responses and capabilities which in turn could affect their subjectivity and identity. Interestingly, these responses suggest that the *Daily Sun* is being used in the same way as the mainstream press. Jenson (1992 in Tester, 1994: 99) argues that the

media serve *informational* and *legitimizing* uses when readers are using factual knowledge relevant to their lives to help shape their personal and social identity. More significantly, it seemed to me that, if Sen (1999) is correct when he argues that people need the freedom to access information in order for them to develop, the *Daily Sun* is serving this function too. Once they have the opportunity to increase their knowledge, their ‘capabilities’ as individuals and citizens will be enhanced or expanded to allow a sense of identity and agency.

5.2.1.2 The *Daily Sun* and tabloid sensationalism

A common criticism of sensationalism in the tabloids is that it reduces news to mere spectacle and influences readers negatively in that they become “passive and conformist, with stunted powers of imagination”(Tester, 1994: 60). Some view tabloid sensationalism as “debasement” (Sparks, 1988: 211) the level of political and social debate, while others feel that this type of journalism detracts from the working of rational thought processes (Habermas, 1989). However, my pilot study suggested something more complex. The readers’ perceptions of *sensationalism* in the *Daily Sun* were therefore noteworthy: “I don’t like those stories, but that is how it is” was the response of one taxi driver. Interestingly, the menial labourer, the unemployed single mother and the taxi conductor all valued the sensational content more as moral lessons rather than just news. This preliminary data suggests that readers regard the ‘sleazy’ items not as sensationalism but as useful additions to the educational or advice function of the newspaper. Comments included, “I learn from those bad things”; and “I tell my children not to do that”. It would seem that when confronted with “bizarre content” (Tester, 1994: 71), readers begin to

question events and issues – and their usefulness. One respondent added that she was “proud because things are happening – good or bad – that must be exposed”. It would seem that some readers *choose* to see the sensational content and to extract meaning for themselves, rather than to perversely enjoy sensationalism, wish for more palatable material or dismiss it as nonsense. However, a couple of readers did question whether the sensational stories could possibly be true: “What makes someone investigate this trash?”; “They sound too good or awful to be true”. One possible explanation for this could be the notion of “sceptical reading competencies” (Fiske, 1992: 48).

My pilot responses suggested that genuine empathy was an important aspect of interpreting or experiencing the gory stories and images; the empathy factor appears to serve a useful purpose for the readers in that the *Daily Sun* could be contributing to creating “an imagined community” (Tester, 1994: 93) where readers identify with those being represented. Some South Africans might react with an ‘ag, shame’ response, but these participants remarked, “It puts questions in your mind when society behaves this way”; “Very sad when I see those people”; “The rapes, killings, make me shocked and upset”.

5.2.1.3 Engaging with the *Daily Sun*

The responses of my pilot study suggested that the readers’ relationship to the newspaper pointed to a perceived need for more than just information as in news. The different kinds of responses, and the modality thereof, indicated a wide range of engagements with the newspaper, including a more personal and emotional involvement. Comments included,

“*Daily Sun* tells what’s happening”; “*Daily Sun* tells it as it is”; “*Daily Sun* helps understand”; “It helps people”; “It’s the medicine of life”; “It motivates me”; “If you go to *Daily Sun* they follow up. The police don’t follow up”; “It tells how people are living and how the government treats us”. These responses are indications that readers are inferring truth and educational and therapeutic aspects to their engagement. Within these responses are hints of an ‘evangelical’ aspect to the content in terms of educating and motivating readers to seek direct benefit for their lives. These preliminary findings seem to support Kuper’s (2002) view but from the other side, the readers’ perspective: “It helps me cope with my job”; “Tells how the community works”. The *Daily Sun* appears to be providing opportunities for readers to learn from its content and, in so doing, they can progress towards lives they can value. It helps to give them tools for personal empowerment – even if it is in as simple a way as teaching readers how to open a bank account and start saving money.

When asked why they *tell others* to read the *Daily Sun*, readers’ comments included:

- “It changed our life. We can know how to manage our life now”;
- “I learnt a lot. It can help you”;
- “It tells about things like water cuts”;
- “It gives info and exposes the police and others’ actions or what they’re not doing”;
- “It motivates me when I’m feeling down. I don’t want to be like those people doing bad things”;
- “It gives what is happening around our country”.

Here there is evidence of the importance of different modalities in the responses reflecting readers' different personal needs or uses of the *Daily Sun*'s content from very personal to social and cultural matters. By sharing experiences based on the *Daily Sun* content, readers could be constructing a new identity – a hybrid of confirming the traditional while accepting a new sense of “involvement, enlightenment, [or] being educated [and] modern – an identity-in-process” (Dahlgren, 1995: 122).

The responses to why people read the *Speak Up* section (letters to the *Daily Sun* that allow readers' voices to be heard) were particularly interesting. One respondent in the discussion group, a hospital intern-counsellor, remarked, “The truth hurts, but it helps. It helps to inform, and putting it out it reveals the truth. It helps others to open up; helps me to cope with my job as a counsellor”. Other responses included,

- “People say how they do this right or wrong, how it happened etc.”;
- “To hear people open up. It heals”;
- “They give us advices”; “It helps when you have a problem. These stories help you – advises one to be friendship to other one”;
- “To hear views and opinions, suggestions”;
- “I learn about how people treat others. When I read some stories I know I can do good things – finding out things from that columns like craft, doing music – wakes people up”;
- “[To read] What are the problems of others. And I'll do the same. Solutions are needed – helping the community”;
- “Views on STDs and young girls' problems – I have a daughter”.

These responses indicate that the readers are using the newspaper content to make sense of their environment and to address the challenges that present themselves. There are elements of self-development that could be impacting on their identity and subjectivity. Readers are showing that they are people who value information and who are beginning to feel that they, as subjects, can become more proactive in their lives and their community, reflecting the notion that news empowers and enables. The responses also point to the idea that, when engaging with the media, readers draw on a “perceived existential utility” (Sparks, 2000: 27) and approach all kinds of news wanting to find and apply information that will be relevant and useful in their daily lives.

A very interesting issue to emerge from readers’ responses was the *surveillance* role played by the *Daily Sun*. The *Daily Sun* has a ‘tip off’ line that the public can phone to report any knowledge of criminal activity in their community. The reporters then follow up on these leads and report on them. Regarding this *surveillance* aspect, there is much evidence to suggest that readers trust the *Daily Sun* to report on and react against criminal elements in the community. These township residents value this ‘watchdog’ role (as in reporting on irregularities in society that could disturb the social order). Readers’ comments included,

- “Criminals are caught easily. The *Daily Sun* always follows the tips from the community if that criminal has been seen somewhere then they will go and catch that criminal with the police”;
- “It helps them about who to contact during problems like rape”;

- “Amazed by the way the *Daily Sun* addresses issues nobody else has. It gets things done that other newspapers, even the police, can’t do, or battle with”;
- “The most important thing is that *Daily Sun* helps people like when somebody is dead, missing, they help”.

These comments suggest a positive role that the *Daily Sun* is playing in the lives of its readers and give the impression that a sense of community is emerging through interaction with the newspaper.

5.2.1.4 The *Daily Sun* and social interaction

Responses in the pilot study showed that readers do talk about what they read. Respondents’ comments included, “We ask questions about the events reported”; “We share the shocking stories”. Implied in responses like this is evidence of the newspaper’s role in constructing a mediated community where readers are sharing their concerns through talk and possible action. In the informal discussion group the hospital workers’ comments included, “We talk to be updated about things – how the people are living and how the government treats us”; “We want to know how to manage our life now... solutions for helping the community”. Taking an overview of the responses, one detects elements of civic and social action emerging within the readers’ context of engagement with the *Daily Sun*: “We want to do something about those things like crime, corrupt policy etc.” This suggested to me that the newspaper might well be playing a role in the creation of a type of alternative public sphere fitting well with McKee’s useful definition in Chapter 3.2.1. My pilot study suggested that readers are interacting through their engagement with the *Daily Sun*.

5.2.2 Conclusions drawn from pilot study

The pilot study suggested that the role of tabloids such as the *Daily Sun* was more complex or enabling than the rather schematic debates over tabloid sensationalism suggest. Responses provided evidence of the role of the *Daily Sun*, which included informing, educating and ‘social skilling’ (or socialization) and surveillance, worthy of further investigation, and in the next stage I take steps in that direction. I was intrigued by the readers’ comments regarding the actions of the *Daily Sun* in the community. The newspaper, apparently, reacts to calls for help in incidents of crime and social problems, even better and faster than the police or social services do and, by facilitating the setting up of community forums, the *Daily Sun* serves to ‘uplift’ and ‘empower’ people within their environment. This could be evidence of the ‘social responsibility’ and ‘development’ aspects of media functioning, so it would seem that to its own constituency, the *Daily Sun*’s functioning is indeed more ‘normative’ than mere sensationalism and entertainment. Overall, the pilot study showed a more complex reaction to the *Daily Sun* and its content than the common view that it merely peddles trash to undiscerning, passive readers. It also served to show how responses indicated to me that further study was worthwhile and necessary, especially in terms of whether one can discern a kind of social response in readers’ activities.

This exercise led to the planning of the in-depth interviews and a focus group to be conducted under stricter conditions and, with the use of consent forms and a tape recorder, it would become more formal in nature to comply with the academic requirements of the university and to ensure reliability and validity of the data. I made

changes to the questionnaire to examine more deeply the issues that the pilot study readers had raised in their responses.

5.3 Research project: The in-depth interviews

After the pilot study, I had more questions that needed answers. I reworked the questionnaire in order to capture more descriptive and qualitative data. I wanted to ‘tap into’ and probe certain issues such as how readers experience their ‘talk’ about the *Daily Sun* – is it just social chat between friends or has it become more of a ‘community’ or civic act, whereby participants are exploring possible actions and resolutions? Do readers see themselves as ‘a group’ and what does this comprise? Is it a social or a civic group, and what distinguishes the two? I also wanted to relate the information I received to understanding the popularity of a new kind of journalism, issues of a developing group identity and ultimately a new kind of public sphere in the South African context.

The in-depth interviews were conducted at the Johannesburg General Hospital in July 2006 with eight individuals, ranging in age from 18 to 65 years both male and female. Although I concede that this is an extremely small sample I believe that, when combined with the earlier and later responses, it does serve to provide useful descriptive data. The questions posed in the new interview schedule (See Appendix 2) were more open-ended and conducive to dialogue and subjective expression than those in the pilot study. I developed the questionnaire to reflect on how readers ‘read’ the *Daily Sun* – through the whole process of reader engagement with the newspaper – from the initial reading experience to the reactions to the content, to the interaction with others on content issues

through to the impact the newspaper has on their lives within their community. Consequently, there were now five sections to the reworked interview schedule:

1. *Initial engagement with the Daily Sun*

In this section, I asked questions regarding where, when and how often they read the *Daily Sun*, as well as how many other people read or share their copy of the newspaper. This was to establish how they use this media product and whether they appeared to be developing a sustained interactive relationship with the *Daily Sun*.

2. *Exploration of readers' responses to different aspects of the newspaper*

Here, in order to probe reader preferences and uses, I showed interviewees copies of past issues of the *Daily Sun* as I asked them questions regarding what parts of the newspaper they found most useful or interesting, and which stories they remembered most. I also asked their opinion of specific front-page stories and the accompanying images to get their perceptions of the more sensational aspects of the newspaper. I focussed on the three types of stories that the pilot study had identified as being the most read and talked about ones. I explained what I meant by *crime*, *human-interest* and *community involvement* stories and asked readers' opinions of these different types of stories to ascertain what types of responses they elicit. Crime stories are self-explanatory. Human-interest stories, including personal motivational stories, usually feature people who are achieving success in some way, improving their lives, helping or training others, etc. The community involvement stories include elements of community 'self-help' and reports of how people are getting involved in groups, forums and committees to solve local problems and improve certain amenities, resources or facilities in the township community.

3. *Assessment of the role the newspaper plays in readers' everyday lives*

In this section, the purpose was to explore audience action and reaction, whether the content leads to any 'talk', what form that talk takes, and the extent to which it influences their attitudes and behaviour. To ascertain this I asked:

- whether readers ever discuss the stories they read and with whom and where they had these discussions;
- which were the most talked about topics and what kinds of discussions they triggered; and
- whether the discussions ever changed their views or actions.

4. *Assessing readers' 'agency'*

One of the more recent arguments concerning newspaper readership involves whether and how readers contribute to the realization of a public sphere. Here I wanted to examine and assess whether and to what extent the *Daily Sun* is contributing to an enhanced sense of 'agency' and what forms this agency might be taking. Are these readers, through engagement with the *Daily Sun*, developing a social identity that enhances their sense of responsibility, accountability and empowerment to act in their society? I asked:

- whether they ever questioned or criticised items;
- whether reading the *Daily Sun* had improved their understanding of their environment, their work and their home life;
- whether, and how, reading the *Daily Sun* had affected the way they relate to themselves and to the 'significant others' in their lives: their families, partners

and children; also their bosses and co-workers; the police; their community; and politicians;

- Whether reading the *Daily Sun* had changed their attitudes or behaviour;
- Whether they had noticed any change in other readers' attitudes or behaviour.

5. *Assessing the perceived social impact of the Daily Sun*

Continuing the theme of 'agency', this section of the interview schedule aimed to investigate the extent to which readers' enhanced agency is contributing to a sense of citizenship. Are they voluntarily and consciously beginning to think and behave in a particular way that could lead to their being able to use their new empowerment to effect change in their community? Here I asked more abstract questions regarding:

- How they think readers benefit from reading the *Daily Sun*;
- How they would describe the kind of people who read the *Daily Sun*;
- What they have learnt from reading the *Daily Sun*; and
- Whether they think the newspaper has changed their sense of who they are.

5.3.1 Analysis of in-depth interviews

I collated the responses firstly under the above questionnaire sections and then implemented the same 'open coding' strategy to analyse the responses and divide the data into the same categories and themes as with the pilot study interviews and discussion group. In doing so, I hoped, firstly, to elicit more detailed information than the data I had gathered from the pilot study and, secondly, that patterns or trends in reader responses would emerge. These would enable me to draw conclusions regarding the broader questions posed by this project, particularly, whether and to what extent readers of the

Daily Sun are beginning to exemplify a new emergent, subaltern or alternative public sphere. As stated, my working theoretical assumption is that readers are active in their relationship to the newspaper. My aim is to examine in what way this activity could perhaps lead to a higher level of engagement in which one can discern a kind of social or civic action that suggests their participation as citizens in an emergent subaltern public sphere. I was also hoping to further my exploration of certain theoretical issues: for example, if the audience is actively engaged in a process of constructing meaning from texts to help them cope better in their daily lives, how are they doing this? Moreover, if, in order to make sense of events in their environment, they engage in ‘talk’ with others, how and to what extent do they do this and come to a shared understanding and a shared identity? I hoped to use my data (readers’ responses and the issues, language and discourses revealed within them) to make connections and comparisons to what is actually being played out in the society that is developing (Allen, 1999; Nightingale and Ross, 2003; Taylor and Willis, 1999; Burton, 2005).

5.3.1.1 The *Daily Sun* as information

Here I aimed to assess why readers buy or read the *Daily Sun*. Kuper (2002: 11) argues that consumption of newspapers should provide information and “social skilling” that help to develop an active, participatory audience. Most respondents valued the ‘information’ aspect of the *Daily Sun*: “The paper got all the information around the world”; “Because it has snap shots – brief, precise news reports”; “It’s cheap and it’s got interesting news”; “My knowledge increased”. These responses would confirm the views of the pilot study respondents as well as the standard view that the function of the media

is to provide a wide range of information. The responses suggest that the *Daily Sun* in these circumstances is fulfilling normal functions of the press by giving readers “accessible, engaging information” which they can use to make sense of their world, especially one in the throes of the “instability” of transition (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000: 291). In addition, readers’ need for information or knowledge, and their information-seeking behaviour, has implications for their identity – these readers, as subjects, value being informed. Unlike traditionalists who use knowledge purely as fact, these readers view it as a pleasure: it is gratifying to know more. If this indicates that the usual critique of tabloids – as in ‘information is good, pictures are bad’ – does not always apply to the *Daily Sun*, then it instigates an argument for revising prescriptive norms in relation to the press. Normative theory needs to be expanded to include tabloids, allowing for the interaction of verbal, graphic and visual modes.

Other responses about readers’ perceptions and opinions of the content of the *Daily Sun* revealed useful descriptive data. The stories ‘most remembered’ were those from the front pages:

- “Lady burnt with acid by her husband”;
- “A woman beaten up by security police”;
- “Those two children who drowned in a dam”;
- “Jacob Zuma story” [at least three respondents agreed here];
- “Alarming report of cop deaths” [When police raided a house to apprehend drug dealers but were themselves all shot dead].

Once again, readers reported that although the stories were negative – about crime, violence, corruption – they “learn from them”. It would seem that the *Daily Sun* is working according to established principles of informing and the readers see that information role as crucial.

5.3.1.2 The *Daily Sun* and tabloid sensationalism

Contrary to what was expected, the responses to the questions regarding the sensational aspects of the *Daily Sun* do seem to suggest that readers, in fact, are using more ‘logical’, rather than merely emotional, means to interpret and assimilate content. The ‘shocking’ stories, although disliked, were again seen as relevant to their circumstances in the townships. Comments like, “I was told about it, and I thought, what if it’s me?”; “So hurting”; “I believe them”, show that readers are not dismissive, but rather indicate an empathetic attitude to those involved in the stories. Readers tended to adopt or take aspects of bizarre stories for themselves. One young woman maintained that the sensational stories “show us clearly the situation in South Africa”.

5.3.1.3 Engaging with the *Daily Sun*

This section was directed at trying to see how readers react to certain types of stories in the *Daily Sun*. The three types chosen for analysis were based on the results of the pilot study. The stories given as ‘most read’ and ‘most talked about’ by readers fell into one of these three categories. I wanted to explore what absorbed their focus in the *Daily Sun*, what aspects of their encounter or engagement with the *Daily Sun* were interesting or meaningful to them, and what uses they attributed to the tabloid in their everyday lives.

This would mean that readers' responses would go beyond merely recording what they read and talked about and begin to show how they actually grapple with issues that come out of their engagement with the *Daily Sun*. Readers were asked to comment on how they felt about the three categories of stories and their responses included:

Crime: One young woman commented, "There's a lot of crime in the country, we cannot defend ourselves". A couple of readers agreed that the articles were a reflection of what was actually happening in their community: "There's lawlessness, communities often take the law into their own hands". These responses pointed to a sense of wariness at the state of crime in the country. The consensus was that "foreigners" were causing many problems as implied by, "[I am] Suspicious of foreigners with nice cars and no jobs". However, one man proposed, "It doesn't help this country if we batter each other's cultures". Interestingly, the older man who identified the Jacob Zuma saga as a crime story maintained, "the Jacob Zuma story has to do with justice".

Human-interest: Having been shown examples of human-interest stories, respondents made comments like: "They advise us to do this and this"; "They are motivating stories". The older man expressed how touched and inspired he had been by a story about "a blind woman who is working three jobs [and] has got a degree in journalism". These comments indicate that readers are developing a sense of individual self-help and social skilling. Other responses point in other directions, such as, "It gives me inside government"; this could imply another type of social 'talk' and behaviour – more civic in nature. "Check how we live with foreigners, then let them in with control because they resort to crime" suggests that this man is perhaps looking for solutions.

Community involvement: Most of the comments given seemed to infer that the community needed to become involved in resolving the issues of crime, poverty and service delivery: “If people suffer then other people assist”; “*Daily Sun* is informing people and giving feedback of how the police helped about certain crimes”. These suggest a move towards developing a shared sense of community and identity.

With regard to ‘*talk*’ or discussing stories, readers all agreed they do discuss mainly the crime stories with co-workers, friends and family. Most readers felt their discussions were serious and constructive. One reader expressed a sense of hopelessness at regularly seeing negative news, “You feel hopeless. What can we do?”, while a number of others offered positive responses which included comments like, “we try to understand the causes of the problems”. These responses indicate that, through discourses generated by the *Daily Sun*, readers are positioning themselves as potential problem-solvers. This would influence their sense of engagement, their identity and their social actions and behaviour. How they are moving to become active participants, as citizens, making choices and decisions, and thereby “anchoring democracy in [their] lived experience” (Dahlgren, 1995: 4) supports the view that the act of talking can itself be a political act in that talk can contribute to political change (McKee, 2005: 193). By extension, this data supports the view that the *Daily Sun* is working as a newspaper should in terms of what it delivers for readers, as citizens.

Asked if the discussions ever *change views or lead to action* on the part of readers, most respondents felt they did indeed influence them. Comments included issues of a social

nature, “We become more aware of safety and security”; “What I hope is to take action but corruption is a problem. A change of government, but what are we voting for?”, but also indicated a sense of personal growth, “One guy wanted to take his life and I went to help him. We talked about news, chances in life and Lotto. It helped”. Once again, readers are showing signs of a changing subjectivity, becoming aware of their own possible participation in the larger community.

The topic of “foreigners” surfaced repeatedly: “Look at all these illegal people - you can trace the legals - but just letting in people and then see the crime rate goes up because of them”. The respondents expressed their dissatisfaction at how the government was dealing with crime and “refugees”: “We have no use of refugees”, was one emphatic response. On further questioning, participants identified “these people” and “refugees” as mainly Zimbabweans, Mozambiquans and Nigerians. One of the respondents was a Zimbabwean and confirmed that he and others are treated with suspicion at work and where he lives.

The questions designed to *assess the agency of Daily Sun readers* elicited interesting information. Asked about whether, and why, they criticise or question what they read, they responded with phrases like, “To analyse the facts”; “I compare *Daily Sun* and *Citizen* and they are not the same”; “News about other nations, and their conclusions, are exaggerated in ‘*Looking at Africa*’ [a section of the newspaper]”. Their words (linguistic markers) like ‘compare, analyse and conclusions’ give evidence of a readership trying to widen its knowledge base but not by passively accepting what they read.

Responses to how *their understanding of South Africa, their immediate environment, their work, home and family* has improved since reading the *Daily Sun* included:

- “The solutions promised not delivered. More inner city policing [is needed]”;
- “If government is corrupt you can’t report them”;
- “I understand foreigners”;
- “It helped improve my life”;
- “It opened my eyes”;
- “I’m from Limpopo. But I picture the Cape from [the *Daily Sun*] maps”;

Here is evidence of people wanting to expand their knowledge and their influence in their community. The contract worker who wanted to start his own business remarked how pleased he was about his new knowledge of “Information for registration for my own company”. He clearly wants to improve himself and his status in the community.

Regarding the *Daily Sun*’s impact *on their own lives*, readers’ responses included:

- “I want to live better, I’m saved by this paper, I’m not going to do bad stuff”;
- “I always tell my family crime doesn’t pay”;
- “Parents should be open. I talk to my mother [now] about anything”;
- “I phone my children to tell them to see the paper”;
- “Interpersonal relationships improved [with boss]”;
- “I get info on bond payments, agents etc.”;
- “I’m the only person who reads, so I tell them [the family] what the stories are about so they know more”;
- “A group at work talk about all things”.

These responses indicate perhaps that these readers are mobilizing as members of an emergent group forming its own identity with its own sense of values and trying to cope with the transition to democracy.

The questions to assess a perceived *social impact* on readers elicited responses such as:

- “They are getting well-informed – educating ourselves”;
- “I’ve learnt a confirmation of African beliefs and awareness of rural beliefs”;
- “I’m becoming more careful about the rate of crime and it’s helped me to be more informed”;
- “It restores my beliefs from European to African beliefs. Culture can change but natural beliefs are passed from generation to generation”.

These re-emphasised the issue of a unique hybridised identity – where the seeming contradiction between the traditional and the contemporary subject is blended. The responses also revealed a sense of newly acquired *agency*. Some respondents used words and phrases that connote an element of self-confidence like:

- “I used to... but now”;
- “I tell my children...my family...my friends...to...”;
- “I believe they [government and officials] need to improve”.

Readers appear to identify with the *Daily Sun*’s strategy to contribute to individual self-development. They can identify which articles do this; they read them and feel they learn both personal and social skills from them. Responses also suggest that these readers are trying to expand their horizons through active participation in their community. Through ‘talk’, democracy is beginning “at home and ...the neighbourly community” (Rosen,

1999: 65). This acknowledges the political potential within the private and the popular. Hence, it would appear that popular tabloids, like the *Daily Sun*, viewed by some as trashy forms of media, are able to offer us opportunities to hear “working-class voices speak” (McKee, 2005: 97). They can also present alternative perspectives that lend credence to the possibility that working-class, vulgar and sensationalist forms of discourse can be valued for being more “honest, open and informed of the realities of life than the restrained tone of ‘quality’ media” (*ibid.*, 98).

5.3.1.4 The *Daily Sun* and social interaction

Dahlgren (1995) and others have argued for the increasing centrality of the media as a public arena where the public can access societal dialogues: “As such, the media play an important part by providing this access, and it is relevant to talk about a mediated public sphere” (Dahlgren, 1995: 9). For this reason, I was trying to probe the *nature and kinds of reader activity* in relation to the *Daily Sun*. Self-improvement may not be the only benefit perceived by *Daily Sun* readers, so I needed to explore other potential benefits of reading this tabloid. I wanted to examine whether the readers’ ‘talk’ was leading to another kind of social activity with elements of participation in civic and community matters. I also hoped to explore in more detail whether this set of social activities could be contributing to a new subaltern or alternative public sphere.

Crime is a strong example of a much-discussed topic in various social settings in South Africa. Most of these respondents shared a deep awareness (which was attributed to their

reading of the newspaper) of the high rate of crime as well as the corruption and ineptitude in the police force. Negative comments regarding the *police* included:

- “They don’t care, they take their time when there’s a situation”;
- “They are also corrupt, you hear about people being arrested at the airport with cocaine, but never the sentence or follow up”;

One respondent did acknowledge that the police had improved: “They do important things. They used to not come when you inform them, now they come but they are dying”. This reference to dying applies to a then current story of police who, acting on a tip-off, went to a house of drug dealers to arrest them, but instead were all shot dead by the dealers who escaped. Other readers referred to an increase in stories about improved police action which could indicate a belief that the community’s actions have, in fact, influenced a change in police behaviour.

Asked about *politics*, all the respondents’ comments fell within two main types: “I know more”, indicating readers’ desire for information about government, politicians and local leaders; and “They [the government and/or officials] need to improve and use a system to improve crime”, indicating their awareness of shortcomings in the political system. These types of responses suggest a possible move towards a more informed electorate that could contribute to the public sphere and the notion that through access to information in the *Daily Sun* this group of people is experiencing a transformation not only in their identities as personal subjects but also as citizens in this new democracy.

An additional notable feature that emerged was the high standard of vocabulary used in the responses. Words like “current affairs”, “political”, “entrepreneurs”, “cultural”, “corruption”, “solutions”, in my view, suggested an improvement in the readers’ language use since the last round of interviews in 2005. These are interesting markers of an emerging consciousness. One explanation could be, particularly for those who are unemployed and at home, that exposure to a range of media is contributing to this improved vocabulary; but their ongoing reading of the *Daily Sun* suggests that it, too, is part of this. Could one then infer that the *Daily Sun* has played a role, since its inception, in terms of increased literacy, education and ‘social skilling’? In addition, the readers’ responses to the *Daily Sun* support the notion that people’s basic freedom will be enhanced if they are provided with access to information and the “enabling conditions” offered by institutions like the media (Sen, 1999: 4).

5.3.2 Conclusions drawn from in-depth interviews

The readers’ responses support the argument that through engagement with institutions like the media, citizens’ cultural rights can be realized – rights to information, experience, and participation. Bearing in mind that the *Daily Sun* targets previously marginalised, poor, working class people in an emerging democracy, we may note what Dahlgren (1995: 312) said (in another context): in evolving notions of citizenship, the popular media can contribute to “opening up the boundaries” between the private and the public domains “to mobilize engagement, even in non-traditional ways”. The *Daily Sun* appears to be acting as a resource for informed citizenship in ways not considered traditional nor

used in the mainstream press. It speaks to readers' feelings, tapping into their own conceptual rationality, to stimulate political awareness and debate.

Under the four categories or themes, the responses, in my view, fruitfully reflected a move towards fulfilling the objectives of the *Daily Sun*'s publisher and counteracted the views of critics in media circles. Overall, the responses suggest that the *Daily Sun* is giving readers more than 'just what they want'; instead, as a popular media product which forms a part of the social system in this country, it is fulfilling the role of circulating information and ideas through education and entertainment (Fourie, 2001: 265). From the evidence of readers' experiences, it has become clear that reading this tabloid requires a process of cognition to make sense of the text, "from emotional, to analysis and reflection" (Burton, 2005: 88). Readers are not merely skimming the surface and looking at the pictures, they are consciously examining the content, and thinking and talking about the issues raised. In this way readers' responses and reactions are seen "as taking charge of the production of meaning" (*ibid.*, 88). This would also suggest that in relation to the everyday problems they face, readers' responses indicate that they are trying to make sense of the chaos around them in a manner that relates to their reality and makes an impact on their lives. Interestingly, this coincides with the *Daily Sun*'s publisher's objectives.

5.4 Research project: The focus group

With these points in mind, I proceeded to the next stage of the research process, the focus group. Here I hoped to uncover and explore, in more depth and with more focus, the

issues involved. In order to take these issues further, I wanted to investigate to what extent the tabloid, the *Daily Sun*, is contributing to

1. Changing notions of the role of the media. I felt I could achieve this by asking questions such as, To what extent can we tell that the *Daily Sun* is a newspaper that talks openly about issues that mainstream newspapers don't deal with, and what evidence is there to show that sensational aspects of the *Daily Sun* are important to its readers? This exploration I situated within the theory relating to the *nature of the press, normative theory and the discourse of tabloids*. I also wanted to examine how and to what extent readers' engagement with the *Daily Sun* affected the next two aspects of their lives:

2. Readers' sense of freedom in the new South Africa (as in a transformation of the citizenry), and the development or creation of a new culture in the new South Africa. I wanted to interact with readers to ascertain how they, as subjects, were actually experiencing a sense of freedom, if at all, and whether this contributed to their sense of agency in the new democracy. I hoped to achieve this by looking at what we can gather from the evidence to suggest that readers feel they *can* participate. Issues arising here would fit into the *culture and development* aspect of my study.

3. The emergence of an alternative public sphere in South Africa. I aimed to explore any experience that readers might have of belonging to a group that they believe could influence decision-making in their society. To achieve this, I could ask questions like, Is there evidence of how the *Daily Sun* generates conversations, or discourse, and how does this discourse strive towards being a democratic discourse or association? Is this interaction an ideal rather than a reality in this context? Is there evidence of ways in

which this points to a ‘counter public’, and how is it working to build or create something close to an alternative or ‘subaltern’ public sphere? This part of my investigation relates to the theory regarding *reconfiguring the public sphere*.

In examining the data from the focus group, I was looking for the evidence that would help to answer the above-mentioned questions. I transcribed the focus group tapes from verbal to type-written data and again used the ‘open coding’ strategy to analyse this new text in order to capture the essence of the responses, as recorded data, and to identify the common themes that could relate to the core issues and theory underpinning the investigation. Each theme was coded in a different colour [the coded analysis of the transcription is available for perusal].

5.4.1 Analysis of the focus group data

In order to get informed opinions from regular readers of the *Daily Sun* who lived in a township, my focus group comprised 10 black people from Soweto, ranging in age from early-twenties to late-fifties. The focus group included:

- a young traditional healer or sangoma, Patricia, an intense woman who takes her work very seriously and wants to be recognised as a legitimate healer. She obtained a certificate to practise and repeatedly made distinctions between traditional healing and witchcraft;
- a young maths teacher, Phillip – quiet but perceptive, with his comments showing a quick sense of humour;

- a builder, George, who was ‘self-employed’ doing jobs as they cropped up, and had aspirations of starting his own business. His other interest and main hobby was horse-racing;
- a tennis coach who was an older man (hence his name, Oupa). He came across as very interesting, experienced and knowledgeable;
- Edmund was a netball coach and single father trying to raise his children to “do good”. Both he and Oupa were officially unemployed but worked in the community on sports development for NGOs and had some experience in dealing with authorities in trying to develop sport in the township and raising the money to do so;
- a middle-aged, self-employed seamstress, Annabella. For an “uneducated” woman, she was very forthcoming and articulate, showing insight into local social, economic and political issues, and generally proved to be an intriguing character;
- two unemployed young women, single mothers, Mpho and Refilwe, both of whom were initially reticent but later contributed enthusiastically to discussions on loyalty to the *Daily Sun*, life in the townships and opinions on officials; and
- two unemployed men, Moses and Marshall, who would take whatever occasional work was offered to them. In the focus group, they both were cooperative and friendly but not as talkative as Patricia, Oupa and Annabella.

As with the analysis of the pilot study and in-depth interviews, I first collated the responses under the five section headings of the questionnaire and then I reorganised

them under the same four category headings I had used for the analysis of both the pilot study and the in-depth interviews. It is under these four headings that I discuss my data.

5.4.1.1 The *Daily Sun* as information

The first section of the questionnaire used for discussions focussed on the readers' initial engagement with the *Daily Sun*. It included a discussion of why they read the newspaper and which stories they find most interesting as well as their perceptions of certain types of stories (crime, human-interest and community). Readers' reasons for reading the *Daily Sun* pointed to a need or desire to know more: "we must know"; "to enlighten"; "get educated"; "refresh our minds" were phrases that came up repeatedly in our discussions. They confirm that information is valued for increased knowledge, education and motivation and, for me, contrary to what was initially assumed, they show that these readers are expecting the same from their tabloid newspaper as others would from the mainstream press. This suggests that the *Daily Sun* text meets the needs of its audience and their particular uses for their media. In terms of media uses, I posed questions that would draw out what uses readers made of their interaction with the *Daily Sun* and its content. Jensen (1992) refers to uses as the "relevances which audiences ascribe to news and other media genre" (in Tester, 1994: 99) and he argues that media content must be relevant to the audience in order to have purpose. My readers' responses fitted into Jensen's categories:

- *Informational uses* refer to knowledge relevant to the readers: "Information about what happens around us"; "*Daily Sun* even gives information all around South Africa".

- *Contextual uses* are important in that, in terms of content reflecting readers' own lives back at them, it legitimizes them and their conditions. This was revealed by comments like, "There's quite a range of everything for us"; "Local news helps you"; "We have something to think about". These, together with Phillip's stated appreciation that "we get information from disadvantaged areas" refer to the specific social environment that feeds readers' interest and influences their use of the newspaper. Some of the participants felt that the newspaper and its format performed a 'ritualising' role – readers need to see the newspaper every morning to feel they are more informed. Readers like to know where to find specific items. For some, familiarity with the newspaper content enabled them to skip the crime-related articles and go straight to a regular column or their favourite section: "You know what you can expect from the newspaper"; "If you don't like that type of story...go straight to the sport or something else that's not scary". This 'ritualising' aspect of the tabloid format helps to contextualise what they read and, together with the regular interaction between newspaper and readers, can over time, lead them to 'speak the same language'. This contributes to a loyal relationship between readers and the newspaper.
- *Legitimatising uses* place the audience in the wider world in order to understand themselves and what they do. Readers need information that will impart knowledge about their world; they need information that will educate them in order for them to participate and grow in their environment. George, the builder and aspiring business man, said, "Readers want info on investment"; while the

two coaches wanted more coverage of “sport stories”. These perceived uses of the media also relate to shaping identity, both personal and social.

- *Diversional uses* of media texts serve to distract readers from everyday problems, tedium or stress. Oupa commented that it was good to read the *Daily Sun* “to relax after the stress of work” while Patricia said, “Sometimes it’s disturbing but the jokes make me feel better”. George’s favourite topics were “the horse tips and the business side” while others enjoyed the competitions, the horoscopes, the sport and the classified advertisement section.

One could deduce that through the *Daily Sun* readers are gaining an understanding of their social environment. Readers are gaining information that is relevant to the context of their social action; they, as individuals, are more able to understand their place in the scheme of things and this helps to shape their identity, and they have a means of distraction from their everyday problems through entertainment or spectacle. The data indicates that readers do regard the *Daily Sun* as having something to offer in terms of providing for all its readers’ interests and their media uses and needs.

The discussion moved on to focus on *readers’ perceptions* of different aspects of the newspaper and what, for them, was a *memorable* story. Responses included:

- “During the trial of Jacob Zuma...I got more information I didn’t know before that rape...that’s why I like the *Daily Sun*” was Oupa’s contribution;
- Patricia cited the story “About the missing police lady, Rasuge, and the suspect. I’m hoping to hear the final outcome of it all”;

- Phillip maintained, “Those policemen killed...a wake up call for all SA to do something about crime”.

These responses suggest that there are aspects of their engagement that include a more civic attitude to the happenings around them, be they political or crime related. The ‘Jacob Zuma saga’ was a prominent one in the media throughout the country. Readers’ interest in it could indicate that they, along with the *Daily Sun*, have moved from wanting personal and entertaining content to more serious political issues that could affect their lives, identity and culture, like being able to vote and to discern the desirable characteristics of a potential presidential candidate.

Other respondents, however, referred to the more bizarre stories such as:

- “The toddler that was raped by her uncle”;
- “That mother burned the child with the iron”;
- “The woman sleeping with the demon man”;
- “The man whose erection lasted 5 days because he took more muti than he was supposed to”;
- “The mother who threw herself out of a building with her baby. That was so sad”.

Responses led me to question whether readers actually believe what they see and read because, usually, critics disregard tabloid content as false or trash and cannot conceive that readers could believe what they see. Phillip and George agreed, saying respectively, “Yes, like the zombie stories, sometimes you ask is it true?”; “Some stories are unbelievable”. Marshall added, “Yes, we believe them because we get people coming from the North and telling us that these things exist”; while Mpho insisted, “These things

are happening by us”. Oupa added that a photograph lends credibility: “They [*Daily Sun*] cover the story with a picture to say nobody can come... to say I was involved or it was lies”.

The issues raised in this discussion reflect the notion of an empathetic subject trying to identify with others. Patricia, the sangoma, argued that exposing these events could change people’s mindsets: “We were taught we have to have secrets...*Daily Sun* at least shows how we live, how steep [cruel] we can be as people”. This is particularly interesting as, I feel, it points to a sense of reassessment or introspection on the part of readers in trying to come to grips with balancing issues of traditional culture with freedom (and freedom of expression) in a new democracy. Furthermore, debates around the moral implications of media texts include the argument that if media texts are channels of moral concern or moral value, then it must be assumed that the news is taken seriously by the audience – where the news is assumed to be objectively true information about the community (Tester, 1994). The data suggests that this is the case with the *Daily Sun*. However, for me, what is important here is not so much about whether the stories are credible, true or false but about the idea that they allow readers to explore the relationship between the *Daily Sun* and development in terms of their own agency.

When asked for their perceptions of *human interest* stories, readers’ responses included comments which relate to the motivational or inspirational function of the *Daily Sun*, like Oupa’s sentiment: “I like reading about life stories...they profile people who have made

it against all odds”; and Refilwe and Mpho found them “emotional” and “affects your emotions”; while Edmund felt they serve to “inspire”.

When asked for their perceptions of *crime stories*, readers’ responses and comments were interesting. Oupa expressed disappointment: “Sometimes the front page is a bit insensitive. Children want to read but when they see the front page they lose interest”; Edmund agreed, saying they contained “things that traumatize people”. Once again, Patricia argued for a view that could accommodate both the traditional customs and open communication: “Sometimes it’s painful but the painful stories can be useful because, if they are not exposed they will be buried and one will not know about what is happening”. Annabella added, “The *Daily Sun* is taking out [exposing] all the daring things that we never knew were happening”. Marshall claimed that readers get involved, “If they’re [the police or *Daily Sun*] looking for perpetrators you can help find them”. Here there are linguistic indicators that point to specific roles of the press – socialization and surveillance – and relate directly to normative theory of the press. The *surveillance* aspect relates to information that will alert them to, or make them more aware of, certain happenings and their consequences. However, in my view, this specific kind of surveillance is a product of the interaction between newspaper and readers rather than the product of a principled surveillance function. Crime, poverty and corruption are part of their reality and so texts that relate to these issues will be relevant to the readers’ context and so have meaning for them. The investigative journalism of old is changing and is now aimed at things that are not working for this particular group in a specific context.

The result of this new kind of investigative (or surveillance) journalism is a newly mediated community.

The notion that readers make newspaper content meaningful by asking, “What can I get from this information or story? How does it apply to my life?” (Nightingale *et al.*, 2003: 66) comes through clearly in the data. Readers seem to be making meaning from the newspaper text in such a way that it is relevant and of use to them and, in the process, they are learning the language necessary to participate in the discourses around issues that impact on their lives. This also relates to the ‘meaning-making’ function of media and cultural products and how a newspaper like the *Daily Sun* uses “a preferred language” (Allan, 1999: 16) or mode of address to represent ‘the world out there’ to its audience. Their preferred language includes the sensational images and the bizarre stories that draw readers’ attention and somehow touch on their reality. From the data in this section, one would concur with the view that people are motivated by different kinds of ‘need’ in their engagement with the text: informational, maintenance of identity, social, entertainment and diversion. The audience is actively selecting aspects of the text for its own use “to work through interests and concerns” (Burton, 2005: 89). There is a sense that the readers of the *Daily Sun* are enjoying the new democracy in that they now have access to diverse and relevant information – “There’s quite a range of everything for us”. There is also evidence suggesting that these people are engaging to some extent in monitoring certain aspects of social service delivery as promised by the government and its departments. This articulates the view that the popular press is serving the ends of “reevaluation of the journalistic and civic significance of everyday life” (Meijer, 2001:

194) by moving from providing information to promoting readers' involvement in democracy.

5.4.1.2 The *Daily Sun* and tabloid sensationalism

Under this heading, I summarise the data collected regarding the *readers' perception of the sensational stories* that are so much a part of the tabloid format. The questions drew some interesting reactions and comments. During discussions, the participants again explored the issue of the sensational front pages and the 'insensitivity' of the graphic front-page pictures. It would appear that because this is such a vital ingredient of the tabloid format it intruded on all the discussions. (I used pale blue to highlight or code responses on the perceptions of these sensational stories.) What emerged during the discussion was that readers consistently felt that people need to be aware of these stories:

- Most of the respondents answered to this effect: "It's getting additional information and knowledge, no matter how awful the news"; "Things that are happening in Limpopo [location of many bizarre occurrences] that are not happening around here, we get to read";
- Annabella and Patricia expanded this sentiment to include the possibility of future action: "It's scary sometimes but we have to face reality...it's there...it's happening and maybe there is something we can do"; and "If the story is there, why do we have to hide it? We must see it and stop it. If we hide it, it will continue...we have been taught that the man is head of the house, but if he rapes we can see it and stop it".

These statements suggest that readers use the sensational or “bad news” in ways that help them, amongst other things, to cope with the harsh realities of their lives. It is not just a coping mechanism, as earlier research findings also support the notion that “people want to know the bad news....providing them with greater control over their lives and ...over public choices” (Kuper, 2006: 15). The sensationalism illustrates how their everyday life struggles are reflected to the readers. Theirs may not be a ‘normal’ society that can be represented in a mainstream or traditional western way. For them complex and abstract information (about citizenship and democratic values) is presented in an accessible mode to help them build knowledge and skills to function as citizens of this democracy without its being patronising or smacking of paternalism on the part of the *Daily Sun*. The sensational elements make content accessible in that readers’ attention is drawn to these items which they then consider and in the process reveal possible underlying causes and concerns.

The responses also imply that the readers have some choice in selecting what they read, instead of their being ‘anaesthetized’ to the horrific aspects of the media messages, *Daily Sun* readers perceive the images and stories as “close” and “very relevant”. It could be argued that this process of ‘anaesthetization’ is in its early stages or that perhaps it is, in fact, already in action and that is why some regular readers in the focus group reportedly overlook the first few pages and move on to pages that contain the more social, civic and moral aspects of the newspaper. However, the responses of my focus group suggest that, contrary to the views of writers like Habermas (1989), Murdock (1999) and others, the sensationalism and populism of this tabloid does not undermine readers’ citizenship or

reduce them to passive recipients (Dahlgren, 2000: 314). Members of the focus group maintained that the horrific reports and graphic images of violence and crime were not gratuitous or merely providing pleasure, but rather educating and instilling a sense of morality. An example of this is found in a front-page story header, “*Another thug bites the dust*” [in the *Daily Sun* of 30 July, 2007]. This headline accompanied a photo of a dead and bloodied “would-be hijacker” who had been shot by security guards while he was hijacking a motorist. Based on information gleaned from the focus group discussions around stamping out crime in the township, this type of story is perceived as a warning to would-be criminals (as the guards were commended for their actions while information about the deceased included that he was out on bail for previous crimes). Readers did not think of it as vigilantism.

The complex issue of the presentation of traditional culture and cultural practices becomes crucial when analysing notions or perceptions of sensationalism. General debates and discussions around the sensational aspects of the tabloid have revealed that topics like ancestors, witchdoctors, sangomas, traditional medicines and superstitions do carry weight with the more traditional reader (Harber, 2005); even some of the more prominent members of the South African business community have openly admitted to a strong belief in these aspects of their culture. At least four respondents acknowledged: “We use muti”; “There are demons”; “Most people consult...but don’t want to do it in the open”. Patricia, the sangoma, confirmed this while others agreed, “We do it behind closed doors”. The reasons given for this included that people don’t want to be seen as “unsophisticated” or “backward” if they consult sangomas or witchdoctors.

When one examines the unique issues and reactions that emerge within the readers' community, one can understand why some thinkers are calling for a recovery of 'Afrocentric' ways of thinking about culture and why they find that spectacle (as in sensational aspects of the tabloid) is as important as the rational modes of communication (McKee, 2005). Readers' comments support the notion that the melodrama of the tabloid, with its strong emotional component, is crucial. There is more to it than mere spectacle. There are suggestions that readers' interpretations of the sensational aspects of the newspaper could constitute a "contextual rationality" (McKee, 2005: 116) where they are using their own type of rational thinking to suit their own unique circumstances. We need to take into account what happens to ideas of sensationalism when we move to contextual rationality. The rigid 'rational versus emotional' distinction can be undermining if one does not reconsider the readers' contextual rationality and the way they think through (in their own 'rational' way) issues that have meaning for them. The lives of these readers seem to be touched by some bizarre happening almost daily and this, to the more mainstream newspaper reader, might seem wholly unbelievable.

Although there are people who refuse to read the *Daily Sun* because they think the gory pictures and sensational stories send the wrong messages, others – including most respondents in this study – actually choose to read the newspaper because they feel the awful images and stories carry moral messages. Comments from the focus group included "...from these bad stories you can do something out of the behaviour of trouble". Patricia gave the obverse side of this by adding "People can also learn bad things like police killing their wives and children – more are doing it now". While it is

true that there has actually been an increase in domestic killings within the police force throughout South Africa, the responses of the focus group do indicate that, exposure to horrific events, is more likely to generate a sense of moral outrage. People begin to see what is happening in their community and the *Daily Sun*, by adding to their knowledge in this way, is perhaps making them consider the possibility that they could be part of the solution for the societal ills reflected in the newspaper.

5.4.1.3 Engaging with the *Daily Sun*

Here my intention was to probe what readers *do* with the *Daily Sun* – how they use it and talk about its content. Responses indicate that *Daily Sun* readers read the tabloid stories, see the images, experience intuitive responses which then propel them to *talk* about them and, in the process, often come to decisions, form opinions or even change their views and behaviour. From the data, these changes include positive attitudes and constructive actions to solve problems. Participants gave the following responses:

- George’s input regarding ‘capacity building’ implies that people can contribute to their own development by engaging with the newspaper. “I can regard them [the talks with others] as part of community capacity building because they do try to motivate people and...inform you about what to do”.
- Marshall felt that *Daily Sun* content, and talk about it, is able to initiate actions in the community: “The discussions over the papers about some actions lead to some other kind of action”; Edmund mentioned that the *Daily Sun* had impacted on his personal life: “I had family problems...reading the *Daily Sun* I got solutions”.

- Phillip, the teacher, uses the *Daily Sun* as a teaching tool: "...now, from a negative thing, you will try to show that there's a positive side of us...I use it. I just cut out items and tell learners there's something on the bulletin board so that they can read it".
- Patricia, the sangoma, expressed her sentiments regarding how the *Daily Sun* has changed things for her: "Some people think we [sangomas] are all bad...we cut up people, chop and sell bodies...at least people now know [through the *Daily Sun*] something is there...some of them do respect us as traditional healers now. I have also learnt about our culture of grandfathers and mothers hiding stories [of ancestors, superstitions etc] because they didn't want us to know such things".
- Mpho's comment was "I now understand what kind of nation we are".
- Annabella affirmed, "*Daily Sun* stories teach our children...if you play with electricity you get burnt. You educate yourself through *Daily Sun*".
- Oupa mentioned the motivational aspects of the 'talks': "...it's encouraging because there's no employment but once you're there [talking with people], there are people who are doing something to uplift themselves, then you start thinking, oh well, let me also start...".

Contrary to the conventional view of tabloids, these comments lend substance to the argument that the *Daily Sun* content is encouraging readers' participation in their community and a sense that each individual subject is being positioned to *do* something within it. This could perhaps enable them to start participating in the democratic process. This "participation" may, of course, include an element of alienation. Strelitz and Steenveld suggest that the success of tabloids is, partly, the result of the "alienation felt

amongst the working class from formal political processes” (2005: 2). Some of the participants in the focus group seemed to echo this view. There was also a strong indication that readers feel negative about certain issues, and experience a sense that the new system has abandoned them. Refilwe, for example, asked, “Who cares what happens to us?” and Annabella complained, “We always relied on clinics ...now it’s a mess, there’s no order – nobody gives a damn” [the township clinics no longer function and people have to go to the larger regional hospitals]. However, the conclusion to be drawn from this is not that the *Daily Sun* is one of the failures of democracy but that it serves to ensure that these readers are informed in such a way that they could develop a sense of wanting to be involved, albeit on a less sophisticated and more informal level. In this way, the tabloid is performing an important function in making readers aware of issues that contribute to their citizenship. According to Meijer (2001: 191), “Citizens should be able (to learn) to identify themselves with the moral and political principles of modern democracy. The media can set the agenda ...to determine the issues that audiences think about ...enhancing democratic culture by making it concrete and visible.”

It would seem that exposure to the *Daily Sun*’s “bad” sensational as well as the more positive and inspirational material is helping readers, to some extent, to become more empowered. Readers’ responses were couched in language that suggests a move away from being uninformed, illiterate and passive to increased knowledge and ‘talk’ on a more abstract level: words like “the system”, “corruption” and “solutions” form part of their social discourse. The respondents’ statements and exchanges regarding their experiences serve to confirm that engagement with the *Daily Sun*, over an extended

period, on issues that are relevant to their lives has contributed not only to an improved vocabulary, but also to a better understanding of those social issues reflected in their vocabulary – empowerment and engagement with social and political discourse. Oupa, the tennis coach, spoke of how he now got good coverage in the *Daily Sun* for his tennis development programmes and this “coverage gets children motivated and the boys don’t think it’s a sissy or girl sport”. This in turn encourages the youth to participate in community activities. Annabella commented on one of the social effects of HIV coverage in the newspaper: “HIV sufferers get motivation from the paper. It helps them join groups and to communicate their status”. Marshall reported, “*Daily Sun* has taught me almost every day about life, politics, sport and everyday things”.

I asked readers to identify stories that they ‘*talk about*’. I coded the topics of discussion in yellow, and these included “rape, crime, ‘zombie’ stories, poverty, sport and politics”. Participants explored the question of what readers talk most about amongst themselves. They viewed this ‘township talk’ “very seriously because it affects our lives and we are learning from them”. The discussion became rather lively when readers talked about matters “close” to them like crime, police involvement in crime and the corruption of government, and community, officials and the police. Such matters are physically “close” to readers in that they occur right in their township, and psychologically “close” because nearly every person in their area has been affected by the crime and corruption in some way. Their safety, security and peace of mind are threatened on a daily basis. Their discussions clearly illustrate a deep concern about ‘bread and butter’ issues that affect

their everyday lives. However, some of their responses would suggest that they also feel strongly about issues of culture and politics:

- The general comment was “I don’t trust police any longer”; however, Patricia elaborated, “the police are a problem ...it’s where we’re supposed to go for protection but they are ones doing some scary things like killing their own families, taking bribes and actually doing crime”.
- Another issue that affected them on a daily basis was “poor services” and “public servants ...not treating people correctly...everything has dropped”;
- Mpho, an unemployed single mother, felt nothing had changed even though we are in a democracy. For her, “the struggle is not over”. She criticized the education system saying, “In black schools it is still as it was...no improvement”. Annabella added, “We haven’t achieved a thing, there is so much poverty, and racism is the order of the day”.
- Oupa recalled a community project he was involved in which helped and collected clothes for, “shack” children who had been raped. His group took the children to the welfare office where they were ignored, “social workers didn’t do nothing”, until they [the local helpers] caused a fuss: “We had to shout at them before they will work! And our councillor’s the one who gets the credit for that project, we didn’t get anything, but we were helping those children. He did not want to donate anything”.
- Oupa also recounted an incident when a *Daily Sun* reporter wanted to gather information with a view to writing an article and exposing certain information. He attended a meeting led by a certain politician, but when the reporter questioned

him, the politician threatened him with words to this effect, “I hear your question but your face becomes even more familiar to me”. Oupa explained that if the information became public “the politician would know who wrote the article and there would be consequences!”

- Edmond added, “Some people’s chances of survival are very slim because these people are criminals, for example, one guy pointed at me and said, you see this thing of putting everything in the paper, well we are going to shoot you”. Annabella’s response was “And that’s how our system runs, Ne!” Regarding councillors, Annabella also complained, “They don’t even ask us, they tell us!”
- Annabella added that she often discussed politics and expressed her opinion on the topic rather vehemently: “... in our parliament up there they are all Xhosas. You won’t find Zulu, or okay, there is Zuma but now we got Mlambo-Ngqecuka”. She questioned the deputy president’s being in that position, “we don’t know her – we know Winnie Mandela. We don’t know what she’s done in the past. She never struggled for our country...if she is Xhosa and not from here...the Xhosas must stay at the Xhosa places...we must stay where we are born”. There is an interesting contradictory discourse and subjectivity visible here and it would be useful to try to account for it in terms of the combination of traditional prejudice along with rational assessment. This has implications for the developing identity and whether it issues from a tribal or ethnic, rather than a national, identity. If it arises from the former then one can argue a case for many subaltern publics where each tribal or ethnic group would want its own space, but how do the groups contribute to the national identity and public sphere?

The respondents talked heatedly about their own experiences, feelings and responses to what they read about in the newspaper. The *Daily Sun* has presented information by appealing to their emotions. This strategy could actually be stimulating their participation in more moral and civic discussions. Although there is evidence of emotion in readers' comments (through voice tone and volume, facial expressions, intonations and exclamations), it is not clear that emotion *per se* is the real issue here but rather the engagement that the modality implies. There are indicators of talk or 'discourse' at the level of 'the citizen' and their tone and attitude expressed no sense of "struggle fatigue" (Strelitz and Steenveld, 2005: 2). There is also a clear sense of 'us' and 'them' which implies a group identity that excludes the politicians and "people coming from outside". In my view, we should start recognising this type of dialogue as worthwhile and reconsider the "exclusion of emotionality [and begin] cultivating appropriate forms of emotion in media contexts" (Meijer, 2001: 196) by taking 'contextual rationality' more seriously as a means of gaining insight into democratic culture.

The evident engagement and identity formation may not, however, be entirely positive as the issue of xenophobia appears to be a contentious one. From the older men to the young women, they all agreed foreigners were usurping their jobs and depriving locals of earning a living as well as "doing crime within our country – rapes, heists and other crimes" and, above all, were being "protected by the laws of this country". This shared opinion fits into this discussion as an indication that a 'self-defining' group with its own identity is starting to form amongst these people. It also contributes to the idea of a subaltern group operating within a broader public sphere. Annabella maintained, "They

[police and authorities] are in the interest of the foreigners, you know they are protected...the minute you raise it in the paper you are labelled as xenophobic... so it is a problem". Oupa added, "We are labelled as xenophobic, uncaring, illiterate, unskilled – they [foreigners] have some sort of protection". An interesting discussion ensued dominated by the idea that "the criminals have rights, victims don't have rights". Marshall said, "The government is too lenient, they can't do anything about crime". They then moved on to a comparison between South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana with observations like, "If you commit a crime there, they will arrest you very soon...within some minutes or hours they will arrest you"; and "Botswana is good. You don't have crime and rape". The latter responses could indicate how knowledge of other countries is helping them to make assessments on their own situation, while the earlier comments show that, for them, personal issues like finding work and keeping safe are becoming political ones.

The prevalent xenophobic and anti-crime attitude and its consequences have hit the headlines recently. There have been a number of media reports of incidents where locals have burnt down shops belonging to people they regard as foreigners or aliens and locals have taken the law into their own hands by 'punishing' individuals caught committing crimes. For example, a headline reading "*Bad guy – shame of the naked robber*" on 16 October 2007 referred to an incident where community members caught a young man who had allegedly robbed a couple and kidnapped the girl. They stripped and shamed him in front of a crowd "for corrupting our society". Questions that issue from this include, Is this vigilantism a response to crime and unemployment? Is it the newspaper

that is perpetuating stereotypes that incite xenophobic and vigilante attitudes, or is it merely reporting and hence confirming what readers are actually experiencing?

In this section, once again, the data suggests that the *Daily Sun* readers identify themselves as a group and perceive foreigners, criminals and deviant government officials as 'other'. This 'us' versus 'them' attitude could confirm that a new group identity is emerging and that readers may even be espousing a new type of nationalism. However, there are negative aspects to the creation of a group identity if it involves the 'othering' of different groups within their community. This negative outcome forces one to consider what writers elsewhere in other contexts, have asked: "But what if the construction of one identity requires the dismissal or denial of others? What if the repressed exercise their own forms of repression? What are the limits to 'free' speech in the major arenas of public discourse? Has the creation of 'niche market', a form of 'narrowcasting' serving self-defining groups made it impossible to create a shared cultural space developing a workable conception of the public good?" (Murdock in Gripsrud, 1999: 9 - 10). However, the notion of a single public good has already been found wanting in a multicultural world and the view for the creation of subaltern groups as proposed by Fraser (1999) still needs to be balanced by its interaction with other groups. In other words, the xenophobia should not be taken as evidence of the ethical deviance created by tabloids, but rather as evidence that issues like this are being circulated for discussion and need to be addressed both within and between different groups. This study supports Fraser's idea of 'safe places' where different groups can address their specific concerns in an appropriate way, forming a mediated subaltern

public sphere, but it also acknowledges the need for questions of how these different groups can effectively cooperate and contribute to a general public sphere and whether there should be a general one at all.

Responses coded in purple highlight *readers' suggestions*, which included one that called for the inclusion of a column for readers to “voice their views [on more public issues like corruption, crime, foreigners, politics] as to how we solve these problems”. Other interesting suggestions included George’s: “Put tenders in the paper so self-employed people can start their own businesses and employ others”; and Refilwe’s: “*Daily Sun* should come up with something positive on the front page”. It would appear that readers are indeed developing ‘life skills’ and feel positioned as interactive readers, giving constructive input about what the *Daily Sun* could do to improve the newspaper, and even making recommendations about what the *Daily Sun* could do to enhance communication with its audience. The comments might be indications of a sense of agency and ‘publicness’, in terms of discussion and debate about the issues in the newspaper and whether, through these discussions, people are beginning to feel more informed and motivated to join forums to improve issues and problems in the community. One may question whether this ‘talk’ is, in fact, at the level of ‘the lowest common denominator’ or whether it could, in some way, constitute a measure of public discourse whereby readers, as citizens, are using information from the tabloid in an attempt to “make informed political judgements” (Strelitz and Steenveld, 2005: 1). This aspect of readers’ responses and behaviour also supports the notion that decision-making requires knowledge and education and, therefore, this ‘opportunity’ for learning through the

media is an integral part of their ‘participatory freedom’. Once these readers start to participate in decisions about everyday issues, they begin to expand their thinking and their ‘capabilities’ towards the political sphere (Sen, 1999; and Barker, 2002).

In the focus group, it became clear that respondents saw themselves, and other *Daily Sun* readers, as a newly emerging group that read the paper because it not only reflected their world, but also gave them an opportunity to engage actively with relevant issues and deal with life in South Africa in the 21st century. They described readers of the *Daily Sun*:

- “Eager to knowledge”; “motivated”; “intelligent”. Phillip suggested, “They are people who are doing something to uplift themselves”. These responses suggest how readers are positioning themselves as subjects who want to improve their lot in life.
- According to Oupa, readers were “people who want to relate to the stories but not be part of the news. With the *Daily Sun* most of the time you become part of the news in the community”. This implies that readers would prefer to learn from incidents related in the paper rather than be involved in them. It also refers to the fact that the local people and readers do actually contribute to the newspaper content about their community. This comment is interesting too in that it supports the idea that readers and community members are engaged in an interactive relationship with the *Daily Sun*.
- “People who want information. The language is simple...no bombastic words like other newspapers. You can understand it”. Here Phillip indicates that readers

would prefer to be informed in language and modes of address that are relevant to their own experience.

- “This paper accommodates everyone” was the general response. However, one reader said, “The middle class read it”. When asked if Soweto and the townships have different classes, the general response was, “Definitely! There are poor, middle class and richer class”.

Based on these responses it seems that generally readers have a positive perception of the *Daily Sun* and themselves. This favourable and optimistic conception of themselves as subjects influences their attitudes and behaviour in their community and their developing sense of identity.

The responses to questions regarding how readers felt they, as individuals, had *changed* in various ways since reading the *Daily Sun* were positive and optimistic:

- Patricia felt, “I can go bold and be proud of my ancestors”;
- Marshall commented, “It taught me about how can I act if ever maybe there is a crisis within my family”;
- Mpho and Edmund remarked respectively, “I know most of the things that happens in our society now I can relate to” and “I learnt more about life skills”.

While these responses referred to the more personal aspects of the changes they had experienced there were also some community-related changes:

- Annabella spoke about the implications of their discussions: “Most of the topics we debate a lot and ...that’s where we get ideas [for example]

conversing with older people ...about HIV and AIDS. Before, it was taboo, now they want to know what's going on”;

- Refilwe expressed a desire “to be helpful to my society and to do something for myself”;
- Oupa expressed his gratification at being able to use the *Daily Sun* to get his own messages across: “As a community worker developing tennis in the area...they make my day when publishing these events”.

All of this indicates that readers are relating what they read to their everyday lives and using the information to inform their behaviour and attitudes. This constitutes evidence that they are using the newspaper as a means of informing, educating and socialising themselves. Their self-development reaffirms the importance of allowing people to find personal meaning in public issues where people use their own experience to find connections and coherence in social dialogue which offers “opportunity for fact-finding, listening, testing of ideas, and figuring out what they believe and how they feel” (Rosen, 1999: 137). Clearly, consumption of popular media can represent consumption of culture through the content and the subsequent meanings given to it and, from the data, one can deduce that the *Daily Sun* is providing the conditions that “enable individuals and social groups to be recognised for what they are or wish to be” (Gripsrud, 1999: 9). The evidence illustrates the conception that popular media products can be areas of “cultural self-making where people reconstruct their identities and their sense of place in the world” (Burton, 2005: 89). As stated before, a cultural change is, in itself, a real political act and the act of talking can itself cause political change. This impels one to reassess the notion of ‘materialist politics’ and move towards the view that “the resources that politics

distributes do not only include physical things like jobs, pay and citizenship but also immaterial but real things, like feelings, self-worth, inter-personal relationships” (McKee, 2005: 193). The data suggests that readers are experiencing these. The vibrancy of South Africa’s democracy comes through clearly in their responses, reflecting a sense of freedom to express their opinions and contribute to a civic culture.

A superficial reading of the *Daily Sun* leaves one with the impression that it carries no ‘hard news’ politics, in that there is little coverage of the workings of Parliament, the politicians and the parties. However, according to the focus group, the *Daily Sun* is filled with stories relating to the hardship of their daily lives – blocked drains, rubbish not being collected, scarcity of jobs, the demise of the hospital system and bad politicians. It also carries stories about the occasional victory over these issues when houses are assigned, a police case is solved or a government official acts. Clearly, this is far more complex than simply being ‘non-political’ or sensational. Something else is going on entirely different from the conventional view of tabloid functioning.

What readers do with the *Daily Sun* influences their developing subjectivities and the kinds of identities they create. From the data in this section, questions around reader identity and culture do emerge and these include, How do they see themselves as ‘group’ – as close community, friends only, or whole society? As stated, the data shows a clear perception of ‘us’ (locals) versus ‘them’ (foreigners and government officials) which points to a group identity, but to what extent does the *Daily Sun* contribute to the experience of this group identity and how has this led to the xenophobia evident in the

data? One possible explanation could be the combined effect of actually seeing that “foreigners are employed or trading and making money instead of us”, reading stories of ‘foreign’ criminals in the *Daily Sun* and hearing ‘talk’ regarding the ‘foreigners’ and their actions. These findings could suggest that a ‘politics of identity’ is at play, whereby these readers have utilised their freedom to access information to create a sense of identity and of belonging that is contributing to its definition. The data findings also support the idea of “expansion of capabilities” (Sen, 1999: 18) where expanded capability and freedom, achieved through engagement with the media, impact on individuals’ ability to help themselves and influence others and hence achieve a degree of social effectiveness. This affects their sense of agency and hence their identity or self-concept as subjects and participants in their community. With the freedom to enrich their lives, readers can develop their ability to help themselves and to influence their world, both central to the process of development.

5.4.1.4 The *Daily Sun* and social interaction

The focus in the previous section was on readers’ ‘talk’ or discourse – about issues raised in the *Daily Sun* – and whether it was influencing their developing identities and culture. Much of what was discussed there spills over into this section where my purpose is to summarise responses collected on how readers view their *experience of social issues* encountered in the *Daily Sun* and what impact this has had on their lives as community members and citizens. The point of this was to ascertain whether, and to what extent, readers are perhaps forming a significant and active social grouping as in a subaltern public sphere. Although much of what I encountered in the previous section is again

raised here this serves to emphasise that in a developing democracy issues of democracy, identity, culture and the public sphere are interrelated and interwoven.

Throughout the discussion, what emerged was the readers' increased understanding of the country, its democracy and the concomitant social and political issues. Readers' responses illustrate the *facilitative* and *critical-dialectical* roles played by the *Daily Sun* in that it supplies information that creates and sustains public debates around issues of social and political order (Fourie, 2001). The responses also suggest that these readers are not mindless, passive dupes; instead, they are showing signs of an acute awareness of problems and the need to try to solve them. Edmund, the netball coach, remarked, "Public servants who [are] not doing their jobs must be exposed. They are not treating people properly". George pointed out that errant public servants and government officials need to be brought to book or made accountable by exposing their wrong-doing, "Politicians need to be reminded how things are supposed to be. Each time there's a problem the *Daily Sun* must just chip in"; and Annabella observed, "They [government officials] have high walls and security guards around them, they are safe, so who cares what happens to us?" Interestingly, these are the very same discussions (discourses) circulating in the mainstream press.

Using the *Daily Sun* content to improve their understanding of community and political issues through discussions can lead to their questioning the roles and activities of civic and government officials. Their questions and actions have the potential to "produce valuable challenges to those in powerful positions" (Gripsrud, 2000: 298). A recent

headline (in the *Daily Sun* of 10 August, 2007), “*Did Mbeki blunder?*” referred to his shock sacking of the deputy Minister of Health, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge: this type of headline highlights the progression across time of the newspaper’s content from personal to political. Readers are ‘interpellated’ as citizens of a democracy and encouraged to consider the topic and to respond. They could do that through letters to the newspaper, social discussions and debates and community forums. These actions could result in a form of citizen journalism and the possible development of a subaltern public sphere.

As mentioned in section 5.4.1.1, there seems to be a general perception that the *Daily Sun* is performing a type of *surveillance* role in exposing, amongst other things, certain police activities. Through the *Daily Sun*’s ‘investigative’ reportage, some readers no longer trust the police and this has put pressure on the police to perform better. In this section, the focus moves toward the readers’ enhanced awareness of the broader civic and political implications of this unique surveillance phenomenon. A number of responses recount experiences (both good and bad) of police action. For example, the teacher, Phillip, recalled an incident where the police had taken three days to arrive at his neighbour’s house after a robbery. Another respondent said, “Some police are more aggressive towards innocent people – the slightest mistake and they just kill them.” However, the *Daily Sun* does also report on what police have achieved in fighting crime. Edmund said, “They used to not come but now they do”. Consequently, there was a consensus that the community needed more police forums as the existing ones were proving successful. According to participants, “We have patrollers”; “If an area does not have community or police forums other people come to involve the others”. This perhaps shows that readers’

concern for their rights as citizens can lead to behaviour that is empowering, rather than demoralising. Instead, they are beginning to see that they can participate and become part of the potential solutions to social problems. This outcome was illustrated as focus group members recounted their experiences of *community stories*. Readers experienced:

- “People helping each other fix houses”; “We help clean up a place”;
- “The community helped to stop crime”; “They patrol certain areas to safeguard children”; “People go to work at 4 or 5 in the morning. We have patrollers so criminals won’t catch them”; “Some work with the police as volunteers”;
- “When people hear of these [community activities] they also start things”; “And we can start things to go about it properly”.

Marshall, Oupa, Edmund and George reported that people do make contact with their councillors to solve problems. For example, there was an incident when sewage was pouring down the street in a particular area. Nothing had been done about it but the *Daily Sun* carried a front-page story with pictures and residents’ comments and reactions. Oupa recalled, “that guy on the outside photo, he was a disabled guy, name of uMpontsweni, he checked out the ANC councillor...he do something because after a few days those sewage were stopped.” This is a clear example of a person actually doing something about his situation. If actions such as this are being initiated by engagement with the *Daily Sun*, one could say it is playing a facilitative role in community action. It also suggests that readers are developing a sense of agency in the community. Together with the right to participate in debates, they are developing as citizens.

The responses contained many terms and comments that serve as linguistic indicators of a growing interest in and awareness of civic matters. Readers' criticisms of "the system" suggest that they have developed a sense of "civic belonging" (Kuper, 2006:16). "Governance, accountability, poor delivery by and corruption of public servants, and non-resident, illegal workers" were linguistic markers for issues that dominated in the responses. In my view, these terms indicate some development or progress in the nature of their discussions and their thinking, from operating on a purely personal level towards a more public one, where civic issues of common interest to all citizens, like "the system, corruption, current affairs and solutions", form part of their social discourse.

According to Meijer (2001: 191), "The media can set the agenda... to determine the issues that audiences think about...enhancing democratic culture by making it concrete and visible". Most of the respondents credited the *Daily Sun* with giving readers access to and insight into a number of social and political issues in the new democracy, particularly service delivery of government officials, and they agreed that civil servants were doing a poor job. Here is a short summary of their comments during conversation on this subject:

Mpho: "Poor public servants need to be exposed";

Annabella: "They are no more workers...they level themselves according to their political participation so no one from the same party will criticise another...that's one of the problems";

Marshall: "They are getting salaries but don't do their jobs"; "They forget they were once like us"; "I can vote for the DA so that it becomes an opposition party that stares at the ANC";

Oupa: “I agree, vote for the DA to stamp out crime”.

Patricia: “Lack of professionalism in our government is killing South Africa”;

Other comments included, “There is so much poverty and unemployment. If you go to Soweto during the week, you think it is a Saturday or Sunday”; and “[there are] overcrowded jails, so not all criminals go to jail”. The discussion moved on (and even included mention of the possibility that former president, Nelson Mandela, had contributed to the unsatisfactory situation by marrying a Mozambiquan!) to issues that included the fact that top jobs are given to members of the ANC and to exiles, and the Xhosa group was criticised. Issues like government officials’ “arrogancy” and “lack of professionalism”, the “high interest rates and cost of living”, were also touched on. Annabella said, “For us to get IDs takes a year with lots of papers”, and Refilwe complained about “foreigners getting IDs and trading on street corners” (something, readers claim, was anathema to the pre-1994 local culture, and the previous government did not allow informal street traders). Evidently, there is a sense that they, “the local people”, have not benefited from the new democracy. Again, these comments point to a possible contradictory subjectivity – tribal or ethnic prejudice combined with their own contextual rationality. The responses signal increasing popular access to the public sphere where individual citizens discuss issues, including the performance of public officials, and then “turn to the government to deal with it” (McKee, 2005: 87).

Annabella felt that through the newspaper she had come to realise that “our government is totally unfair... only the wealthy and those in top positions govern and benefit in this country and those with money are above the law”. I noted this severe criticism and

negative attitude with great interest because it seemed out of character for her. In previous discussions, she had repeatedly reported that, on a personal level, she ‘talks’ to her children – “we always discuss things” – and she teaches them to be respectful and to try to “empower themselves”. She was also the respondent who consistently gave very constructive input and suggestions on improving the situation in the township. One could deduce that perhaps this has evolved from a problem solving thought process and attitude (she is unemployed and earns money working from home, sewing) rather than any sense of being able to affect change. Perhaps hers is the type of future-oriented thinking that is required in a modern democracy (Giddens, 1990: 204).

Readers also made recommendations to improve their situation that included:

- “People should not only blame the past regime...we are [now] being taught how we must behave in life not only at home, even outside”;
- “I am going to be accountable, ...we all need to be involved”; “We can teach ourselves how to live our lives”;
- “We need to communicate with each other”;
- “To stand up for your rights”;
- “We need to develop sports within our country... go each and every month to submit a report to MEC...we will have power to go there and negotiate things” [Edmund, showing his experience and knowledge of dealing with officials].

Once again, the use of ‘us’, ‘we’ and ‘our’ reflects a type of group identity emerging – one that implies a cooperative attitude to building up their community by asserting their rights in the democracy while still facing poverty and other “unfreedoms” (Sen, 1999: 3).

According to Habermas (1989: 169) popular forms of media are “serving up the material as a ready-made convenience, patterned and pre-digested”, implying that people no longer use abstract thought to interpret and understand meaning and culture. However, the data points to something else. Readers are beginning to question, discuss and contemplate constructive action around issues raised in the tabloid. These people are deliberating, hence, contrary to Habermas’ view, their forum is “deliberative rather than just informational” (in Harrison, 2006: 108). So, although outsiders, including many academic critics, may perceive their popular media as trashy, working class, commercialized culture, it “need not be seen as less worthwhile...it may simply be the culture of a different demographic group” (McKee, 2005: 68) and we need to recognise this group and its contribution to a public sphere.

Most of the respondents reported a positive *change* in their personal behaviour as a direct result of regular reading of the *Daily Sun*:

- “I practise...the good things that I learn from the paper” [Phillip]
- “*Daily Sun* has taught me...how to trust, respect and love others no matter what their situation” [Mpho]
- “I’ve learnt to be compassionate. When you see someone else is struggling even more than you you are helpless” [Oupa]
- “I’ve learnt to talk to my children coz some of the stories in the *Daily Sun* they concern them” [Edmund]
- “...most people can read now...youngsters, you see them with papers in their hands” [Moses].

These comments reflect the notion that media texts function as resources for socialization, empowerment and upliftment, as well as contributing to developing a sense of recognition as “full partners in social interaction” (Fraser, 2001: 23).

Readers’ references to new possibilities for private business ownership (such as George, the builder’s) and education also illustrate that they are embracing certain aspects of democracy, freedom and development. Certain linguistic markers are relevant to two of my arguments – the emergence of new identities and the development of new social groupings – in that they might be indicative of discourse at a more rational and abstract level.

- “We are unemployed, we need to learn some other skills to make money...not sit ...saying we are unemployed” [Marshall]
- “When you start analyzing each and everything you read you can be able to differentiate and talk about life in general...to teach one another by form of exchanging” [Oupa]
- “We talk through everything, it brings people together” [Patricia].

This suggests that the readers are not only affected by issues in their immediate personal context but are also, as citizens, developing the ability to talk constructively about them from a social and political perspective. For example, the *Daily Sun*’s coverage, and the subsequent discussion of issues around the World Cup soccer tournament, has exposed readers to a global, rather than merely a South African, perspective. All the men in the focus group had been following “the recent story about FIFA taking away the 2010 World Cup from South Africa and giving it to Oz – that was scary!” and by voicing their

concern showed some awareness of the implications of the story. Oupa's use of the very colloquial "that was scary" shows how personal emotion is transferred to a social context and, for me, this is a good marker of the modality of public discourse. Patricia commented on the educational role of the *Daily Sun*: "The education column, even about insects to do with the ecosystem, and the *Africa* section is about war and rebels...we have more information". This type of information expands their knowledge and view of the world. The data illustrates starting points of the development of a mediated public sphere with the *Daily Sun* as mediator – an alternative version of the public sphere, where these readers can articulate their specific needs as well as expand them to include the social and political dimension.

The evidence suggests that the *Daily Sun* has contributed to the creation of a public discourse – a "collective sense-making" (McKee, 2005: 197) – around issues of common concern within this community. This has led to the formation of decision-making groups like the policing forums and this shows the possible beginnings of a new, alternative, public sphere. Readers' responses have shown that this type of "subaltern counterpublic" could eventually contest some of the rules of the "hegemonic public sphere" (Fraser, 1997 in Calhoun, 1997: 123). It is important in South Africa for multiple public spheres to offer opportunities for a greater variety of people to voice their interests. Different groups need to have their voices heard as it is their voices that will influence the future development of this democracy. Different groups might have different, specific needs and interests which they can work on in their limited public spheres or "safe places" and then bring them to discussion in the national or official public sphere (Fraser, 1990 in McKee,

2005: 154). The *Daily Sun* readers have shown that their group's involvement in the issues of interest to them and their environment – limited though it might be – constitute a 'safe place' where they can explore, discuss and test views on problems and issues.

In looking at the difficulty within the notion of the 'traditional' citizen in the multicultural context of South Africa, "recognition of cultural difference" (Fraser, 2002: 22) is a concept worth consideration. It embodies the idea that each group's personal issues should be recognised as valuable to public discussion and that ordinary people, as citizens, can begin to contribute to the public sphere. However, the idealisation of the public sphere is not viable in the reality of everyday lives of ordinary people where at times "public opinion is itself an irrational force" (Rosen, 1999: 63). This concurs with ideas of democracy as a system based on principles of individual freedom and faith in the people's capacity to make decisions and to contribute towards solving problems no matter how irrational their input may seem. Furthermore, if we accept that commercialized, sensationalized culture is as valuable as the quality culture of educated audiences, then we should examine media forms, like tabloids, to see what worthwhile ideas they offer about the functioning of the public sphere (McKee, 2005: 31).

However, some interrogation follows: Could readers' 'talk' at home, at work and in taxi buses be construed as public discourse within a public sphere? What constitutes a 'forum' amongst these readers? How do they see their police and community forums in terms of how they can affect local, provincial and government representatives' responses to the

issues raised by ‘the people’ on the ground? Finally, what is their ‘shared space’ – is it hypothetical or real?

5.4.2 Conclusions drawn from the focus group

For me, the focus group, with its “individualised discourse” (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 50), where respondents shared their experiences and gave meaning to them, and where the individuals gave their narrative versions of their lived reality, proved very useful in obtaining the ‘thick descriptions’ I required for my data. Participants very clearly stated their high regard for the tabloid, the *Daily Sun*. They expressed their need and use for its content in their daily lives, even the sensational elements. Comments reinforced the notion that politically marginalised groups, like these readers, favour visual content and made sense of the world, society and personal relationships using dramatic and spectacular elements of story-telling in a “bottom-up” way (Sparks *et al.*, 2000: 297) that helps them understand the present social change in South Africa. The mix of content offers these ordinary people a sense of upliftment. As one respondent remarked, “Those stories are informing, educating and motivating people to do better”.

Although, on the surface, the *Daily Sun* does appear to have the characteristics of a typical tabloid with all the alleged ‘flaws’, a closer examination reveals a more moral and civic agenda. It ‘gives the readers what they want’ in terms of content, literacy and social development in the context of the new South African democracy. The data supports this view and suggests that over the years the newspaper has responded to its readers’ feedback by making changes to suit readers’ needs and uses and established a loyal relationship with them. Monitoring of the content over a period of three years reveals that

it has moved from the purely private (domestic violence, personal loss, traditional superstitions, crime, etc.) to the more public zone (local or municipal affairs, policing issues and government or political issues). Issues like corruption and ineffectual policing have caused readers to engage in community activity such as forming forums and committees to discuss solutions to the problems. This could also mean that what these people regard as important for their personal safety and security is being brought into the public sphere and, if the public officials are not seen to be doing anything about their situation, these readers could exercise their right to vote and remove those officials – playing their part in the democratic process.

Contrary to some opinions, these tabloid readers are not apathetic about public issues. They are thinking and talking about them with a view to improving them. Readers' responses support the view that public opinion "emerges from individual voices discussing issues" (McKee, 2005: 9). The *Daily Sun*, by giving readers access to information, does provide for "societal dialogues" and a "market place of ideas" on common concerns essential to democracy (McQuail, 2002: 196). According to McKee (2005: 5), the public sphere is where people find out what is happening in their community, and what social, cultural and political issues are facing them; where they engage with these issues and add their voices to discussions about them, playing their part in the process of a society reaching a consensus or compromise about what they think about issues, and what should be done about them. The findings show that this is exactly what is happening in practice, showing that tabloid journalism can help influence social change by addressing issues not previously open to debate, including new publics

and using new forms, thus “introducing new areas of discourse into the mainstream mediated public sphere” (Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004: 286). Hence, the tabloid can contribute to the creation of a public arena for its readers in the townships. There could perhaps be various other arenas as ‘safe places’ for groups such as, environmentalists, gays, etc. Fraser’s call for multiple, alternative public spheres is a valid one that could work in the new democracy in South Africa where the various counterpublics can work on ‘trans-group’ discourse. In building a workable version of the ‘rainbow nation’ identity in South Africa, it is desirable to have a number of subaltern or alternative public spheres operating simultaneously, contributing to the national public sphere. Given that we do start to recognise the different groups and allow them the space to engage in what concerns them, cross-pollinating ideas with other groups, the question remains: How do we achieve “transgroup interaction” (Fraser, 2001: 23)? And how can this impact on the larger public arena in a way that makes a difference to the lives of individuals and the state of the country?

To conclude, I maintain that the findings in this study show that the detrimental effects of the tabloid on democracy as discussed by in Chapter 3.3 do not necessarily apply to all aspects of the *Daily Sun* functioning.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

In this final chapter, I conclude my thesis by restating my general findings and resituating them in the wider context of the South African media and consider the implications of these findings for the normative press and public sphere in South Africa. I recall the leading thesis question of whether, if at all, and in what way the *Daily Sun* could be contributing to the development of the South African democracy or reflecting this democracy. The *Daily Sun's* impact on its readers, the media and society needs to be understood and evaluated. I will discuss the findings in terms of how the *Daily Sun* could be contributing in some positive way to educating and empowering a once voiceless mass of people in South Africa. I will also look at the negative outcomes and consider possibilities for further research in this area.

Although the findings are descriptive and anecdotal, this research would interest scholars elsewhere because it provides data and findings from a specific context which may extend or revise current thinking about development, tabloids and the public sphere. Although research on tabloids has been done in Britain, Europe and the USA, the specifics of this study, that is, the way in which the *Daily Sun* is contributing to post-Apartheid empowerment, will provide evidence for a broader perspective on the relationship between tabloid journalism and a more “radical democratic approach” to studying the media (Gillwald, 1993: 65).

I have used inductive reasoning, making inferences and generalising from my sample to the target population; but I am aware that the “inference is the best explanation” approach (Mouton, 2001: 118) should be applied with caution. With this in mind, I proceed with

drawing conclusions from the findings regarding the extent to which the tabloid, the *Daily Sun*, is contributing to:

- the emergence of an alternative public sphere in South Africa;
- the readers' sense of freedom in the new South Africa and the creation of a new culture in the new democracy;
- the changing notions of the role of the media.

For the sake of clarity, I will draw my conclusions under the headings of the three areas or strands of my theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 3.

6.1 Reconfiguring the public sphere

A key concept I have used to analyse my data is that of the *public sphere*. As discussed, the traditional Habermasian notion of the public sphere no longer applies in a multicultural emergent democracy such as South Africa. Rather, we have to begin to consider the possibility and political need for multiple, mediated public spheres. A public sphere, by definition, expresses the needs, anxieties and fears of those who are dominant in it, those who formulate its rules of discourse. Clearly, there is evidence of a group identity forming among the local readers that excludes 'foreigners' but, in a model of multiple public spheres, how do we understand irrational or heterogeneous elements such as the xenophobia? I argue that the xenophobia identified in this study is more a product of this particular context and characterises one of a number of public spheres in this country. This move away from a single, normative Habermasian conception of the public sphere certainly raises difficulties and, as I have already shown in the discussion of my data, obliges us to see politically and morally problematic discourses such as xenophobia

as elements within particular public spheres. But, in my view, the advantages of the concept of multiple public spheres outweighs such disadvantages because it paves the way to a more sympathetic understanding of the nature and role of subgroups in a heterogeneous emergent democracy. The question of how alternative public spheres resolve their differences will, however, inevitably arise. Obviously, the final arbiter of the rightness of a view or action is the constitution which is there to provide for the workings and trans-group interactions of these different public spheres by making decisions, and upholding ethical considerations and those of its own components. But since the constitution always needs to be interpreted, having subaltern, alternative or counter-publics involved in the public sphere can, in my view, only lead to a more vibrant democracy.

The findings of this study suggest that the *Daily Sun* has managed to position itself, in a variety of ways, as offering an alternative perspective on the issues, forms and audiences of the mainstream press in South Africa – and hence contributing to an alternative public sphere. However, if the *Daily Sun* readership constitutes a subaltern public arena, how can it communicate effectively with other groups, like the ‘foreigners’ and the government, that form other public arenas in a way that will contribute to the national public sphere in South Africa? If we do not pay attention to the “interactionist dimension” (McQuail, 2002: 197) of the public sphere, democracy may be undermined.

This study of an alternative or counter public sphere also points to the need for further research into the public sphere in South Africa. Such research may range from general theoretical questions such as, What are the discursive criteria for a public sphere? When

do the discourses of a group acquire critical mass so as to constitute a public sphere? This questioning draws attention to the need for more investigation into the public sphere so that a range of studies may result in the drawing up of criteria to concretize the public sphere and the notion of what makes an alternative public sphere. Further research on the move from a single public sphere to multiple public spheres in order to explore the nuanced functioning of multiple public spheres needs to be conducted. Further study is also necessary to determine the nature of the multiple, mediated public spheres right through to the examination of particular mediated public spheres in South Africa. For example, one could look at magazines aimed at the emerging middle class, the co-called ‘black diamonds’: what are their discourses and could they be considered part of another alternative public sphere where their concerns and aspirations are articulated?

6.2 Culture and development

The findings of this study indicate that readers of the *Daily Sun* are concerned citizens who are willing to confront issues, to challenge authority, to work towards a crime-free community and to take up whatever opportunities for development and empowerment that come their way. This provides evidence of a new civic identity emerging in the new South Africa where a previously subaltern group of readers is trying to use its right to participate fully in social life to help influence “new spheres of social action and new social groupings” (Gripsrud, 1999: 8). The *Daily Sun* readers in this study see themselves and should be seen as a social grouping with a ‘civic culture’ that includes a range of attitudes to the economic, political and social order. This culture is developing in the circulation of communicative actions or discursive practices (talk, debate, forums etc.)

facilitated by the *Daily Sun* in which readers are constantly declaring “we need to...”; “we try to...” and referring to “our community”. To this extent, the findings of this research indicate that the *Daily Sun* is fulfilling an important task by contributing to the development of a hybrid culture in which the *Daily Sun* readers are able to simultaneously to talk about witchcraft and about ways of improving community policing. In this way, the data shows that readers are developing a shared public concern and sense of citizenship, and “an identity of citizenship not too formal and not too substantive [within the] hetero-cultural context” (Anderson, 1997: 43) of the South African social democracy.

The *Daily Sun*, by giving its readers access to information, does provide for societal dialogues and a market place of ideas on common concerns essential for a working democracy. In doing so, it does, to some extent, help to prepare and transform readers for political involvement and citizenship. What the *Daily Sun* has managed to do, albeit for primarily commercial reasons, is attract a new public by speaking to them about issues previously ignored in new, clearly understandable ways. The *Daily Sun*, in making its target group more visible with more coverage, and thereby contributing to its transformation, is playing a role in the new South African democracy.

6.3 The nature of the press and the discourse of tabloids

The findings suggest that despite common perceptions, the *Daily Sun* is performing many of the normative functions of the press in South Africa’s new democracy. My findings

show that the newspaper is serving many of the functions traditionally seen as the role of the press, and its official sources remain the police, court officials, municipal managers and the people themselves (Fourie, 2001 and McQuail, 2002). My research on the *Daily Sun* shows:

- (1) it fulfils the same functions and roles (e.g. collaborative, surveillance and facilitative)
- (2) it does this for a different group who have previously been denied access
- (3) it does this in a different way.

Therefore, the discourse of tabloids needs to be re-examined. Current changes in the media therefore demand that we re-insert the tabloid into the South African media landscape, functioning at the confluence of the commercial and the political. While tabloid journalism may be criticised by traditional writers and media, for its readers it is able to function as a catalyst for an alternative arena for public discourse wherein criticism of both the privileged political elites and traditional types of public discourse plays a central role. Consequently, tabloid journalism can broaden the public reach, giving news access to groups that previously were not targeted, and affecting societal change by redefining previously ‘undebatable’ issues in need of debate, as the *Daily Sun* has done with regard to many areas like crime, traditional superstitions (such as ‘tokoloshes’), health, civic authorities, education and unemployment. The newspaper has given rise to a new form of journalistic discourse that is unquestionably more accessible to its audience and less deferential to traditional authority. Moreover, the much-criticised appeal to emotion does actually stimulate political participation, by engaging readers’ own experience and understanding.

From these findings, one could infer that, in general, the *Daily Sun* is mediating the local reality in the language appropriate to its readers. Clearly they find its content accessible and relevant to their daily lives. One may ask why the *Daily Sun* chooses to focus on issues that the mainstream media neglect. Some of these issues are not deemed newsworthy, nor even identified as social problems, by the mainstream media. By focusing on violence, abuse and the like, the *Daily Sun* is trying to ensure that those issues are kept in the readers' consciousness and acted upon. At the centre is the audience. Who are they and what information can they use? This previously marginalised group is making sense of the world using the *Daily Sun*, a tabloid, as a preferred form of communication. This suggests positive aspects of the tabloid and confirms the view that tabloids have a role to play in a society where mainstream newspapers have failed to meet the needs of a specific constituency. One needs to look beyond the media in isolation to a broader social and cultural context and consider the lives of the readers in the township community who are moving away from moral, intellectual and civic "dullness" (Tester, 1994: 104) and developing a sense of agency in a new democracy.

The *Daily Sun* content helps to set the agenda for what its readers are thinking and talking about as citizens – crime, violence, AIDS, government fraud and corruption – making these concrete and visible. This is exactly what the mainstream press is also doing but with a different constituency. In this new democracy, the *Daily Sun* clearly exemplifies the complexity of media functioning and the interrelatedness of concepts like information, individual freedom and development, free press and social order. However, the media in South Africa has realised the need for introspection. Both the mainstream

media and the tabloids are making some changes towards a more inclusive approach, reassessing their strategies so as to engage readers more constructively to embrace the tenets of pluralism in our democracy. In order to keep newspapers alive, the traditional media workers and academics accept the need to adopt a new approach of “talking across paradigms” where “the mass media regularly communicate across demographic boundaries, finding ways to speak to men and women, formally and informally educated, black and white citizens all at the same time” (McKee, 2005: 156). The ‘boundary work’ between mainstream and tabloid press could ensure a genuine interactive, pluralist media system.

In the wake of the *Daily Sun*’s success, it should be noted that a number of the broadsheet newspapers in South Africa have recently adopted the tabloid style and format, for example, *Cape Times*, *The Times* (*The Sunday Times*’ daily edition) and *The Witness*. There is furthermore, increasingly substantial overlap in the South African newspaper industry between what were previously known as “community newspapers” and tabloids. Community newspapers historically dealt with the small, everyday stories that the broadsheets deemed not of national or provincial interest, often focussing on local community gossip, school news, municipal problems and so on. They make more use of photographs, colloquial language and a personal tone, and far less use of the erudite language and style that one would find, say, in *The Mail and Guardian* or *Business Day*. It is also interesting to observe how the media in South Africa is changing, for example, the ‘tabloidization’ of a number of the mainstream newspapers such as *The Witness*. Decision makers at that newspaper may shy away from calling it that but will expound on

the rationale for changing its format to make it more readable with bite-sized items to widen its readership. Is this an instance of interaction with the tensions between the demands of different public spheres? Understanding their changing readership demographics and responding to the rise of alternative public spheres is not necessarily ‘dumbing down’ but rather making information accessible in order to contribute to the building of a democracy. In order to understand the changing nature of the local press, it would be interesting to investigate thoroughly specific media examples, such as *The Witness*, in terms of tabloidization.

It is interesting to note that in spite of all the criticisms levelled at the *Daily Sun*, for example, that it trades in “stereotypes, xenophobia and fear” (Harber, 2004: 156), the Press Ombudsman’s Report for 2005 shows that surprisingly few complaints were being made at this level. Out of a total of 185 complaints made in 2005, only 21 were laid against the tabloids *Daily Sun*, *Daily Voice* and *Son*, and only one complaint against the *Daily Sun* was upheld.

Some commentators maintain that South African politics over the next few years will be framed around lower and lower-middle class satisfaction with the areas of practical governance that facilitate and improve their lives, in which case the *Daily Sun* should be seen as a potential important political force. “The politicians are not taking much notice now, but at some point in the next few years they will notice that the staff and readers of the *Daily Sun* have become more important to the next election than *Business Day* or the *Sunday Times*. And things will never be the same again” (Harber, 2004: 158).

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The *Daily Sun*: Investigating the role of the tabloid newspaper
in the new South Africa.

Appendices

1. Interview Schedule for Pilot Study
2. Interview Schedule for In-depth interviews and Focus Group
3. Informed Consent Form for Focus Group
- 3a. Informed Consent Form for In-depth interviews
4. List of participants in the Focus Group.

All the documents relating to the data collection and analysis for this research project have been lodged with the Department of Media and Cultural Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg and are available for perusal.

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule used for Pilot Study 2005

Questionnaire used in Semi-Structured Interview with readers of The *Daily Sun* Newspaper. (Interviewer-administered)

I am from the UKZN researching what readers think of the *Daily Sun* and its role in the community it serves. To help with the gathering of information, I would appreciate your participation in this interview. Would you be willing to answer some questions?

(To gain consent, read to interviewee: *I understand that this interview is part of a research project being conducted by Desiray Viney of UKZN. The information I give will be treated confidentially and used only for academic purposes.*)

Interviewee's consent /agreement obtained Yes/No

Thank you. I appreciate your contribution.

Gender: Age group: Employed: Yes/No (for interest)

1. Do you read the Daily Sun? Yes No

2. How often do you read the Daily Sun?

a. Every day or nearly every day

b. Once or twice a week

c. Once a month

d. Other: _____

3. Do you buy it or read a friend's? _____

4. Where do you read the newspaper?

a. at work

b. at home

c. Other: _____

5. How many people read your Daily Sun?

6. What do you like to read most in the Daily Sun?

Rate the following by giving a number 1 to 5. For example, 1 is your favourite:

News stories

Sport

Music

Quizzes, crossword

Jokes, cracks etc

Looking at Africa and the World

Entertainment: TV Guide etc

SunShape

Tell Me

Speak up – letters from readers

Other _____

7a. How do you feel or respond when you read the *Daily Sun* stories?

7b Do you ever talk about/discuss the stories with other people?

If yes, what types of things do you discuss with other people?

Crime, Murders, killings

Looking at Africa and the World

Police action

Good news stories eg in *Sun power*

Sport

Other _____

8. How does the *Daily Sun* affect your life? In terms of the following: (to be reworded to suit interviewee)

- Who you are, where you live, what you believe – your identity.
- How you cope with your work and your home life.
- How you feel about being a female/male.
- How you see and react to events in your community.

9. What would your life or day be like without the *Daily Sun*?

10. Rate the following sections of the paper in order of importance. 1 is most important to you.

Information
Entertainment
Education

Other _____

11. Have you ever written in to the *Daily Sun's Speak Up* section?

Why? _____

12. Do you read the *Speak Up* section?

Why? _____

13. What would you tell other people about the *Daily Sun* newspaper?

14. Would you tell people to buy the Daily Sun? Y N

Why? _____

Thank you. I appreciate your contribution.

Additional comments/notes:

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule for in-depth interviews and Focus Group (July 2006) (used as both self-completed and interviewer-administered)

Questionnaire

1. Informed Consent

Give respondents a copy of the **consent and information sheet** explaining the research and their participation in it and get them to sign.

1. Are you willing to answer some questions on the *Daily Sun*?
2. Will you sign this statement agreeing to participate in the research?

2. Initial engagement with the *Daily Sun*.

1. Do you read the *Daily Sun*? Yes No
Why?

2. How often do you read it?

3. Where do you read it?

4. Do you buy your own copy?

3. Exploring readers' responses to different aspects of the newspaper.

(This will include showing various issues of the newspaper to respondents.)

1. What parts of the paper do you read?

2. Do you find some parts more interesting or useful than others?

3. What parts do you find useful?

4. What story/ies do you remember most?

5. What do you think of this issue/story/image?

6. What do you think of the front-page story?

7. What do you think of the crime/human interest/community involvement stories?

4. The newspaper and social interaction (questions designed to assess the role the newspaper plays in the respondent's everyday life).

1. Do you ever discuss stories you have read with other people?

2. Who are these discussions with? _____
Where? _____
3. What are the most frequent topics discussed? _____

4. What kind of discussions follow your reading of the newspaper?

Are they joking/ gossipy/ serious?

5. Do the discussions ever change your views or lead to actions of any kind?

5. Questions designed to assess the agency of *Daily Sun* readers.

1. Do you ever criticize or question items that you read? YES NO
Why? _____
Examples? _____
2. Has reading the *Daily Sun* has it improved your understanding of:
South Africa, _____
Johannesburg, _____
your work, _____

your home life _____

3. Has reading the *Daily Sun* affected the way you relate to or see:
Yourself: _____

your family: _____

partner: _____

children: _____

your boss: _____

your co-workers: _____

the police: _____

your community: _____

political issues: _____

How?

4. Has reading the *Daily Sun* changed your attitudes or affected the way you
behave? YES NO

How? _____

5. Have you noticed any change in the behaviour or attitudes of other *Daily Sun*
readers? YES NO

6. Questions designed to assess the perceived social impact of the *Daily Sun*.

1. How would you say readers benefit from reading the *Daily Sun*?

2. How would describe the kind of people who read and/or support the *Daily Sun*?

3. What have you learnt from reading this newspaper?

4. Do you think reading the newspaper has changed your sense of who you are/how you think about yourself?

Appendix 3: Informed Consent Form for Focus Group



School of Literary Studies, Media & Creative Arts

Private Bag X01, Scottsville Pietermaritzburg 3209

**UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL**

Telephone: 033 260-5024

Fax:033 260 6213

email: vineyd@ukzn.ac.za

Agreement to participate in a research project

I am gathering information for my MA research project at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I would be grateful if you, as a reader of the *Daily Sun*, would agree to answer some questions.

The project I am working on is entitled “Investigating the role of the *Daily Sun* in the new South Africa”. I hope to collect information from readers of the newspaper that will help me understand what role the *Daily Sun* plays in their lives.

I would like you to participate in a group discussion with other readers of the *Daily Sun* which will last for 1½ – 2 hours. I will tape record and take notes during the discussion and use these materials in my research. Once the research is complete, the tapes and notes will be destroyed. I will not try to force you to answer any questions against your will and will not use your name in my research report. You are free to withdraw from the group discussion at any time.

I will cover of the costs of your transport, your time spent in the group discussion and some light refreshments.

If you have further questions after the group discussion, you may contact me or my supervisor at any time. Our address is listed at the top of this letter and our telephone numbers are as follows: Ms Desiray Viney: 033 260 5024; Prof. Anton van der Hoven (supervisor): 033 260 5304.

Thank you,

Desiray Viney

Lecturer in Culture, Communication & Media Studies

University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus)

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

I..... (name of participant) understand the contents of this letter and the nature of the research project, and consent to participate in the research project.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, if I so wish.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

Appendix 3a: Informed Consent form for in-depth interviews



School of Literary Studies, Media & Creative Arts

Private Bag X01, Scottsville Pietermaritzburg 3209 Telephone: 033 260-5024 Fax:033 260 6213

email: vineyd@ukzn.ac.za

Agreement to participate in a research project

I am gathering information for my MA research project at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I would be grateful if you, as a reader of the *Daily Sun*, would agree to answer some questions.

The project I am working on is entitled “Investigating the role of the *Daily Sun* in the new South Africa”. I hope to collect information from readers of the newspaper that will help me understand what role the *Daily Sun* plays in their lives.

I would like to interview you for approximately 15 minutes while you wait at the hospital. I will take notes from the interview and use this information in my research. I will not try to force you to answer any questions against your will and will not use your name in my research report. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. Once my research is complete I will destroy the notes I have made.

If you have further questions after the interview, you may contact me or my supervisor at any time. Our address is listed at the top of this letter and our telephone numbers are as follows: Ms Desiray Viney: 033 260 5024; Prof. Anton van der Hoven (supervisor): 033 260 5304.

Thank you.

Desiray Viney

Lecturer in Culture, Communication & Media Studies

University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus)

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

I..... (name of participant) understand the contents of this letter and the nature of the research project, and consent to participate in the research project.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, if I so wish.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

.....

Appendix 4: List of participants in the Focus Group 6 July 2006