Digital Journalism and Tabloid Journalism

Marco T. Bastos

Abstract

In this chapter I review the legacy of tabloid journalism in the context of digital media and discuss the transition from the strong editorial identity of tabloid newsprint to content curation that is both user-generated and created by paid staff members. Although the terms broadsheet and tabloid stem initially from paper size and format, I rely on this distinction to refer to editorial decisions that define newspapers' journalism standards, setting quality press (broadsheets) apart from popular newspapers (tabloids). I describe the heyday of tabloid journalism in the early twenty-first century, when newspapers shifted toward compact, visually appealing, and commuter-friendly editions featuring fewer stories with fewer words on each page and making space for the use of photography in storytelling. These structural changes to the process of newsmaking are reviewed in the context of the introduction of social networking technologies that once again disrupted newsmaking, with social media audiences behaving differently from the traditional readership of broadsheets and tabloids. I inquire whether entertainment-focused websites like Upworthy and BuzzFeed are positioned to displace the traditional tabloid media by churning out viral content that is mostly short, highly visual, sharable, and mostly accessed through mobile devices. In short, this chapter reviews the key assumptions underlying the opposition between broadsheet and tabloid in the context of digital journalism and offers a discussion on viral news websites and the personalization of news amplified by fragmented networked audiences. The article offers a contribution to the understanding of the world of tabloid journalism in the context of digital media.

Introduction

Tabloid media and the process of tabloidization are terms that refer to the deterioration of serious news gathering and reporting associated with the quality press that resulted from successive concessions to market liberalism and individualism (Franklin, 1997; Rowe, 2011: 452; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). 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 ensuing century that the term gained specific application to print media. The fast and large acceptance of the term was arguably driven by the multiple and reinforced expressions of disapproval from public intellectuals (Greenberg, 1996).

The terms broadsheet and tabloid stem from paper format, with the earlier being printed on A1 paper and the later in variations of the smaller A3 paper. The terms were subsequently adopted 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 celebrity gossip to popular culture.

The differences between the two formats of journalism are considerable. Broadsheet papers rely 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 to broadsheet newspapers, 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).

Tabloid and broadsheets appeal to different audiences with limited overlap. The readership of British broadsheets reacts mostly to articles dedicated to "substantive issues rather than human interest or life style themes" (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011: 991), with commentaries concentrated on domestic politics and party policy and lifestyle issues such as sport, celebrity, and gardening receiving comparatively fewer comments. On the other hand, most comments made on British

online tabloid are concentrated on religion, with the bulk of online posts focusing on lifestyle themes such as sport, celebrity, and gardening. Moreover, dialogue and debate among online readers of British newspapers are limited almost entirely to broadsheet discussion threads (31.3 percent of broadsheet comments, compared to 2.3 percent for tabloid newspapers), with the lion's share of this debate taking place on Guardian Online (Richardson and 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 lesser 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. Consistent with these differences in business model and audience demographics, tabloids generally have a larger circulation compared to broadsheets (Murphy, 2003).

Print Press and Tabloid Journalism

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).

During this period, the priorities of journalism have undergone considerable change: "entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgment has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged to be more 'newsworthy' than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values" (Franklin, 1997: 4). 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).

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 critical take on tabloidization has made the point 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: 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, one with its own theoretical foundations, has been systematically challenged by studies that measured the connection between levels of consumption of tabloid media and political engagement. Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007: 182) investigated patterns of media consumption in Britain and found a relationship between voting likelihood and attachment to celebrity culture, but interest in celebrities was negatively correlated with level of political interest. In fact, the study reported a substantial disconnect between celebrity culture and public political engagement and confronted authors celebrating popular culture as a force for democratization while ignoring the fundamental divide in how audiences orient themselves in the world.

The differences between broadsheet and tabloid content are deeply 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 cultural and professional practices that feedback into the content. Rowe (2011) noted that while broadsheet journalists devote considerable professional time to refining codes of ethics, in the tabloid world there is less emphasis placed on how the product is collected, how it is presented, and on what basis it is presented.

The immediate inference from the relationship between form and content is that the simple and ordinary change of a newspaper from broadsheet to tabloid format can enable new practices in the newsroom, with tabloids reportedly enforcing discipline, but placing less emphasis on developing the skills of its workforce and not being as committed to the principles of quality journalism. In short, there is a tangible effect on the news content resulting from the physical transmission medium used to convey the news. In tabloids, for instance, the turnover of journalists is reportedly higher than on a broadsheet (Rowe, 2011). As online news grows to become the major source of news in Western countries (Pew Research Center, 2012a, 2013b, 2014b), the practices and standards of journalism are likely to experience further upheaval.

Tabloid Transition to Digital Media

The growing integration of print and online newsrooms has been accompanied by the proliferation of free titles, followed by the process of increasing tabloidization that advanced on the space of 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 (Allan, 2006). In fact, the dominance of celebrity and social news, and the growth of reality shows and other forms of popular culture-oriented news, contributed to the blurring of credibility boundaries that once set traditional outlets apart from digital media (Johnson and Kayer, 2004). Furthermore, the sharp decline of paid newspapers created the expectation that free dailies, mostly published in tabloid format, would fill the gap. However, the broadsheets' continued circulation decline was not followed by an increase of free daily newspapers, particularly in the United States and Europe (Benton, 2015), where free daily circulation went down 50 percent between 2007 and 2012 (Bakker, 2013).

Common to tabloid and social media audiences is the relative youth of their readerships (Andersen, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2013a), though tabloid readers are on average less educated (Andersen, 2003) compared to social media audiences, which are also more likely to be urban and politically engaged (Pew Research Center, 2012b). Twitter and Facebook are especially appealing to urban adults aged 18–29, particularly Twitter, which attracts urban dwellers more than both suburban and rural residents. Instagram has a special appeal to adults between the ages of 18 and 29, and Pinterest is particularly attractive to women, but also to white, young, well-educated, and wealthier people (Pew Research Center, 2013a). One potential similarity of social media and

tabloid press is the role of audience share and feedback to articles, which is often driven by the appeal of the headline rather than the content of the article (Roston, 2015).

The transition from the printed press to online news websites represented a qualitative leap that changed readership and reflected structural transformations associated with platform design, section assignment, and website layout. These technical modifications exert a major influence on reading habits and change the way news is consumed. The integration of social networking technologies to online newspapers further changes the reading experience not only because of new standards of graphic design, illustrations, typography, and positioning but also because of the technical possibilities granted to audiences that can access, share, and recommend the content to large communities of users.

In fact, the impact of social networking sites to the news industry is likely to be of greater importance than generally acknowledged at the time of this writing, with recent scholarship documenting the effects of social networking sites on broadsheet newspapers. Bastos (2014) reported that the audiences of social networking sites engaging with The New York Times and Guardian content tend to favor hard over soft news articles, but also opinion pieces, when compared to the news editors' choices. The disruptive influence of social networking sites to the news industry is consistent with the impressions of social media editors at The New York Times, who gained followers at very fast rates by providing wall-to-wall coverage of newsworthy events on Twitter. The newsroom believed that "investing effort in using social media platforms to share news had a measurable impact in growing the audience for a desk's journalism" (Roston, 2015).

Audience Feedback Loop

Innovation in the newsmaking process has cut across the broadsheet/tabloid spectrum. Dowling and Vogan (2014) examined new genres of news reporting on The New York Times, ESPN, and Sports Illustrated and detailed how each news outlet leveraged new opportunities in digital long-form storytelling (cf. Dowling and Vogan, this volume). These new forms broke significantly with journalism's past by resorting to visual attributes, multimedia features, and innovative layout that "function as opportunities for these prominent media organizations to build a branded sense of renown in an increasingly competitive market" (Dowling and Vogan, 2014: 10–11) and noted that these elaborately produced stories "encourage reader-driven circulation via social media, a process that expands the products' reach and allows consumers to cultivate their own identities by associating with such artifacts" (Dowling and Vogan, 2014: 11).

Although the differences between broadsheet and tabloid inherited from legacy media remain relatively stable in terms of content shared on Twitter (Bastos and Zago, 2013), social media platforms have introduced modalities of newsmaking that disrupt the broadsheet/tabloid spectrum and challenge the current classification scheme. This is likely a result of the audience component in the networked architecture of journalism that displays considerably erratic behavior compared to the traditional readership of newspapers. News readership on social networks expresses a preference for a subset of content and information that is at odds with the decisions of newspaper editors regarding which topic to emphasize (Bastos, 2014).

The disagreement between social media audiences and news editors stems mostly from items about arts, science, technology, and opinion pieces, which are on average more frequent on social networking sites than on newspapers. Social media users also rely on several different platforms to retrieve news, thus presenting another point of departure from the context of print media with a strong editorial identity. Social networks that are primarily a visual medium (i.e. Pinterest and YouTube) can specialize in providing visual and audio information in a similar fashion to broadcast television and radio. This specialization can result in greater fragmentation and boost new types of attention paid to content, further stratifying readership according to the news format and the interests of like-minded groups.

The potential fragmentation of audiences prescribed by social networking sites is another significant point of departure from the context of tabloid print press. This sits side by side with the balkanization of readership according to interests of like-minded groups and has sprung a renewed debate on potential political polarization, echo chamber behavior, and ideological homogeneity resulting from news consumption on social media (Barberá, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014a). The scholarly debate rages over whether online social networks increase ideological segregation or exert the opposite effect by providing higher exposure to opposing perspectives. By any measure, the role of social media in the potential fragmentation of audiences remains an unresolved point of contention.

The debate is long-running and reflects the public fear of a news ecosystem tailored to individual's interests and tastes. It also reproduces the conflicting preferences of news readerships compared to news professionals. Jian and Usher (2014) examined patterns of funding preferences in a database of story projects crowdfunded through Spot.Us, a nonprofit news platform that funds ideas by micropayments, and found that "compared to reporters, consumers favor stories that provide them with practical guidance for daily living (e.g. public health or city infrastructure), as

opposed to stories from which they gain a general awareness of the world" (Jian and Usher, 2014: 164–165). This is overall consistent with the hypothesis that if consumers are to play a bigger role in news production, lesser articles covering general public affairs would be expected.

The differences between what newspaper editors have deemed to be of public interest and what is of interest to users of social networking sites needs be considered within the wider debate on press and the public sphere and the validity of liberal journalism's claims to freedom and objectivity. As readership agency begins to deliver critical feedback to news items and interfere with the coverage of news outlets, newsrooms are forced to strike a balance between news that answers the wishes of their increasingly interactive and demanding readers and news that is of public interest—arguably the moral imperative of professional journalism (Jacquette, 2007: 214). This change in the balance of power introduced by social media is not restricted to quality press. In fact, the tabloid press is facing changes that are potentially even more disruptive.

Digital Tabloid Journalism

Picard (2014) provided an overview of the current changes in the news industry and argued that journalism is drifting away from a relatively closed system of news creation dominated by official sources and professional journalists. These changes impact on the business of newsmaking, as news providers become less dependent on any one form of funding than they have been in the last century, and impose considerable challenges to tabloid media. In this transitional period of journalism practices, the influence of commercial advertisers is likely to be severely reduced, and tabloid media, a segment of newsmaking whose form, range, and practices of news provision are often directed by marketing departments and focused on audience share, is expected to experience considerable changes in the business model.

Such changes have been observed across various national contexts. The fierce competition between tabloid media in Sweden has extended to clickbait viral news sites. Expressen competes with Aftonbladet as the two national evening tabloids in the country. While the digital editions of tabloids are not particularly different from their print editions, tabloid's parent companies have developed BuzzFeed-like 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. The viral news website Omtalat is a spinoff of the tabloid Expressen, which has a print circulation of 193,100 and controls two of the most visited news sites in the country (expressen.se and expressen.tv), while the viral news website

Lajkat is affiliated with Schibsted, Aftonbladet's parent company. The two websites (Lajkat and Omtalat) represent a substantive change in the tabloid format by publishing compilations of highly clickable content that rarely offers any news value.

At the time of this writing, none of the top three headlines at Lajkat.se reported news events: (1) "28 persons who will have a worse Christmas than you" (*28 personer som har en sämre jul än du kommer ha*); (2) "11 Swedes who must practice their compliments" (*11 svenskar som måste öva på sina komplimanger*); and (3) "The reason it was much nicer to fly during the 70s" (*Anledningen till att det var betydligt skönare att flyga på 1970-talet*). NiemanLab emphasized that this change in the Swedish media landscape reflects a global trend in tabloid media that has witnessed an explosion of viral news sites like BuzzFeed, Upworthy, Viralnova, and Mashable devoted to aggregating highly clickable web content. As readers' habits change and advertising revenue continues to decline, media organizations are investing in viral sites as a potential source of revenue that can reverse the business downturn. In a country with a population of just 9.6 million like Sweden, viral news websites have amassed an average of 1 million unique mobile browsers each. Omtalat has expanded the business model to other countries and languages by launching similar viral news sites in German, Turkish, and Norwegian, while rival viral site Newsner has started an English language version of the site (Lichterman, 2014).

Conversely, viral news sites aim at a pulverized audience with varying media sophistication and often incompatible lifestyles and political orientation. This newly developed variant of digital tabloid media explores crowd mechanism and 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. As Upworthy races for the social media attention, the team breaks down the content into 'seeds' and 'nuggets'—content to feature on the site and a list of 25 potential headlines that are streamlined for 'click testing' (Rohani, 2014). The distribution and potential success of any viral news site depends directly on peer-to-peer engagement on social networking 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 (Andersen, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2013a).

A recent such example is BuzzFeed's story "What Colors Are This Dress?" (Holderness, 2015). At the time of this writing, the piece has amassed a total of 38 million page views 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. Like a considerable portion of BuzzFeed's content, 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 (Mahler, 2015). The social media conflagration provided such exposure that at its peak nearly 1 million users were simultaneously viewing Buzzfeed's post, and yet few readers arrived to 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 tabloid media. 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. Social media editors perform reverse-gatekeeping by pushing stories that are gaining momentum across the highly interactive audiences of social networking sites. The reverse-gatekeeping function performed by news editors consists of filtering content based on the expectation that audience feedback loops will kick in and move the story forward. Social media cascades usually happen in the first minutes after the post is published (Dow, Adamic, and Friggeri, 2013), and accordingly the expertise of social media teams revolves around 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.

Conclusions

In this article I reviewed the fundamental differences between broadsheets and tabloids in terms of form and content and explored the impact of the physical transmission medium used to convey the news to the deontology of journalism. I also detailed how readership varies across the two types of news outlets and described the ongoing disruption in the ecosystem of tabloid press caused by digital and social media; changes that stem from a changing landscape of media production, shifting audience demographics, as well as structural modifications in the business model and funding strategies.

I reviewed recent scholarship that assessed the impact of social network sites on the news industry, particularly broadsheet newspapers, but also news outlets with greater emphasis on soft

news items. I explored the increasingly important role played by audience feedback and connected these developments to changes in tabloid media formats posited to take place in response to the disruption caused by social networking technologies. These structural changes can be summarized in two main rationales. Firstly, social media users rely on several different platforms to retrieve news, which presents a point of departure from the context of print media with a strong editorial identity. Secondly, and more importantly, the changing business of newsmaking has lessened the influence of commercial advertisers in ways that are particularly hurtful to the tabloid press and the business model directed by marketing departments and focused on audience share.

These changes have forced tabloids to move into viral news sites like BuzzFeed that publish compilations of highly clickable content rarely covering news events. Although viral news websites represent a niche audience behavior at odds with the readership and content of tabloid media, clickbait news sites can also represent a phenomenon of extreme tabloidization, with celebrity news as an endemic phenomenon that has found a place across the entire news business and beyond the niche market of tabloid media. Journalists currently working between the divides of broadsheet and tabloid, online and print, are familiarized with such challenges and have to employ strategies to navigate a precarious and embattled professional workforce. It seems that for such workers, and particularly for those working at the crossroads between digital and tabloid journalism, the reality of digital journalism is not entirely clear, and the future is even less so.

Further Reading

This chapter has benefitted from David Rowe's *Obituary for the Newspaper? Tracking the Tabloid*. The piece depicts the process of tabloidization in contemporary newspapers, while Robert G. Picard's *Twilight or New Dawn of Journalism* provides an overview of the current changes in the news industry and my own *Shares, Pins, and Tweets: News Readership from Daily Papers to Social Media* details what news editors emphasize compared to social media users. For an extended treatment of journalism and the entertainment industry see Bob Franklin's *Newszak and News Media*.

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