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Tabloid Journalism

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of tabloids as a form and style of journalism that sits in opposition to broadsheets. We trace the development of tabloids to the rotary press and paper formats and discuss the process of metonymic transfer through which the term was extended to refer to a form of journalism dominated by infotainment and soft-news content along with the increased reliance on headlines and visuals. The piece concludes with an overview of ongoing transformations affecting tabloid journalism in the context of digital and social media.

Keywords

Tabloids, clickbait, broadsheet, viral, infotainment

Introduction

Tabloid journalism refers to a form and style of journalism that sits directly opposite broadsheet or quality journalism. The term broadsheet stems from the use of rotary printing press in the late 18th century when the broad-sheet was the full size of a rotary press plate. The opposition between full and compact page size newspapers, or broadsheet and tabloid, remained relatively constant in journalism newsprint, with the earlier being printed on A1 paper and the later in variations of the smaller A3 paper. While the terminology emerged to refer to different layouts dedicated to the pre-print templates of the newspaper sections, they evolved to distinguish newsprint according to market segmentation, editorial style, political alignment, and circulation.

Broadsheet and tabloids are currently employed to refer to editorial decisions that define newspapers' journalism standards, setting quality press (broadsheets) apart from popular press (tabloids). By the early twentieth century, through a process of metonymic transfer, the term was extended to embrace commercial media in general, especially television, in a context of widespread concern about the power of the media and the quality of journalism. Tabloid press became increasingly specialized in the techniques of connecting reports on consumer products to economics and offering around-the-clock coverage of celebrity gossip and popular culture.

Early incursions into the tabloid genre date from the nineteenth century with experimental publications designed to appeal to popular taste, but it was only during the following century that the term gained a dedicated application to journalism and print media. According to Greenberg (1996), the fast adoption of the term in the public discourse was ironically driven by the multiple expressions of disapproval from public intellectuals, who scorned the oversimplification of tabloid narrative as a potential threat to the public. It was during this period that the differences between the two formats of journalism became ostensible opposites.

Broadsheet newspapers rely heavily on investigative approaches to news that emphasize in-depth coverage and a sober tone in articles and editorials, with smaller headlines, fewer pictures, and lengthier texts that are staples of the quality press (Preston, 2004). Tabloid content, on the other hand, tends to expose sexual misconduct and explore conservative and iconoclast topical interests, with strong commercial emphasis and populist vernacular. The type of writer and the editorial emphasis on the subject matter are also considerably different in tabloid media compared with broadsheets, with readers' voices being amplified in different ways by different types of newspaper. In terms of article composition, tabloid news articles are on average shorter and place more emphasis on headline and image space (Rowe, 2011).

The editorial differences between tabloids and broadsheets are also reflected in their different readership targets. The readership of British broadsheets reacts mostly to articles dedicated to "substantive issues rather than human interest or life style themes" (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011, p. 991), with commentaries concentrated on domestic politics and party policy and lifestyle issues such as sports, celebrity, and gardening receiving comparatively fewer comments. On the other hand, most comments made on British online tabloids are concentrated on religion, with the lion's share of online posts presenting a topical focus on sport, celebrity, and gardening. Dialogue and debate among online readers of British newspapers was also found to be limited almost entirely to broadsheet discussion threads, with most of this debate taking place on Guardian Online (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011).

While broadsheet newspapers emphasize hard news coverage, fact-checking, and research based on a timeline in which the story unfolds, tabloid newspapers present on average less detailed articles often directed by marketing departments and heavily influenced by demographic appeal and audience share. The readership of the tabloid press is on average younger and less educated (Andersen, 2003; Rowe, 2011). On the other hand, the detailed coverage of political issues offered by broadsheets appeals to a readership more interested in politics and more likely to be well informed. In addition to these differences in business model and audience demographics, tabloids generally have a larger circulation compared with broadsheets.

The differences between broadsheet and tabloid content remain intertwined with the physical transmission medium. Newspapers that transitioned to tabloid formats to meet the needs of an increasingly mobile readership commuting long distances within constrained areas of public transport also suffered substantial changes in content, deliberately or inadvertently. Different forms of journalism practices are enabled by different physical media, which in turn enforce specific professional practices. Firstly, broadsheet journalists devote considerable professional time to refining codes of ethics while tabloids place little emphasis on how the product is collected, how it is presented, and on what basis it is presented. Secondly, tabloids reportedly enforce discipline, but are less likely to support the developing of skills in their workforce likely due to the higher turnover of journalists compared with broadsheets (Rowe, 2011).

The differences between broadsheets and tabloids have long extrapolated the physical transmission medium used to convey the news to incorporate differences in editorial policy and practice. The cleavage between tabloid and broadsheet has also been brought into question. Journalism scholars have argued that broadsheets and tabloids are slowly converging toward

similar content (Uribe & Gunter, 2004) and that the polarity would be better represented as a spectrum rather than a gap between tabloids and quality newspapers. This trend was observed since the mid-twentieth-century and has reportedly affected the broad ecosystem of newsmaking, which pivoted from a focus on political and socio-economic issues toward infotainment news covering celebrities' personal lives and showbiz events (Franklin, 1997, 2008; Schudson, 2011).

The increasing pervasiveness of tabloid style of news coverage is often referred to as the tabloidization of news. Tabloidization thus refers to a form of journalism that is dominated by infotainment and soft-news content, a significant incidence of headlines and visuals, and a personalized angle of coverage. Tabloids are also traditionally associated with sensational crime stories, gossip columns, celebrity culture, and sports stars. This sits in opposition to broadsheets that reportedly strive for objective, impartial, and nuanced reporting. Tabloidization, in summary, is employed to identify the deterioration of rigorous news gathering and reporting associated with the quality press that resulted from successive concessions to market liberalism and individualism.

Cultural studies scholars have welcomed the cultural role of tabloids and the ensuing power struggle it reveals, as the binary classification of newspapers is both horizontal (broadsheet versus tabloid) and hierarchical (broadsheet over tabloid). Turner (1999) acknowledged that the tabloid press sacrifices information for entertainment, accuracy for sensation, and that it employs tactics of representation that exploit audiences, but he also argued that the discourse of tabloid media is important and ranges from the explicitly playful or self-conscious (e.g. staged family conflicts) to the self-important gravitas of an issue of public interest (e.g. a politician's sex life). The criticism of tabloidization, still according to Turner (1999), is grounded in a conventional and long-standing hostility to popular culture. Another critique of tabloidization has advanced the idea that "broadcasters have not been sufficiently remorseful to change their practices, nor apparently have audiences felt enough shame to avert their eyes or demand alternatives" (Langer, 1998, p. 4).

This scholarship argues that tabloid is not necessarily a negative term, but a desirable infiltration into the news media of the everyday concerns of non-elite readers, who are often alienated by the traditional, patriarchal guardians of the serious press interested in maintaining cultural hegemony (Rowe, 2011). This alternative take on tabloid media has however been challenged by studies that measured the connection between levels of consumption of tabloid media and political engagement. Indeed, the likelihood of voting and the level of political interest was found to be negatively correlated with celebrity culture, with a substantial disconnect between celebrity culture and public political engagement (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007).

In the early twenty-first century, tabloid journalism boomed with various newspapers moving from broadsheets toward compact, visually appealing, and commuter-friendly editions that featured fewer stories with fewer words on each page and made space for the use of photography in storytelling. Hard news stories disappeared from the front page, which increasingly featured large photographs and headlines, with other editorial changes prompting an emphasis on more personalized news and a focus on themes such as education, the environment, health, and housing, along with an enhanced focus on readers' letters and readers' pages (Franklin, 2008).

The staples of journalism coverage changed considerably during this period, with entertainment superseding the quality reporting, human interest stories supplanting the issues of public interest, measured prose giving way to sensationalism; and the trivial triumphing over the weighty. Other factors identified by Franklin (1997) that have driven the upsurge in tabloidization include the prevalence of reporting on the intimate lives of celebrities, the world of sports, and news coverage of the royal family which are judged to be more newsworthy than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. The spread of infotainment across news outlets and the increasing simplification and spectacularization of news, traditional characteristics of tabloid media, led scholars to diagnose a generalized tabloidization of contemporary newspapers (Rowe, 2011).

The tabloidization of news advanced together with the proliferation of free titles and was followed by online and free daily papers, both of which place an emphasis on rapid turnover of content, digest-style short stories, blogs, entertainment gossip, and a heavy reliance on the visual. The dominance of celebrity and social news, and the growth of reality shows and other forms of popular culture-oriented news, eventually blurred the credibility boundaries that once set traditional outlets apart from digital media. Attendant to this development was the sharp decline of paid newspapers which created the expectation that free dailies, mostly published in tabloid format, would fill the gap. But the ensuing decline in broadsheets' fortunes was not followed by an increase in free daily newspapers, particularly in the United States and Europe, where free daily circulation went down 50 percent between 2007 and 2012. What followed was in fact a rapid shift of news readership towards digital and eventually social media platforms.

Although viral news websites represent a niche audience behavior somewhat at odds with the traditional readership of tabloid media, clickbait news sites also represent a phenomenon of extreme tabloidization, elevating celebrity news as endemic cultural malaise beyond the niche market of tabloid media. Picard (2014) reviewed the current changes in the news industry that pose considerable challenges to media, but tabloid journalism is likely to have pivoted to the attention economy to bypass some of these challenges. Tabloids have largely metamorphized into a or at least incorporated elements of clickbait viral news sites, a tendency observed across markets in Europe and the Americas. While the digital editions of tabloids are not particularly different from their print editions, tabloid's parent companies have developed clickbait copycats featuring parents' advice, content that speaks to personal experience, ranking of celebrity-related events, feel-good-human-interest pieces, curiosity gap headlines, and memes or videos trending across the web, a substantive change in the tabloid format by publishing compilations of highly clickable content that rarely offers any news value.

Clickbait news websites also present a considerable departure from traditional tabloid newsprint. Such websites have evolved through crowd mechanism that develops controversial stories by meticulously testing potential content on the website and upholding or removing material according to the number of clicks retrieved from early testers. Media attention is measured, tested, and eventually calculated by focus groups or test team that assigning content to seeds and nuggets with potential headlines for click testing. The distribution and potential success of any viral news site is contingent on peer-to-peer engagement on social network sites, which exhibit demographics considerably different from the traditional readership of newspapers, but perhaps

more in line with the traditional readership of tabloids, which is younger and places less emphasis on experience.

A telling story is BuzzFeed's "What Colors Are This Dress?" The piece rapidly amassed 38 million pageviews by asking readers to identify the colors of a dress. Individual differences in how the brain processes light and visual information provided fertile ground for polarizing responses to the color of the dress. The post rapidly went viral and surpassed Tumblr's and BuzzFeed's previous records for traffic. The photo was not produced by BuzzFeed itself. It was actually discovered on Tumblr and made its way to Buzzfeed via Twitter and later Facebook. Social media provided so much exposure that at its peak nearly 1 million users were simultaneously viewing Buzzfeed's post, and yet few readers arrived at the post via BuzzFeed's homepage. The story speaks to BuzzFeed maturation from clickbait to a social news company and sheds light on BuzzFeed strategy to incentivize content curation that is both user-generated and created by paid staff members.

It is unclear whether viral news websites like BuzzFeed and Upworthy represent niche audience behavior or reflect broader, systemic changes in the news ecosystem. Viral news sites feed from social network websites, primarily Facebook, but also Twitter and Reddit, in an attempt to ride the organic conversation in the social web. Tabloid news have incorporated this approach by pushing stories that are gaining momentum across the highly interactive audiences of social networking sites. In this scenario, tabloid news fills a gap between social networking sites and news outlets that forces traditional tabloid news desks to contend with social media teams and the artistry of guesswork on which stories will go viral. This represents a clear point of departure from print tabloids, with their content carefully tailored to large segments of the population, but it is unlikely to be the last challenge faced by tabloid journalism.

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Further Readings

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