

Beyond Sensation and Sleaze in Urban Settings! *H-Metro* and the Promotion of Water, Hygiene and Sanitation

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Abstract

Tabloids and tabloid journalism are generally considered to be a colloquial type of journalism. They are seen as a contamination of the public sphere by pandering to the lowest common denominator in terms of public taste, simplification of complex issues, de-contextualisation, emotionalism, vulgarity and sensationalism. The controversially acclaimed character of tabloids as a trash and collective demon that contributes little in terms of societal well-being means that its content is generally dismissed as unimportant (Bird, 1992; Sparks, 2000). The launch of English language tabloids, such as *H-Metro* and *B-Metro*, by the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (Zimpapers) in 2009 with the former riding under the catch phrase: 'Real Life, Real Drama' introduced audiences to the world of tabloid journalism. Through a content analysis of randomly picked editions of *H-Metro* and informant interviews with editors, media academics and tabloid readers, this article argues that contrary to the characterisation of tabloids as useless, *H-Metro* is a key vehicle in sensitising audiences on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Issues (WASH) issues including the COVID-19 global pandemic in urban areas as it targets ordinary people who are normally excluded by mainstream newspapers and can be a potent force in ensuring healthy and hygienic urban environments.

Keywords: *Tabloid, journalism, H-Metro, COVID-19, Sanitation, Water, Hygiene*

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INTRODUCTION

Access to water and provision of proper sanitation are basic human rights for the preservation of dignity of every individual. According to UNESCO (2019), improvements in water resources, management and access to water supply and sanitation are important in addressing various social and economic inequalities. Issues of water supply and sanitation are also critical in light of the grim statistics that indicate that three out of 10 people globally have no access to safe drinking water. To complicate the matter, half of the people in the world drinking water from unprotected sources live in Sub-Saharan Africa (WHO/UNICEF, 2017a). According to WHO/UNICEF (2017a), 2.1 billion people lack access to safe and readily available water at home and 4,5 billion lacked access to safely managed sanitation in 2015. These figures do not tell the complete story, as there are huge inequalities between and within countries and between the richest and the poorest (UNICEF, 2017). WASH issues are thus critical because the absence of safe accessible water and sanitation presents many challenges, such as poor health and living conditions, malnutrition and lack of opportunities for education and employment. Social unrest, conflict and violence can also be a result of insufficient access to water and sanitation services (Miletto *et al*, 2017).

According to the Human Rights Watch (2013), Zimbabwe suffers from severe sanitation-related diseases due to lack of clean water and open defecation. Between 2008 and 2009, over 100 000 people contracted cholera in Zimbabwe, Africa's worst epidemic in 15 years, with over 4 200 people succumbing to the disease (*ibid.*). The human rights watchdog noted that diarrhoea is responsible for 10 percent of the deaths of under-five children – a situation that can be prevented by access to potable drinking water and appropriate sanitation. The media can specifically concentrate on the areas of concern identified by the Human Rights Watch, such as failure by government to provide access to potable water, inadequate provision of health information, inability to address poor sanitation, public sector corruption and lack of political will to address these problems at all levels of government.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is informed by the agenda-setting theory/hypotheses developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The media, through their coverage of issues, have the capacity to set an agenda for the public. The central theme of the agenda-setting function of the media is that the press has the power to determine what the people should think about. After studying media and foreign policy, Cohen (1963:13) concluded that news “may not be successful in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about”. The agenda-setting hypothesis was further developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) by studying the 1968 United States presidential election campaign through an examination of the content of political news of the campaign in the press, news magazines and on television. McCombs and Shaw found a high level of correspondence between the amount of attention given to a particular issue in the media and the level of importance assigned to that issue by the people in the community exposed to the media. The concept of agenda-setting is critical in this case since the media appears to be stunningly successful in telling people what to think about. Tabloids like *H-Metro* have the capacity to set the WASH agenda among their readers in meaningful and useful ways that may lead to a better and clean urban environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media, especially print media, play a critical role in information dissemination and enjoy the mileage of being the strongest means of public information through effective agenda-setting and in-depth coverage (Showkat, 2016). Print media are critical because they are a form of communication that create a longer influence on the minds of the reader because of their durability as the reader can always refer back, unlike the electronic media. The media can help to trigger positive change in opinion as well as behaviour and can also lead to public pressure on authorities through sensitisation about sanitation issues (UNICEF, 2017). As noted by the World Bank’s Group Water Global Practice:

The news media plays a pivotal role, not only in raising awareness and support for water and sanitation sector, but also in providing a stronger voice to citizens and in monitoring commitments made by political leaders. When journalists understand the real challenges behind delivering water and sanitation services to the poor, they help facilitate public dialogue and citizen engagement that focuses on relevant solutions (Showkat, 2016:2)

These sentiments are quite instructive on the role that the media play in the WASH issues and this aptly applies to the Zimbabwean situation where huge gaps are observed in terms of water and sanitation, as mentioned earlier. The role of the media is critical, especially in light of the fact that an audit of the European Union (EU) funded WASH projects in 2013 in Sub-Saharan Africa showed that the projects failed to meet the target because the media, among other factors, failed to play the watchdog role (The Water Channel). Additionally, the media remain critical in terms of WASH issues, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of people defecating in the open is still increasing (UNICEF, 2014). The huge expectations on the media are, in most cases placed on the mainstream or serious media. This article focuses specifically on the tabloid media that are not expected to cover such issues of a serious nature, like water and sanitation. However, such media, like tabloids in the Zimbabwean scenario, have a role in sensitising citizens and playing the watchdog roles as shall be demonstrated in this article.

H-Metro is a tabloid in an English language published in Harare from Monday to Friday by the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (1980) (Private) (Limited) (Zimpapers). It was established in 1999 and runs with the catch-phrase 'Real Life, Real Drama'. It concentrates on sensational news, celebrity gossip and scandals (Gadzikwa, 2013). Tabloids have been accused of promoting escapism and docile populace (Franklin, 1997), propagating apathy and cynicism as well as devaluing the journalistic profession (Bird, 1992). Tabloids have also been blamed for pandering to the lowest common denominator in terms of public taste, simplification of complex issues, dramatisation, de-contextualisation and personification – resulting in public apathy and cynicism on fundamental contemporary socio-economic and political developments in society (Franklin, 1997; Ornebring and Jonson, 2004; McNair, 2000; Sparks, 2000; Bird, 2000).

The rejection of tabloids has been countered by other scholars who believe that despite their criticism as being “populist”, “emotionalist” and “simplistic”, the tabloids have played an important role in such areas like campaigning against social injustices, offering an alternative public sphere from the elite-dominated one and criticising the privileged political elite (Barnett, 1998:20). Tabloids also liberate and make news accessible to many people by using simplified language that readers are familiar with (Fiske, 1992), encouraging critical awareness in audiences (Hartley, 1996), catering for every taste in the public sphere (McNair, 1998) and instilling in all its members a sense of community and identity of shared conditions and values (Gripsrud, 2000).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research sought to answer the following key questions:

1. Can a tabloid, like *H-Metro*, be a key tool in the promotion of WASH issues in urban settings?
2. How effective can tabloids, like *H-Metro*, be best utilised in dealing with WASH issues?

To provide answers to the research questions, key informant in-depth qualitative interviews with media experts, editors and lecturers were conducted to elicit their views on the role *H-Metro* can play in WASH issues. In-depth interviews were buttressed by a qualitative content analysis of randomly selected articles from *H-Metro* that demonstrated that the tabloid was now tackling important issues around WASH and that the tabloid was moving beyond just publishing sensation and sleaze for its audiences. The random sampling included picking any available edition and analysing whether there are WASH articles. This was critical so that a proper pattern, in terms of coverage could be obtained. In-depth interviews were selected because they allowed for the understanding of the experience and meanings that people make of an event, process phenomenon or activity (Greeff, 2006). The focused and discursive nature of in-depth interviews also allows for full exploration of whether tabloids can play a part in WASH issues (Morse, 1991; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Seidman, 1998).

The study also employed the qualitative content analysis (QCA) method to examine the selected newspaper articles. Content analysis is a flexible method

of analysing text data that can be used either as qualitative or quantitative (Cavanagh, 1997). QCA is an approach of empirical, methodological analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytic rules and step-by-step models without rash quantification (Mayring, 2000:2). QCA is unlike quantitative content analysis in that it is a dynamic form of analysis of verbal and visual data that is oriented towards summarising the informational contents of that data (Morgan. 1993; Altheide, 1996).

RESULTS

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis of randomly picked editions revealed that, indeed, *H-Metro* covers a wide range of serious issues that affect society. Surprisingly, the reports are written in non-tabloid style. Such serious issues include WASH, among others, as revealed in the story entitled “Food crisis at UZ” (April 4, 2019). It is an example of a story that is of national/societal importance and related to sanitation and health in the broader context. In this story, *H-Metro* reported that University of Zimbabwe students were being served unhygienic food in the halls of residence. This story was written in the broadsheet and serious format in terms of tone and language. What can be deduced from this kind of story appearing in tabloids, such as *H-Metro*, that have been described as concentrating on sleaze, vulgar and lurid issues, point to a departure from its original gossip and sensational past. In fact, *H-Metro* is trying to remodel itself, like some influential tabloids, such as *The Sun* in Britain, that deal with serious issues but still carry on with its sensational tabloid-style stories. Although being a tabloid, *The Sun* has much influence in British politics and transforms public opinion on many issues.

In the same edition, *H-Metro* also published the story, “Kenzim College hails clean-up campaign” (*ibid.*) where a high school college in Waterfalls suburb of Harare supported the clean-up campaign by President Emmerson Mnangagwa that is held nationwide every last Friday of the month. Kenzim College cleaned the Chogovanyika Shopping Centre in St Mary’s in Chitungwiza as a way of inculcating social responsibility in students so that they can emulate the importance of clean environments. One of the organisers was quoted as saying “once our cities are clean many people will not suffer from diseases, such as cholera that are associated with a dirty nation”. The college also revealed plans

to clean other areas in compliance with the call by the President. By publishing such stories, *H-Metro* is setting the agenda and performing a distinct public service in the sensitisation of communities and at the same time fulfilling the wider goal in terms of water and sanitation issues in urban environments.

An important indicator of the official mind of any publication is reflected in its editorial. By their nature, editorials reveal the official position of a newspaper on any issue. Editorials, unlike news stories, contribute an important aspect of a newspaper or content because they provide an opportunity for the press to influence public opinion (Hulteng, 1973; Kriegbaum, 1956; Davies, 1987; Harris and Johnson, 1965). The *H-Metro*, as part of its effort to support clean environments and demonstrate its seriousness, published an editorial entitled “Respect Presidents’ Initiative” (*ibid.*). In this editorial, the tabloid urged the whole nation to take heed of the President’s initiative to clean their environments. The editorial also applauded the efforts of various organisations, such as the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) and other local environmental pressure groups that have embraced the clean-up campaign. The editorial also urged school children to follow the example given by the President and avoid littering their communities and respect service providers like local boards that help to collect litter every day.

The editorial “Respect Presidents’ Initiative” noted that “Harare is already overpopulated, especially in the Central Business District (CBD)... No one has respect for a clean environment anymore as people throw litter all over the CBD” (*H-Metro*, April 4, 2019: 8). The editorial also urged consciousness on the part of citizens in terms of sanitation and clean environments and made a passionate plea on litter bugs.

“Litter bugs think that they are the only ones throwing litter and since they are only few people, they cannot make Zimbabwe dirty while others throw litter because everyone is doing it. The result is the dirty Harare that we are living in. Litter is a result of every little thing we do not place in a bin and as long as you have that habit as an individual, your home, city and country will never be clean” (*ibid.*).

In such elaborate pleas in its editorial, *H-Metro* set the agenda for its readers on such a serious issue and these are the majority, poor and ordinary who, in most cases, populate the city. This kind of information that appeals to the conscience of the readers might lead to some positive change in behaviour and cause arrests of litter bugs. In this case, education and enforcement can be combined to achieve cleaner cities (Kurth, 1981). What may also be needed are engineering solutions, making sure that bins are available in most of the strategic places for people to drop the litter and the collection of litter regularly so that citizens will not feel that all their efforts will be defeated eventually.

This kind of an editorial is mainly the preserve of mainstream broadsheet newspapers. By publishing such an editorial, *H-Metro* also demonstrated that it can tackle serious issues and that it regards its readers as responsible community members who have an important part to play in meaningful societal issues beyond their taste for gossip and sleaze stuff.

***H-METRO* AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, *H-Metro* also tried to sensitise readers about many aspects of the pandemic. Tabloids can be viable tools in communicating important issues to their readers who are critical stakeholders in the success of such initiatives. Tabloids can set important societal agendas and communicate key public service information to the excluded subaltern on top of their usual sensational and sleaze stuff. *H-Metro* exhibited these qualities in its coverage of the COVID-19 global pandemic by sensitising citizens on the preventive measures that they must take; including relaying critical government health messages that are important in stemming the spread of the disease. By deliberately focusing on the pandemic, tabloids, like *H-Metro*, have demonstrated that reporters are responsible citizens who can be called to action in times of emergencies (McQuail, 2013). In its edition of March 17, 2020, *H-Metro* exclusively published lead stories related to the COVID-19 pandemic, with such articles as “COVID-19 suspects isolated ... Borders still open... Bulawayo and Harare on high alert... Mass gatherings discouraged....” The front page had a picture of the then health minister and workmen renovating one of the designated COVID-19 hospitals in preparation for admitting patients.

The same edition carried another story with the headline ‘Health minister calls for cleanliness,’ where the health minister urged citizens to start practising good personal hygiene and high standards of cleanliness in public places in order to prevent COVID-19. Stories on COVID-19 were written in a serious tone, providing important updates while being instructive in terms of the information on such things like washing hands with soap after using toilets, handling animal remains and caring for the sick, as well as changing greeting patterns. The story also informed the public on the cancellation of high-level conferences as some of the precautionary measures by the government. Another story headlined “Four more labs for COVID-19 testing” advised citizens that four more laboratories be built in Mutare, Kadoma, Masvingo and Gweru to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet another story that was featured in the same edition with important public service announcement, had a banner which warned: “No ban on gatherings, YET! Cabinet to deliberate on measures”. The story discourages large gatherings associated with Easter holidays as well as non-essential travel, and encourages the provision of hand sanitisers to all public institutions and buildings, such as offices, supermarkets and banks.

Other stories included an update on the state of the closure of borders – “Zim borders open: Kazembe”, where it was announced that Zimbabwe will not close its borders but strengthen screening, monitoring and surveillance. The other news article, titled “Govt on rigorous contact tracing,” reiterated government’s resolve to embark on contact tracing for COVID-19 victims. By writing such stories, tabloids, such as *H-Metro*, play a distinct public service role in the dissemination of critical information, albeit in a serious manner not typical of tabloids. Further analysis of *H-Metro*’s coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic will likely reveal a similar trend of informing critical stakeholders on key developments and government measures – a sign that tabloids are indispensable in WASH issues.

Another story relating to COVID-19 was entitled “Water pipes damaged during demolitions” (May 4, 2020). It reported that a bulldozer destroyed water taps, disrupting the provision of clean water which is crucial in terms of the prevention of COVID-19. The water taps were destroyed in the demolitions of illegal structures by Harare City Council in the high-density

suburb of Sunningdale. In the same story, *H-Metro* echoed the voices of residents who raised concerns about sanitation issues, such as the provision of functional public toilets at shopping centres and the collection of garbage. Residents are quoted saying, “It is better for you (Harare City Council) to remove everything including that closed toilet building and uncollected garbage that the Council is failing to service.” What this story demonstrates is that tabloids can be potent forces in the water and sanitation fight by pointing at areas that need attention, albeit with their usual doses of sleaze and sensational angles. This view is also shared by many media experts who think that tabloids, such as *H-Metro*, have an immense capacity that might need some little bit of focusing to attract the attention of policy-makers.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Expert views on whether tabloids like *H-Metro* can be a reliable source in the promotion of water and sanitation issues were diverse, ranging from complete denial to comprehensive consensus that can make meaningful contributions. Those who completely refuted that idea seemed to think of the tabloid only in terms of its earlier practices and share the views of critics such as Bird (1999) and McNair (2001) who believe that tabloids are full of trash and can contribute nothing to society, other than temporary diversions from public affairs. The belief that tabloids cannot contribute well to issues to do with water and sanitation was also informed by the normative roles that tabloids are usually associated with, including publishing stories sensationally on issues about sleaze, sex and celebrity gossip. Such responses were oblivious to the facts on the ground and the current practices by *H-Metro* as has been revealed by the content analysis of randomly picked issues. Those who believe that *H-Metro* can play an important part in water and sanitation issues pointed to aspects that are informed by certain realities on the ground and also suggested ways in which the tabloid can be enhanced if it is to play a more meaningful role.

THE PESSIMISTIC AND CONVENTIONAL PERCEPTIONS

Respondents in this category were firmly engrained in the perceptions that tabloids are not serious newspapers and should be confined to the less serious issues that do not include issues such as water and sanitation. One media

lecturer interviewed on 6 February 2020, completely refuted that tabloids can be of any use, arguing that water and sanitation issues are “not the stuff for tabloid newspapers... these issues are best addressed by a mainstream media that address livelihood issues or community-based media.” With or without evidence of the tabloids dealing with these issues, the lecturer still maintained the view that even if the tabloid carries these matters, it still would not make any impact. The lecturer did admit that perhaps the true test of whether tabloid readers take heed of such messages can only be left to tabloid readers themselves. What this points to is the fact that in most cases, what the audiences make of what they read is much more complex than what people ordinarily think. It is also possible that tabloid messages may end up in the realm of the elite through interpersonal channels, among others.

One media consultant also said on 3 April 2020 that the bone of contention among those who dismiss tabloid news as unhelpful is the notion that does not attract a readership which is interested in such serious issues unless they publish headlines such as “Dozens of used condoms found in the church and nunnery septic tanks.” What such examples above point to, is that such views miss the fact that while the disposal of condoms in the church may point to illicit sexual activities in a nunnery, the story also points to a sanitation issue – the correct disposal of used condoms. Beyond the sensation, it seems the news can still be delivered and if such a story is on the same page with a serious issue, then by chance or choice it may get the attention of the reader and produce the required change in behaviour and attitude.

Some of the pessimistic views on the capabilities of the tabloid in dealing with serious issues, such as water and sanitation are informed by elitist denials that *H-Metro* is going astray in trying to dabble into serious news as one media critic on 4 April 2020 noted that,

I do not think *H-Metro* can be a vehicle in dealing with sanitation issues in cities because it is suffering from an identity crisis. *H-Metro* was established as a scandals paper that mainly sold sex stories. It then tried to ditch that line and pursue a sober line but they are struggling.

While the above sentiments dismiss the role of the tabloid in dealing with issues such as water and sanitation, they do confirm that the article is indeed trying to rebrand and focus on other issues that are beneficial to communities. This is an important admission that points to the possibilities of the tabloid in making greater contributions in terms of WASH matters, if there is a nuanced and serious focus whilst using the sensationalist aspects in other stories to attract the readers to the newspaper and possibly inculcate the serious issues with time. What is also critical is the fact that tabloid readers are also human beings who have a part to play in water, hygiene and sanitation issues and that the information should be packed in simplistic ways so that they understand. This is also critical since such people are overlooked and ignored by the broadsheet newspapers. Water and sanitation issues may only succeed if there is the inclusivity of all actors, both the elite and non-elite. Tabloid newspapers thus fit in very well in the mix.

SETTING AND ARTICULATING THE AGENDA FOR WASH ISSUES

Tabloid newspapers can play an important part in setting the agenda and articulating WASH issues in urban areas. Respondents in this category are of the view that *H-Metro* will go a long way as a source of information but has to be supplemented by a strong dissemination strategy that might include distribution through the use of social media platforms such *WhatsApp*, among others. *H-Metro* can effectively deal with these issues, especially in its catchment area of Harare, Norton and Chitungwiza. One media editor interviewed on 8 April 2020 did confirm this by noting that “*H-Metro* is ideal in dealing with issues such as water and sanitation if the focus is Harare. ...although the *H-Metro* has dropped city scandals, its popularity went down but as a vehicle for urban messaging it will just be fine”. What this sentiment shows is that as a tabloid, *H-Metro* has built a huge reputation. This can be useful in spreading important information on serious topics. The editor also confirmed that the tabloid is indeed shifting from mainly city scandals to serious issues, such as water and sanitation.

The ability of the tabloid to make headway in such issues like WASH, is also outlined by another media activist on 3 March 2020, who argued that *H-Metro* can play a critical role but the only challenge would be getting policy-

makers to make it a serious source of news. “It is already modelled like the British *Sun* that has serious issues while having the topless page 3 girls. *H-Metro* has a comprehensive English football coverage that most ordinary people in Zimbabwe follow.” What might be its main shortcomings, as expressed by respondents, is the capacity of the tabloid to be taken seriously by policy-makers. The consensus remains that the tabloid is critical in raising awareness amongst its readers, something that is important for generating the required change in behaviour.

Other aspects that have been pointed out in terms of the suitability and potential of *H-Metro* to tackle serious issues include the fact that, as one respondent stressed on 6 March 2020, the tabloid generally “dwells on issues of public interest and the so-called common people go for such papers ahead of others.” This point is buttressed by the fact that the tabloid is written in simple language easily understood by ordinary readers and also the fact that *H-Metro* has become the only accessible form of “magazine” as most magazines have disappeared from the Zimbabwean media space due to the debilitating economic collapse for more than two decades (Raftopoulos, 2009).

Another important aspect that makes the tabloid a useful vehicle is that it has become, as one journalist said on 3 April 2020, “a more followed paper for its melodramatic approach to news and gossip and it will be more effective in enhancing WASH issues. But the question is: would it be acceptable since it is not a serious paper?”. What the above extract points to is that sensation and drama are key attributes of tabloid newspapers and these can be exploited to draw the attention of readers and are not bad aspects after all. A reader can read a story only if it has some element of attraction. It is only after being attracted that a person reads a story. This aspect is prevalent even in broadsheet news stories.

POLICING CORRUPT OFFICIALS IN WASH-RELATED ISSUES

While the role of tabloids has been dismissed, some water and sanitation activists have hailed the *H-Metro* for playing a critical role in exposing corrupt activities. According to an interview with one WASH activist, *H-Metro* has played a crucial role in issues to do with water and sanitation through its coverage of financial scandals in water projects through naming and shaming. The naming and shaming have resulted in transparency in terms of how water funds have been managed. Examples include the abuse of the Chinese loan meant for water and sewage reticulation in Harare and Zimfund projects bankrolled by various United Nations donor agencies. *H-Metro* managed to expose key officials in the Harare City Council responsible for looting the funds through naming and shaming. This kind of sensational reporting helped to raise alarm and stopped the looting. In a way, this contributes to healthy local urban authorities as resources are channelled towards their intended purposes to ensure transparency.

As the WASH activist noted above, it is clear that *H-Metro* has also been influential in exposing malpractices in terms of tenders for water treatment chemicals, including some that involved prominent figures in government. Such exposures are likely to make the perpetrators less willing to engage in corrupt activities. In a way, the tabloid could be said to be playing a prominent role in terms of exposing malpractices through its investigative practices. More importantly, the *H-Metro* expositions are written in sensational ways but are not just trash but evidence based. Tabloids, in the case of *H-Metro*, seem to have assumed a nuanced mainstream approach and now cover serious issues in response to the needs of the audiences although the sensational mode is maintained to captivate and lure the readership. Communicating issues such as water and sanitation is critical for tabloids like *H-Metro*, because their audiences have a role to play in ensuring that urban environments are clean. More importantly, *H-Metro* expands the public sphere (Dahlgren, 1999) by targeting this segment that is not catered for by the mainstream newspapers.

MAXIMISING AND ORGANISING THE TABLOID POTENTIAL ON WASH ISSUES

There is consensus among optimistic respondents that tabloids like *H-Metro* can be effective vehicles in dealing with sanitation issues in cities. The

stumbling block that has been identified currently is that the mind-set of many journalists and editors at *H-Metro* and similar media outlets is that issues like WASH are regarded to be dull and not able to bring in the much-needed revenue. As one newspaper editor noted, tabloid style and techniques can work in favour of the dissemination of WASH issues. The editor on 9 April 2020 argued that,

Tabloids are already known to appeal to readers' emotions, whipping up the mob and appealing to the basest of human instincts. Publishers of tabloids can take advantage of this aspect and enhance issues around water and sanitation. What is required is for tabloids to take advantage and make use of their strengths, namely 'storytelling' news style, and focus on personal/individual narratives of people in the cities and other locales who will give first-hand accounts on how WASH issues have negatively affected them. These tabloids can create vibrant discussions between authorities and the affected populace. The style of reporting (Sensational) can help jolt responsible authorities into acting!

Sentiments expressed above also point to the relative strength that tabloids have in terms of articulating WASH issues. The editor, unlike other critics, is aware that tabloids cater to a specific segment of the community that is not targeted by mainstream newspapers. Since WASH issues are regarded as dull and unattractive by other media, the only way that they can be made alive would be to make them appealing in tabloid style, without exaggerating the facts. In short, these issues are human-centred and need to be emotionalised so that the respective constituencies can even raise the issues with responsible authorities or evoke outrage and demonstrate better services and cleaner environments. The issue of directly influencing elite policy-makers will not matter here, since the actions of the citizens will make them spring into action. The role of tabloids, in this case, will be to raise alarm and outrage among the citizens who will demand corrective measures from the authorities, especially in the rapidly declining urban environments in Zimbabwe.

An editor of a talk radio station on 20 May 2020 also alluded to the fact that *H-Metro* has particular market-sensational news, but, in reality, it can and carries vital public interest news that is of immense importance,

H-Metro, as a tabloid is hard wired towards sensational news and indeed that is their market. However, an assessment of their newspaper shows that they also carry a number of public interest and public policy stories regarding health - including WASH issues. The key to unlocking coverage is for editors either through training (and moral persuasion) or sponsorship to be encouraged towards dedicating more coverage of WASH issues

What may be needed by the editor of *H-Metro* to effectively deal with WASH issues, is the specific packaging of the news to make it sexy enough to suit the readership. This calls for application of health communication strategies that are relevant, in particular, using celebrities or prominent personalities to communicate certain messages and values associated with WASH issues. In order for *H-Metro* to be more relevant, a deliberate strategy could be developed by WASH campaigners and the editors of the tabloid that must clearly set out what needs to be achieved and the mechanisms for executing such a strategy. This, therefore, implies is that WASH issues can be promoted by the tabloid to its readers who are already a captive audience. Whoever wants to get the message to these audiences can utilise the tabloid newspapers for effective dissemination. These tabloids are read by ordinary people who play a critical role in WASH issues. From this emerging view, the notion that tabloids are trash or useless (Bird, 1999) does not find support for the Zimbabwean scenario. *H-Metro* has, in fact, gravitated towards the more serious issues in society.

CONCLUSION

What has emerged from this discussion is the fact that tabloids do have a role to play in issues such as WASH, including the COVID-19 global pandemic if there is a deliberate focus by the editors. Tabloid readers are also part of the targeted population in terms of such issues, hence the tabloids have a role to communicate such information. *H-Metro* can be a very important tool in the water, hygiene and sanitation agenda either by choice or chance. The Zimbabwean experience has also shown that tabloids have been communitised

and do have unique influence, like broadsheets. While they publish stories that people love, they can throw in issues like sanitation and hygiene and, by chance, push the agenda on the popular standing that these papers have.

It seems critics who think that scandal and emotion is limited to sex only, also miss the fact that water and sanitation issues involve emotions as well. Tabloid techniques such as sensationalisation and emotionalisation can also be critical in story-telling and can produce the desired action from readers who are part of the implementers of WASH issues. If properly structured and organised, tabloids can be the new frontiers in the campaign for water, hygiene and sanitation issues. They can also democratise WASH issues and guard against corrupt practices by naming and shaming those involved in scandals that threaten the provision of water and sanitation services in local authorities.

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- Tawanda Bote, “Kenzim College hails clean-up campaign” (05/04/19)
- Editorial, “Respect Presidents’ Initiative” (04/04/19)
- Aaron Nyamayaro, “Water pipes damage during demolitions” (04/05/20)
- Fiona Ruzha, “Four more labs for COVID-19 testing” (17/03/20)
- Fiona Ruzha, “Health minister calls for cleanliness” (17/03/20)
- Fiona Ruzha, “No ban on gatherings, YET! ... Cabinet to deliberate on measures” (17/03/20)
- Fiona Ruzha, “Zim borders open: Kazembe” (17/03/20)
- Mathew Masinge, “Govt on rigorous contact tracing” (17/03/20)

Interviews

- Interview with media lecturer (06/02/20).
- Interview with media consultant (03/04/20)
- Interview with media editor (08/04/20).
- Interview with former media editor (03/30/20)
- Interview with media critic (06/03/20).
- Interview with water activist (15/03/20)
- Interview with former broadsheet newspaper editor (09/04/20)
- Interview with a Radio Talk editor (20/05/20)