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**Gender transformation and media representations:  
Journalistic discourses in three South African  
newspapers**

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>LIST OF IMAGES.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 THE ORIGINS, IMPETUS AND INSPIRATION FOR THE RESEARCH .....	9
1.2 APPROACH AND AIMS OF THE RESEARCH .....	12
<b>2 FEMINISM: A THEORETICAL AND POLITICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE.....</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1 INTRODUCING FEMINISM .....	17
2.2 GENDER AS A TOOL OF ANALYSIS .....	19
2.3 DIVERSE FEMINIST TOPOGRAPHIES: LOCATING AND CONCEPTUALISING COMPARATIVE FEMINIST FRAMEWORKS FOR THE RESEARCH.....	21
2.3.1 <i>A note on the significance of “progressive” and “liberal-inclusionary” feminisms</i> .....	21
2.3.2 <i>Liberal-inclusionary feminist approaches</i> .....	21
2.3.3 <i>Progressive feminist approaches</i> .....	32
2.4 “MIND THE GAP PLEASE”: A NOTE ON ANTI-FEMINIST BACKLASH.....	41
2.5 CONCLUSIONS.....	47
<b>3 THE NEWSROOM AND BEYOND: THEORISING THE MEDIA.....</b>	<b>49</b>
3.1 THE MEDIA AS SOCIAL AGENT: DEBATING THE MEDIA’S IMPACT ON SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION....	49
3.2 INTO THE NEWSROOM: JOURNALISTS, JOURNALISM AND THE MEDIA PRODUCTION CONTEXT .....	54
3.3 POWER, VOICE AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION: A FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF PRINT MEDIA .....	62
3.4 CONCLUSIONS.....	66
<b>4 THE STATE OF THE PRESS: LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXT AND CRITIQUES.....</b>	<b>69</b>
4.1 THE SOUTH AFRICAN PRESS: POLITICS AND POLITICAL ECONOMY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.....	69
4.2 THE CHANGING FACE OF LOCAL AND GLOBAL JOURNALISM: TABLOIDISATION IN PERSPECTIVE .....	74
4.3 CHALLENGING REPRESENTATIONS: FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF MEDIA PRODUCTS.....	80
4.3.1 <i>An international overview of feminist media studies</i> .....	80
4.3.2 <i>Feminist media studies in South Africa</i> .....	88
4.4 INSTITUTIONALISING CHANGE: SOUTH AFRICA’S GENDER AND MEDIA POLICY ENVIRONMENT.....	95
4.5 CONTEMPORARY TURNING POINTS: POLITICS, PRESS FREEDOM AND FEMINISM IN SOUTH AFRICA AT THE TIME OF RESEARCH.....	97
4.5.1 <i>Contextualising the research within contemporary events and debates</i> .....	97
4.5.2 <i>Zuma, Zuma, Zuma: Three key dimensions to Jacob Zuma in the media</i> .....	98
4.5.3 <i>Partiality, prejudice or public interest? Debates over the media’s role in national transformation</i> 106	
4.5.4 <i>Crossing the invisible line: Setting the limits on “free speech” in the media</i> .....	107
4.6 CONCLUSIONS.....	110
<b>5 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>113</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION .....	113
5.2 FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS.....	114
5.3 SELECTION OF MEDIA INSTITUTIONS FOR THE STUDY .....	123
5.4 RESEARCH COMPONENT ONE: ANALYSING NEWSPAPER CONTENT .....	125
5.4.1 <i>Selecting an appropriate methodology</i> .....	125
5.4.2 <i>Method applied</i> .....	133
5.5 RESEARCH COMPONENT TWO: PRINCIPLE RESEARCH WITH PRINT NEWS JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS 139	



5.6	DATA ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL THEMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS .....	143
5.6.1	<i>Selecting a data analysis approach</i> .....	143
5.6.2	<i>Incorporating thematic analysis</i> .....	143
5.6.3	<i>Incorporating critical discourse analysis</i> .....	146
5.6.3.1	<i>Choosing critical discourse analysis</i> .....	146
5.6.3.2	<i>Defining discourse</i> .....	147
5.6.3.3	<i>Discourse, power and social change</i> .....	149
5.6.3.4	<i>Making discourse analysis critical</i> .....	152
5.7	A NOTE ON STUDYING RACE AND THE LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH .....	153
5.8	CONCLUSIONS.....	156
<b>6</b>	<b>GENDERED DISCOURSES IN DISCONTINUITY: ANALYSING NEWSPAPER CONTENT</b>	<b>159</b>
6.1	INTRODUCTION .....	159
6.2	PARTICIPATING NEWSPAPERS: A PROFILE .....	160
6.2.1	<i>Sunday Sun</i> .....	160
6.2.2	<i>Sunday Times</i> .....	162
6.2.3	<i>Mail &amp; Guardian</i> .....	165
6.2.4	<i>Summary of Newspaper Profiles</i> .....	167
6.3	GENDERED DISCOURSES: ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER CONTENT .....	169
6.3.1	<i>Broad Themes Emerging</i> .....	169
6.3.2	<i>From the Podium to the Bed: Gendered Discourses in the Sunday Sun</i> .....	171
6.3.2.1	<i>General style, content and discursive orientation</i> .....	171
6.3.2.2	<i>Counts of textual units with gender relevance</i> .....	175
6.3.2.3	<i>Discussion and examples of discourses in the Sunday Sun</i> .....	176
6.3.3	<i>Investigations and Sensexualisations: Gendered Discourses in the Sunday Times</i> .....	197
6.3.3.1	<i>General style, content and discursive orientation</i> .....	197
6.3.3.2	<i>Counts of textual units with gender relevance</i> .....	201
6.3.3.3	<i>Discussion and examples of discourses in the Sunday Times</i> .....	202
6.3.4	<i>Carving spaces: Gendered Discourses in the Mail &amp; Guardian</i> .....	217
6.3.4.1	<i>General style, content and discursive orientation</i> .....	217
6.3.4.2	<i>Counts of textual units with gender relevance</i> .....	221
6.3.4.3	<i>Discussion and examples of discourses in the Mail &amp; Guardian</i> .....	224
6.3.5	<i>Key Findings from the Newspaper Discourse Analysis</i> .....	231
<b>7</b>	<b>NEGOTIATING DISCOURSES OF VALUE: INTERVIEWS WITH JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS</b>	<b>238</b>
7.1	INTRODUCTION .....	238
7.2	INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE .....	240
7.3	PARTICIPATION AND POSITIONALITY: INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS .....	243
7.4	MAKING NEWS FOR THE PEOPLE: JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSES FROM THE SUNDAY SUN .....	250
7.4.1	<i>Market and market appeal</i> .....	250
7.4.2	<i>Getting stories, writing stories</i> .....	258
7.4.3	<i>Role of the media</i> .....	259
7.4.4	<i>Notions of gender transformation and gender issues</i> .....	272
7.4.5	<i>Discursive strategies for transformation</i> .....	283
7.5	STRADDLING TRADITIONAL AND POPULAR NEWS POLARITIES: JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSES FROM THE SUNDAY TIMES .....	294
7.5.1	<i>Market and market appeal</i> .....	294
7.5.2	<i>Getting stories, writing stories</i> .....	298
7.5.3	<i>Role of the media</i> .....	299
7.5.4	<i>Notions of gender transformation and gender issues</i> .....	312
7.5.5	<i>Discursive strategies for transformation</i> .....	324
7.6	BALANCING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSES FROM THE MAIL & GUARDIAN .....	326
7.6.1	<i>Market and market appeal</i> .....	326
7.6.2	<i>Getting stories, writing stories</i> .....	331
7.6.3	<i>Role of the media</i> .....	334



7.6.4	<i>Notions of gender transformation and gender issues</i> .....	342
7.6.5	<i>Discursive strategies for transformation</i> .....	350
7.7	CONCLUSIONS.....	353
<b>8</b>	<b>FINAL REFLECTIONS</b> .....	<b>356</b>
8.1	INTRODUCTION.....	356
8.2	GLANCING BACK: A SYNOPSIS OF THE RESEARCH APPROACH AND FINDINGS.....	357
8.2.1	<i>Approach</i> .....	357
8.2.2	<i>Limitations of the study</i> .....	361
8.2.3	<i>Key themes arising from the study</i> .....	362
8.2.3.1	<i>Discursive devices and diverse spaces</i> .....	362
8.2.3.2	<i>Lags in “private sphere” gender discourses</i> .....	363
8.2.3.3	<i>Journalists and editors in discursive negotiation</i> .....	365
8.2.3.4	<i>Reader primacy, political economy and the democratisation of the media</i> .....	366
8.2.3.5	<i>Indirect didacticism through the news</i> .....	367
8.2.3.6	<i>Discursive strategies and negotiations in creating news texts</i> .....	368
8.2.3.7	<i>Dominant liberal-inclusionary paradigms in understanding “gender transformation”</i> .....	370
8.3	LOOKING FORWARD: CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH.....	371
8.3.1	<i>So what does it mean? Implications of the research</i> .....	371
8.3.1.1	<i>Bringing gender activism and the media industry together</i> .....	371
8.3.1.2	<i>Harnessing the dynamism of media roles in South Africa</i> .....	371
8.3.1.3	<i>Interrogating dominant gender transformation discourses</i> .....	372
8.3.1.4	<i>Re-examining tabloidisation, political economy and gender in South Africa</i> .....	374
8.3.1.5	<i>The need to promote a progressive “gender lens”</i> .....	375
8.3.1.6	<i>Exploring and harnessing discursive openings for change</i> .....	378
8.3.2	<i>Contributing to the fields of gender studies and feminist media studies in South Africa</i> .....	380
8.3.3	<i>And where to from here? Vistas for further research</i> .....	381
8.4	CONCLUSIONS.....	383
	<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>384</b>
	<b>APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT GUIDE</b> .....	<b>403</b>

## ABSTRACT

Despite apparent feminist advancements within contemporary South Africa, media representations continue to reproduce discourses that inhibit processes of gender transformation. As such, the media represents an important site of continued struggle over gendered meanings and power. While prolific research on gender and the media has been undertaken, there is still a need in South Africa to explore the ways in which media professionals themselves perceive their role in generating gendered media texts. This research therefore aimed to unpack media professionals' perceptions of gender transformation through their work. Furthermore, given the perceived limitations of certain approaches to gender and the media in South Africa, feminist theory conceptualised as "progressive" was applied in the study towards strengthening engendered media production research. The study involved a thematic, critical discourse analysis of newspaper texts and interviews with journalists and editors from three weekly news publications. The study revealed a high level of discursive contradiction in gender representations, especially in the tabloidised newspapers. Gendered meanings were effected through different discursive devices, namely complicit, advocate and spatial discourses, which played out variously within different spaces of the newspapers. In particular, gender transformative representations of the "private" sphere lagged significantly behind those related to the "public" sphere. In addition, important negotiations over gendered meaning were being undertaken in the more "informal" newspaper spaces, such as columns and jokes pages, often neglected in news media research. The interviews further highlighted lags in feminist trajectories pertaining to the "private sphere", with liberal-inclusionary feminist conceptions of gender transformation, focused on women's public participation, predominating. With a few exceptions, progressive feminist perspectives, moving beyond numerical representation towards greater attention to symbolic, relational and integrated understandings of gender, were generally lacking. In addition, many participants conveyed a largely positivistic discourse of objectivity through the media. However, various discursive strategies through which social transformation values were imbibed into newspaper texts were identified, and the research highlighted potential discursive opportunities for gender transformative change. The central strategy identified was the need for the development of a progressive gender lens and the decentralisation of a liberal-inclusionary feminist paradigm within the media and broader society.

## LIST OF IMAGES

<b>Image 1:</b>	Cartoon of Jacob Zuma’s “AIDS shower”, Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 12 May 2006	...101
<b>Image 2:</b>	Cartoon about the ANC succession race, Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 7 December 2007	...103
<b>Image 3:</b>	Cartoon about the ANC Women’s League’s nomination of Zuma for ANC president, Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 6 December 2007	...104
<b>Image 4:</b>	Scathing cartoons about Jacob Zuma and his relationship with the media, Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 7 April and 7 July 2006	...105
<b>Image 5:</b>	Tabloid news content, Sunday Sun, 19 August 2007	...171
<b>Image 6:</b>	“Aspirational” discursive content, Sunday Sun, 19 August 2007	...172
<b>Image 7:</b>	Images of women in the public sphere, Sunday Sun, 9 December (top left), 2 December (top right) and 9 December 2007 (bottom)	...176
<b>Image 8:</b>	Complicit discourses of heteronormativity, Sunday Sun, 12 August 2007	...178
<b>Image 9:</b>	More complicit discourses of heteronormativity, Sunday Sun, 2 December 2007	...180
<b>Image 10:</b>	Religious column reproducing patriarchal discourses, Sunday Sun, 12 August 2007	...184
<b>Image 11:</b>	Religious columns with discourses naturalising gender differences, Sunday Sun, 12 August (left) and 9 December 2007 (right)	...187
<b>Image 12:</b>	Columns promoting progressive gender discourses, Sunday Sun, 2 December (left) and 12 August 2007 (right)	...191
<b>Image 13:</b>	Discursive contrast in gendered representations of women, Sunday Sun, 2 December 2007	...193
<b>Image 14:</b>	Contradictory discourses on gender based violence, Sunday Sun, 12 August (left) and 16 December 2007 (right)	...194
<b>Image 15:</b>	Content variety and colloquialism, Sunday Times, 2 December 2007	...197

<b>Image 16:</b>	Gendered constructs of consumers and consumables in the business section, Sunday Times, 2 December 2007	...202
<b>Image 17:</b>	Picture-stories in the objectification of women, Sunday Times, 2 December 2007	...203
<b>Image 18:</b>	The privatisation of women's public participation in the sports section, Sunday Times, 16 December 2007	...206
<b>Image 19:</b>	Trivialising gender issues in a sports column, Sunday Times, 2 December 2007	...206
<b>Image 20:</b>	Discursive sidestepping of gender dimensions through the framing of a quote, Sunday Times, 9 December 2007	...208
<b>Image 21:</b>	Gender equity discourses sidestepping constructions underlying inequity, Sunday Times, 9 December 2007	...209
<b>Image 22:</b>	Tabloid humour and colloquialism as trivialising gendered topics, Sunday Times, 16 December 2007	...210
<b>Image 23:</b>	Internal contradiction and struggles over gender transformation meanings and strategies, Sunday Times, 13 January 2008	...211
<b>Image 24:</b>	Personalised voicing in representations of gender based violence, Sunday Times, 2 December 2007	...212
<b>Image 25:</b>	Rare woman columnist discussing contemporary gender issues, Sunday Times, 2 December 2007	...213
<b>Image 26:</b>	Feature writing highlighting social and structural gender dynamics, Sunday Times, 13 January 2008	...214
<b>Image 27:</b>	Special issue featuring the voices of women leaders on the ANC succession race, Mail & Guardian, 7 December 2007	...218
<b>Image 28:</b>	Spatial discourses of voicing through special written contributions by women leaders, Mail & Guardian, 7 December 2007	...224
<b>Image 29:</b>	Discursively delving into issues of symbolic representation, Mail & Guardian, 7 December 2007	...226
<b>Image 30:</b>	Complicit and activist discourses working together in a feature on sex work, Mail & Guardian, 30 November 2007	...228
<b>Image 31:</b>	Raising socio-economic and structural dimensions to gender, Mail & Guardian, 30 November (left) and 7 December 2007 (right)	...229
<b>Image 32:</b>	Editorial comment on controversial column on gender based violence, Sunday Sun, 12 August 2007	...290

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1:</b>	Content Analysis Framework for Pilot Qualitative Component One Methodology	...127
<b>Table 2:</b>	Newspaper Issue Sample for Component One of the Research	...133
<b>Table 3:</b>	Categories for Component One Counts of Gendered Textual Units	...136
<b>Table 4:</b>	Participating Newspaper Readership and Circulation Figures	...167
<b>Table 5:</b>	Research Component One Counts for the Sunday Sun	...174
<b>Table 6:</b>	Research Component One Counts for the Sunday Times	...200
<b>Table 7:</b>	Research Component One Counts for the Mail & Guardian	...220
<b>Table 8:</b>	Interview Participant Profile	...239