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Tabloid Journalism and the Public Sphere: a historical perspective on tabloid journalism

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ABSTRACT *Tabloid journalism is generally considered to be synonymous with bad journalism. This assessment of tabloid journalism is not very productive from a social scientific point of view. The argument of this article is that the journalistic other of tabloid journalism has appeared throughout the history of journalism, and that elements and aspects of journalism defined as “bad” in its own time in many cases served the public good as well as, if not better than, journalism considered to be more respectable. Tabloid journalism achieves this by positioning itself, in different ways, as an alternative to the issues, forms and audiences of the journalistic mainstream—as an alternative public sphere. By tracking the development of tabloid journalism through history, we want to contribute to the reassessment and revision of the normative standards commonly used to assess journalism that is currently taking place within the field of journalism studies. We do this by first examining what is meant by an alternative public sphere and how it can be conceptualised, then by relating this to the historical development of tabloid journalism. The historical examples are used as a basis for reviewing and revising a key dimension of current criticisms of tabloid journalism.*

KEY WORDS: *Tabloid Journalism, Public Sphere, Alternative Public Spheres, Media History, Mass Press*

Introduction: the problem with tabloid journalism

The problems of tabloid journalism are, of course, all too well known: it allegedly panders to the lowest common denominator of public taste, it simplifies, it personalises, it thrives on sensation and scandal—in short, tabloid journalism lowers the standards of public discourse. Or, even worse, tabloid journalism may even actually be a threat to democracy, breeding cynicism and a lack of interest in politics, while ignoring the real political issues in favour of superficial political scandal.

This view of tabloid journalism is fairly common in contemporary debates on media standards—and it is not merely tabloid journalism that is so criticised. The word *tabloidisation* is sometimes used to describe the perceived tendency for all journalism, even all media, to become more like tabloid journalism (see e.g.

Franklin, 1997)—so tabloid journalism seems no longer confined to the medium of its origin, the tabloid press. Indeed, today the case could be made that television is the prime medium for tabloid journalism (Dahlgren, 1992, p. 16; Langer, 1998, p. 1). Tabloid journalism and tabloidisation also become obvious targets when journalists themselves engage in self-reflection and media criticism (see e.g. Rivers, 1996). Rhoufari (2000) interviewed journalists about the role of journalism in Britain and the place of tabloid journalism in particular, and found that a kind of double standard was in place when journalists discussed the role and practices of tabloid journalism:

...all the respondents, from the crime reporter to the deputy editor, developed arguments that led them, more or less explicitly, to distance themselves from the tabloid press and its methods of investigation while endorsing many of its charac-

teristics in discussing their day-to-day activity. (Rhoufari, 2000, p. 170)

This is potentially a source of problems for social scientists investigating tabloid journalism. The researcher might easily take on the perspective common in the profession and in the media industry and adopt a perspective where tabloid journalism becomes everything which serious, responsible, good-quality journalism is not: sensationalist, over-simplified, populist etc.: tabloid journalism means, simply, bad journalism. Tabloid journalism becomes a kind of journalistic *other*, used as a warning example and symbol for all that is wrong with modern journalism (for a similar line of reasoning, see Langer, 1998, pp. 8–9). Using this definition, the question whether there can be any quality tabloid journalism becomes impossible to ask, since tabloid journalism by definition is bad, and consequently good tabloid journalism cannot exist. If it was good, then it could not be tabloid journalism!

Recent scholarship on tabloid journalism (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000 provides a very comprehensive selection, for example) has engaged with this normative simplicity, and developed the concept of tabloidisation as well as highlighted how, even though a continually changing news market is also changing journalism, the values by which journalism is judged do not seem to change that much. Lay (and sometimes academic) criticism of journalism continues to be based around simple binary oppositions, where emotional is bad and rational-intellectual is good, sensation is contrasted with contextualisation and tabloid journalism is charged with meeting complexity with dumbing down. But emotionalism, sensation and simplification are not *necessarily* opposed to serving the public good.

The argument of this article is that the journalistic *other* of tabloid journalism has appeared throughout the history of journalism, and that elements and aspects of journalism defined as “bad” in its own time in many cases did a better job (or at least as good a job) in serving the public good than “respectable” journalism. Tabloid journalism has done so by positioning itself, in different ways, as an

alternative to the issues, forms and audiences of the journalistic mainstream—as an *alternative public sphere*, if you will. Looking at the journalism considered “tabloid” in our own time, maybe this is what is happening again. By tracking the development of tabloid journalism through history, we hope to contribute to the reassessment and revision of the normative standards commonly used to assess journalism that is currently taking place within the field of journalism studies. We will do this by first examining what an alternative public sphere can be taken to mean, and how it can be conceptualised, and then relate this to the historical development of tabloid journalism.

Journalism in the Public Sphere

Following Jürgen Habermas, a number of media scholars have used the concept of the *public sphere* both to describe and evaluate the role of the mass media—particularly news—in public life. Since the publication of Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962 (the first English translation appeared in 1989), his public sphere model has been developed and updated (not least by Habermas himself) to take into account a number of different aspects—one of the more important ones being the changing nature of the media landscape (the book was written when television was only just beginning to gain popularity as a mass medium). Scholars such as John B. Thompson (1995) and Peter Dahlgren (1995), for example, have argued for the increasing centrality of the media as a public arena where the public can access societal dialogues. As such, the media play an important part by providing this access, and it is relevant to talk about a *mediated public sphere* (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 9).

Thompson points out that we have gone rather far from the forms of societal organisation where dialogue and face-to-face communication are viable instruments for day-to-day democracy. Today, we are not able to participate in political life in the same way as described by Habermas, but on the other hand, public life is marked by a much higher degree of visibility—a *mediated publicness* has been created (analogous to Dahlgren’s mediated public

sphere). Whereas the central struggle in the bourgeois public sphere was the struggle of one particular class to find a new place in society (by criticising traditional authorities and power elites), the central struggle in the mediated public sphere is the struggle for visibility, i.e. the struggle to be heard and seen in the first place (Thompson, 1995, pp. 247ff). This struggle for visibility seems to indicate that there might not be just one mediated public sphere, but instead the media landscape could be described as consisting of a mainstream and a number of alternative spheres—spheres from which marginalised groups strive to gain access to, and representation in, the mainstream.

Alternatives and Counterpublics

Even a cursory examination of modern media shows that it is simply not realistic to talk about “the mediated public sphere” as if it constituted a single monolithic entity. Outlets for news, journalism, commentary and debate are numerous and increasingly global in nature. But for the sake of our argument, we assume that one can talk about some kind of *mainstream mediated public sphere*, consisting perhaps of the television and radio news and commentary shows and the daily newspapers that have the largest audience and/or are generally considered most important (in the most general sense of the word) by members of the audience as well as members of the political, economic and cultural elites. We further assume that this mainstream mediated public sphere is dominated by elite sources of different kinds (politicians, corporate representatives, representatives of non-governmental organisations etc).

This type of structural elitism in the mainstream mediated public sphere in turn creates a need for one or several *alternative* public spheres, where different people debate different issues in different ways. This is a perspective advanced by one of Habermas’s key critics, Nancy Fraser (1989, 1992). As Fraser points out, Habermas “...stresses the singularity of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, its claims to be *the* public arena, in the singular” (Fraser, 1992, p. 122). The basic unity and all-encompassing nature of the bourgeois public

sphere is an integral part of its attractiveness as an ideal—everyone takes part in public life, playing by the rules of rational debate and equality. Fraser, and others, instead suggest that creating possibilities for alternative public spheres to exist and thrive is a better way to promote democratic participation and open public debate. She writes:

I contend that in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public. (Fraser, 1992, p. 122)

and further:

This historiography [the revisionist historiography of the public sphere, our note] records that members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities interests and needs. (Fraser, 1992, p. 123)

Fraser uses the late 20th-century feminist movement as an example of such a subaltern counter public, using alternative outlets like journals, publishing companies, bookstores, film and video distribution networks, meeting places, festivals etc. to invent, formulate and spread new concepts and terms (e.g. “sexism” and “sexual harassment”) for describing and critiquing social phenomena.

It must be pointed out that Habermas and Fraser to an extent, pursue different theoretical and empirical agendas: Habermas is interested in the public sphere as a locus for *political power*, whereas Fraser is discussing the role of the public sphere as an arbiter of *cultural recognition*. Political power and cultural recognition are related, to be sure (it is difficult to achieve power without recognition). But the emancipatory potential of the public sphere will certainly be judged differently depending on whether the main standard is equality of power or equality of recognition. Needless to say, this discussion is very philosophically complex and

intensely debated, and cannot be resolved here. We do wish to point out, however, that criticism of tabloid journalism and tabloid form is more often made using traditional criteria of political power (voting, participation in formal political activities etc.), rather than criteria of cultural recognition (representation, participation in other types of political activities etc.)—see the summary of criticisms of tabloidisation provided by McNair (2003, pp. 46–52), for example. This is something we will return to in our conclusions.

Dimensions of the Alternative

Fraser primarily discusses the public sphere in general and not specifically the mediated public sphere. Using Fraser's argument as a basis for conceptualising alternative mediated public spheres, we can say that they can be "alternative" in four different, but related ways. First, alternative might be taken to mean that the discourse itself takes place *somewhere else* other than in the mainstream mediated public sphere—in alternative media outlets, in specialised journals or fanzines, on the Internet, etc. Second, the alternative public sphere may be alternative in the sense that *other participants* than those normally dominating media discourse have access to and a place in the debates and discussions taking place. Third, an alternative public sphere might be alternative in the sense that *other issues* than those commonly debated in the mainstream are discussed—or that issues not even debated at all in the mainstream are discussed in the alternative sphere (much like the privileged position of the church could be debated and defined as a potential obstacle to emancipation in the bourgeois public sphere, for example). Fourth, the "alternativeness" may derive from the usage of *other ways or forms* of debating and discussing common issues than those commonly used in the mainstream, for example forms which encourage citizen participation and non-parliamentary direct action.

As noted at the outset, all these aspects are related: the whole concept of an alternative public discussion being carried out somewhere else than in the mainstream (the first aspect),

implies that it will include other participants, be open to other issues and/or use other forms—there is no need to conform to the explicit or implicit rules of the mainstream mediated public sphere. For Fraser, the aspect of creating an entirely new public sphere, based on different networks and media outlets, is clearly the most important one—from this all other aspects follow (Fraser, 1992, pp. 123–4). She points to the dual nature of subaltern counter publics: "On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regrouping; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics" (Fraser, 1992, p. 124). To have "a space of one's own" is central to the idea of subaltern counter publics and alternative public spheres.

However, this raises the problematic question of integration. According to Fraser, these subaltern counter publics are alienated from the mainstream, or dominant, public sphere both by choice and by necessity. But it would seem that at least part of the goal for subaltern counter publics is acceptance into the mainstream—not acceptance on the terms of the dominant ideology, but rather a dissemination of the subaltern counter public's own definitions and discourses into the mainstream. Indeed, this seems to be one consequence of defining subaltern counter publics as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics" (Fraser, 1992, p. 124). Thus, while Fraser's ideal remains a "multiple publics" model, it continues to be important to exert influence over the mainstream, redefining and recontextualising public issues for wider publics.

The discourses created in tabloid journalism are clearly not taking place "somewhere else", in an alternative arena—tabloid journalism must in most ways be said to be solidly within the mediated mainstream. But using a wider definition of the concept of "alternative", tabloid journalism, at least in theory, could provide the three other aspects of an alternative public sphere: it is quite possible that the tabloids would cover different issues using different forms, giving voice to different participants. In the context of the mediated public

sphere, we use “alternative” to indicate criticism and questioning of the political, economic and cultural elites and the societal status quo—the possession of some kind of emancipatory potential. Tabloid journalism can help affect social change in addressing issues not previously open to debate, including new publics and using new forms—thus introducing new areas of discourse into the mainstream mediated public sphere. So, there is no theoretical reason why tabloid journalism should not be able to do exactly the same kinds of things Habermas has shown that the early press did during the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. In the second part of this article, we demonstrate that tabloid journalism has done this many times throughout its history—and that it might well do so again.

Tabloid Journalism as Alternative Public Sphere

The word “tabloid” was introduced into the world of media by Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe). He stole a term trademarked by a pill manufacturer (*tabloid* was a combination of the words *tablet* and *alkaloid*). Harmsworth wanted his new paper, the *Daily Mail* (established in 1896), to be like a small, concentrated, effective pill, containing all news needs within one handy package, half the size of a conventional broadsheet newspaper. The smaller size made the tabloids easier to handle and read on the bus, tram and other forms of public transport—an adaptation for a new reading public. It must be added that the tabloid format was only one of many strategies Lord Northcliffe used to reach a mass audience: contents, layout, price, distribution and marketing were all factors contributing to the mass-market appeal of the *Daily Mail*. The *Daily Mail* was “the daily time saver”, according to Northcliffe, the news format for the quick-paced twentieth century (Seymour-Ure, 2000, p. 10; Tulloch, 2000, pp. 131–2).

The tabloid press thus was synonymous not only with a specific paper format, but also with a certain way of selecting and presenting news. From the very beginning, the tabloid press was criticised for sensationalism and emotionalism, for over-simplification of complex issues, for

catering to the lowest common denominator and sometimes for outright lies. But tabloid journalism also managed to attract new publics, by speaking to them about issues previously ignored, in new, clearly understandable ways. Much of the criticism against tabloid journalism came from established power-holders within the media industry, as well as representatives of a pre-industrial, pre-mass society cultural and political elites. Tabloid journalism was damned, in part, for not conforming to the more refined tastes of these elite groups. In this section, we present three historical examples to illustrate how the tabloid journalistic other can be interpreted as an alternative public sphere, more in tune with societal changes than traditional media. The first example concerns the development of the penny press and, later, yellow journalism in the United States. The second example comes from Britain and shows that sensationalism need not be opposed to the goal of affecting societal change and creating public debate. The third example aims to show how tabloid journalism was at the forefront in changing the forms of journalism—and thereby also the forms of public discourse.

Alternative Publics: tabloid journalism, new journalism and the Yellow Press

The first instance of more popular journalism aimed specifically at a non-elite public came with the so-called penny press in America around 1830. The word “tabloid” was of course not yet in use (see the previous section), but the penny press was clearly a forerunner—not least because the penny press also functioned as a kind of journalistic other, being criticised for sensationalism, emotionalism and the other identified characteristics outlined above.

With the introduction of these papers both the reason for publishing newspapers and the content of the newspapers changed. The penny press was more of an economic venture and less a political project than had been the case with most of the papers before that time: “...with the penny press a newspaper sold a product to a general readership and sold the readership to advertisers” (Schudson, 1978, p. 25). An important element in this new kind

of journalism was an interest for the everyday life of people and it was in the penny press that so-called *human-interest* news was born. This kind of journalism was, and still is, considered less important and noteworthy than so-called hard news. Michael Schudson draws the important conclusion that these changes in journalism and the development of ideals was intimately connected to political as well as economic changes—at the same time the democratic market society was born (Schudson, 1978, pp. 27ff). Emery and Emery also make clear that the emergence of the penny press was dependent upon other changes in society:

Whenever a mass of people has been neglected too long by the established organs of communication, agencies eventually have been devised to supply that want. Invariably the sophisticated reader greets this press of the masses with scorn because the content of such a press is likely to be elemental and emotional. Such scorn is not always deserved. Just as the child ordinarily starts his reading with Mother Goose and fairy stories before graduation to more serious study, so the public first reached by a new agency is likely to prefer what the critics like to call “sensationalism”, which is the emphasis on omission for its own sake. The pattern can be seen in the periods when the most noteworthy developments in popular journalism were apparent. In 1620, 1833, the 1890s, or 1920, this tapping of a new, much-neglected public started with a wave of sensationalism. (Emery and Emery, 1978, p. 119)

The year 1833 is considered a watershed year in the history of the American press. On 3 September of that year, New Yorkers saw the arrival of a new daily newspaper: the *New York Sun*. Its founder, Benjamin Day, made a paper for “the common man” in a time where newspapers usually aimed for a more affluent and educated audience. Before the *New York Sun*, the largest dailies were mostly distributed by subscription. Copies bought at newspaper vendors cost six cents. The *Sun* was sold in the streets for one penny, and its customers were the rising American working classes.

The major invention of Day was the redefinition of the concept of news. In earlier papers, news meant reports and comments on political happenings, and even more importantly, commercial information such as shipping news—the audience was the property

class, not the working class (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 53). The so-called human-interest story might well have originated in its modern form on the pages of the *Sun*. Scandalous tales of sin, the immoral antics of the upper class, and humorous tales of mishaps of all kinds were a staple of the *Sun*. But so was extended coverage of crime and police news, mostly written by the British veteran police reporter George Wisner (Emery and Emery, 1978, p. 120). In short, it was aimed directly at a newly literate public that did not have much in common with the newspaper public of a mere 10 years earlier.

Inevitably, Day's foray into the newspaper business was met with criticism from other contemporary publicists, who accused the *Sun* of lowering the standards of journalism through its vulgarity, cheapness and sensationalism (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 52; Emery and Emery, 1978, p. 121). The critics became especially vehement after it became apparent that the *New York Sun* was a commercial success. Some of this criticism might seem inappropriate in relation to the modern concept of news, for, as Schudson writes:

The six-penny papers responded to the penny newcomers with charges of sensationalism. This accusation was substantiated less by the way the penny papers treated the news (there were no sensational photographs, of course, no cartoons or drawings, no large headlines) than by the fact that the penny papers would print “news”—as we understand it—at all. (Schudson, 1978, p. 23)

Imitators launched new papers almost immediately. The most well known of these competitors are probably James Gordon Bennett, who founded the *New York Herald* in 1835, and Horace Greeley, who founded the *New York Tribune* in 1841. During the years following, the journalism of the penny press changed. Bennett developed crime reporting and a generally more aggressive journalism, used “extras” (special editions) to boost interest in the paper, he included a letters column, where readers could comment on the paper, he developed a financial section and he offered sports news. As with Day, Bennett was roundly criticised by other publicists. A movement to boycott the *Herald* was started, and Bennett was even ac-

cused of blasphemy because of his at times flippant treatment of religious news (Emery and Emery, 1978, p. 125). No doubt the *Herald* used sensationalism and emotionalism to bring in the readers, but clearly much of the criticism at the time was motivated by the astounding commercial success of the paper. It was the traditional New York papers, Colonel James Watson Webb's *Courier and Enquirer* and Park Benjamin's *New York Signal*, that led the war against Bennett's *Herald*, clearly afraid to lose their own position as commercially leading dailies.

When Horace Greeley started his *New York Tribune* in 1841, he used many of Day's and Bennett's ideas, but added something genuinely his own: a tireless crusading journalism and campaigning for a wide range of causes (Smith, 1979, p. 139). Greeley apparently tried to avoid the worst sensationalism of the earlier penny papers, but his sights were still set on "the common man" as audience and public. Greeley, as well as his predecessors, was criticised, mostly for his radicalism and habitual crusading—if it wasn't the evils of alcohol that raised his ire, it was the practice of tobacco consumption. But Greeley's mass paper undoubtedly played an important role in opinion leadership and formation (Tebbel, 1963, pp. 105, 112).

When what is considered to be the next great change in the history of American newspaper came about in the 1880s and 1890s, it is worth noting that the elite's reception of new inventions in journalism changed little. In 1883, Joseph Pulitzer purchased the *New York World* and proceeded to turn it in to one of the success stories of the decade. Part of the recipe was the same as Day's five decades earlier: sensation, crime and varied news coverage. Other important parts of Pulitzer's formula were aggressive self-promotion, and, more importantly, a penchant for crusades that rivalled Greeley's. Pulitzer took up several popular causes and campaigned for them in his newspaper, thus both covering and forming public opinion. An immigrant himself, Pulitzer often railed against the inhuman conditions in which many of New York's immigrant labourers lived—particularly against the garment district's sweatshops which

employed immigrant women. When, in July 1883, a heat wave caused the deaths of over 700 in the slums (over half of them children under the age of 5), Pulitzer used sensational headlines and shocking narrative in an attempt to force the authorities to recognise the housing problems of the city (Emery and Emery, 1978, p. 224)—a clear illustration of the simple truth that sensational and emotional coverage might have a place and a function within the public sphere, helping to bring about social change and addressing issues not previously addressed in the mediated public sphere.

As could have been expected, Pulitzer came under fire for reviving the coarse and lurid sensationalism of the penny press in the 1830s. He had many imitators and, as before, commentators considered the proliferation of sensationalism and human interest stories a threat to serious journalism (Emery and Emery, 1978, pp. 224–5; Tebbel, 1963, pp. 201–2). The critics became even more vocal when the so-called "yellow journalism war" started in 1895, when William Randolph Hearst bought the *New York Journal* and challenged Pulitzer's new *Sunday World*.

Hearst's sensationalism was considered even more brazen than Pulitzer's and when it came to crusades and campaigning, Hearst consistently strived to go one better than his competitor. The *Journal* soon adopted the tag line "While Others Talk the *Journal* Acts"—among other things, the paper obtained a court injunction that stopped the granting of a city franchise to a gas company. After this success, the *Journal* started similar actions against alleged abuses in government and by large corporations (Emery and Emery, 1978, p. 249; Tebbel, 1963, p. 201). This "journalism that acts" was lauded as well as criticised.

Two points can be made from this short and admittedly selective history of the American penny press. First, that it demonstrates the continuous existence of a journalistic other, that the established institutions of journalism use to define themselves—according to its critics, the penny press, and later the yellow journalism of the 1880s and 1890s, epitomised everything that good journalism should not be. Second, that this journalism obviously played an important

role in the public sphere. While it often was sensationalist and emotional rather than measured and rational-intellectual, it can well be described as an alternative public sphere, where a grassroots-based populist critique against established corporate and governmental elites could come to the fore. While the discourse in this populist public sphere might have been limited, the mere fact that it existed where no alternative mediated public sphere of such a size and influence had existed before, demonstrates the potential power of tabloid journalism in widening the public sphere. Being unabashedly emotional does not seem to have stopped the penny press from having a bettering influence on issues of great importance to the poor and disenfranchised in the society of its time.

Alternative Issues: a sensationalist crusade

We now move from the United States to the UK. The journalist W. T. (William Thomas) Stead joined the evening penny paper *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1880 as a sub-editor. The *Pall Mall Gazette* was at the forefront of the so-called "new journalism" in the London press. This "new journalism" sought new audiences and was characterised by a lighter approach and dramatisation of news (especially crime)—in other words, it was the tabloid journalism of its day.

W. T. Stead was soon to move from his position as a sub-editor at the *Pall Mall Gazette* to become one of the most influential and prolific members of the editorial staff. In 1885, he was approached by Benjamin Scott and Josephine Butler, who had for some time and without much success campaigned against juvenile prostitution and for a Bill raising the age of consent (the age of consent at the time was 13). Stead was enlisted to the cause and became a vitriolic critic of juvenile prostitution. He embarked upon a scheme to attract and focus public attention on the issue: he decided to pose as a "vicious man" and try to buy a young girl from her parents, and then try to sell the girl to a house of ill repute. Using a female intermediary, Stead managed to buy a girl and then to sell her, before revealing his ruse and

handing the girl into the care of the Salvation Army (Whyte, 1925, pp. 160ff). In July 1885, the first article (of five) on this early form of investigative reporting was published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. It was entitled *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: the report of our secret commission*, and had subheadings such as 'The Violation of Virgins', 'The Confessions of a Brothel-Keeper' and 'How Girls are Ruined'. The article took up five and a half of the *Gazette's* 16 pages. The next day, another five-page article appeared with headings such as 'Unwilling Recruits', 'How Annie was Poisoned', 'You Want a Maid, do you?' and 'I Order Five Virgins'. Headlines like 'The Ruin of the Very Young', 'Entrapping Irish Girls' and 'Ruining Country Girls' continued to appear over the next week (Cranfield, 1978, pp. 212–3; also see Herd, 1952, p. 229 and Whyte, 1925, pp. 163–6). We can see how Stead piqued the readers' interest by using drastic, sensational and even lurid headlines, a typically tabloid strategy.

The reactions caused by the reports of the *Gazette* were many and diverse. Some newsagents refused to sell the *Gazette*, and Stead himself was prosecuted and sentenced to three months in jail, because he had not obtained the consent of the girl's father before "buying" her, and he had also stated in public that he "abducted" her (see Whyte, 1925, pp. 182–6 and Herd, 1952, p. 230). Many readers and advertisers cancelled their orders—but new customers came in their stead. The other London newspapers commented on the *Gazette's* articles: the *Weekly Times* considered them "a public outrage", whereas *Reynold's News* said that "The *Pall Mall Gazette* has done one of the most courageous and noblest works of our time". But the most common reaction seems to have been, as Whyte puts it, "...people ... were so shocked and scandalized by Stead's methods that they could not take adequately to heart the horrors which he had revealed..." (1925, p. 167). For some, the controversial and unorthodox methods Stead used raised far more ire than the widespread practice of juvenile prostitution.

Stead's motives were questioned: was he simply a sensationalist trying to sell papers, or

a genuine crusader (Cranfield, 1978, pp. 213–4; Whyte, 1925, pp. 171–2)? It is, of course, quite possible that he was both—the binary opposition between writing-for-profit and writing-for-a-cause is exactly the result of the overly simplistic view of tabloid journalism we have described at the outset of this article. Indeed, Stead's biographer Frederic Whyte describes him as follows:

As all who knew him can attest, Stead was sincerity itself in his love for, and devotion to, the less fortunate of his fellow-men—he never spared either his time or his purse in his efforts to help them—but his whole-hearted benevolence went hand in hand always with a boyish delight over his own prowess and a showman's eagerness to turn it into practical account. (Whyte, 1925, p. 105)

Stead's campaigning influenced public opinion and caused much heated public discourse. The culmination of the affair was a mass demonstration in Hyde Park, and the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, which raised the age of consent to 16 years. Numerous influential public figures came out on Stead's side, and it was clear that the articles and the ensuing debate created a public pressure on the legislators (Cranfield, 1978, p. 214; Whyte, 1925, pp. 166–73, 180–2). The stir that Stead's articles caused cannot be underestimated—he introduced an issue not previously widely debated, using controversial forms of presentation, and clearly also helped bring on a concrete political effect (new legislation) that could be defined as fairly progressive. The *Gazette* helped the formation of public opinion and public discourse on a hotly debated issue—probably not in spite of but rather thanks to its sensationalist bent, using sensationalism and emotional reporting to gain attention and ferment opinion.

Alternative Forms: the interview as a new form of public discourse

In a chapter of his book *The Power of News* (1995), Michael Schudson describes the history of the news interview. He shows how the interview developed from a journalistic other—a distinctly tabloid phenomenon—to a mainstay of modern journalism.

The interview as a form of journalism was

mostly unknown until the 1860s. The word “interview” of course existed, but was generally used to describe any type of meeting and/or conversation between two people. When we use the word interview today, we generally mean the practice of journalists posing questions to people in order to receive or confirm information. The word “interview” not only refers to the practice of interviewing though, but also to the textual result of that interviewing (as in “I read an interesting interview with the Prime Minister in the paper today”).

Historians have placed the first modern news interview at different times—some place it as early as 1836, in relation to James Gordon Bennett's coverage of the Helen Jewlett murder case, others name 1859, the year of Horace Greeley's publishing of a conversation between him and Mormon leader Brigham Young (Schudson, 1995, p. 73). For the purposes of this paper, the exact date is irrelevant—the interesting thing is how interviews were perceived at the time that this journalistic format came into existence.

Schudson writes that the practice of interviewing for news purposes in the late 19th century was considered an American invention, and therefore not informed by European sensibilities. Strong words were used to condemn the interview: it was akin to toadying, it was a form of espionage, it was indiscreet, and of course it threatened to disgrace and even destroy journalism as a whole (Schudson, 1995, p. 76). In Europe, the interview was definitely a journalistic other, a practice responsible journalists simply did not engage in. It is, though, fair to point out that the reception of the interview as a form of journalism in Europe was not uniformly negative (Schudson, 1995, p. 79).

The interview was used to create sensation—an interview with a famous person could be a scoop in itself, as was the case when a *New York World* reporter interviewed the Pope in 1871, or when Frederic William Wile interviewed King Oscar II of Sweden for the *Chicago Daily News* in 1906 (Schudson, 1995, pp. 77–8). The interview was also sometimes regarded as somewhat populist, mostly because of the impertinent and aggressive interviewing style of the American reporters. The interview was considered an in-

vasion of privacy by the critics of the time—it was simply uncouth to just demand answers from prominent politicians and power holders (a practice that today, of course, is the norm rather than the exception). Thus, there is a definite kinship between the interview (at least in its early, American style) and tabloid journalism—the interview was sometimes in its infancy a kind of tabloid journalism—impertinent, sensationalist and, in a sense, populist.

Most important, though, this example shows us very clearly that values and ideals about what constitutes good and bad journalism change over time. Today it is virtually impossible to imagine journalism without interviews—the importance of the interview seems self-evident, and to obtain a comment of some sort from a politician or other power holder (garnered through an interview) is standard practice. It seems almost unbelievable to think that the interview was once a highly unorthodox practice in journalism, and considered to be bad taste of the worst kind. And, most importantly: it was considered bad taste because it was founded upon the practice of demanding answers from those in public office. This new practice is of course dependent upon other changes within the profession and practice of journalism as a whole—but the emergence of the interview can well be viewed as a sign of the emergence of an at least slightly more critical press. To question and elicit comments from those in power was, simply put, a new form of discourse in the mediated public sphere—a form of discourse that created a potential for criticism and a journalism less intimidated by authority. In terms of creating new forms, this can surely be viewed as a contribution to an alternative public sphere.

Concluding Remarks: the current situation

The previous examples show that much of the criticism levelled at the journalistic other through history has been based on a set of values that to a large extent coincides with the values of cultural and political elite groups—groups that, in some cases, did not take too kindly to the competition for resources and

attention that tabloid journalism offered. This is, of course, not to say that all criticism of tabloid journalism is based on class-based self-interest. Tabloid journalism can be legitimately criticised in many ways. To state the obvious: the fact that sensationalism, emotional appeals and new forms of presentation are not always incompatible with factuality and fairness, does not mean that an incompatibility *never* exists—of course a focus on the emotional and sensational aspects of a news event or story can mean that facts or fairness suffer. And the fact that emotional appeals may serve the public good as well as rational-intellectual reporting and debate, does not mean emotional crusades always serve the public good—but it is possible for it to do so. Again, this is an obvious point, but we still feel it needs to be reiterated: we take a revisionist stance, but of course we do not want to rule out the possibility of criticising tabloid journalism on *any* grounds.

What we are calling for is a greater openness when making normative judgments about tabloid journalism and its effects. What we have referred to as tabloid journalism runs like a spectre through the history of journalism—where there are ideals and ideas about good journalism, there is also a discourse about bad journalism. Bad journalism helps define the good. And the criticism levelled against bad journalism seems to follow similar lines from the 19th century onwards: it is populist, sensationalist, emotionalist, simplifying, uncouth and irresponsible—everything good journalism is not. Whether we call it tabloid journalism, New Journalism or the penny press, the discourse surrounding journalism more oriented towards the popular and the mass audience seems almost timeless. Popular journalism is immoral, unethical and possibly dangerous precisely because it aims for a different audience than its predecessors or contemporary competitors.

In this study of the development of journalism in history, we have pointed to several examples where the tabloid press actually became an important and influential part of the mainstream mediated public sphere and public discourse, serving the public good. The populist nature of tabloid journalism may have many

faults, but it can also be seen as an alternative arena for public discourse, wherein criticism of both the privileged political elites and traditional types of public discourse plays a central role. Tabloid journalism has the ability to broaden the public, giving news access to groups that previously have not been targeted by the prestige press (as was the case when the penny press and the yellow journalism aimed for the mass audience), to effect societal change by redefining previously undebatable issues as in need of debate (as was the case of W. T. Stead's campaigning in the *Pall Mall Gazette*), and give rise to new forms of journalistic discourse that may be more accessible to the audience and less deferent towards traditional authority (as was the case of the interview—a form of journalism that was seen as controversial at least in part because its central element was questioning people in authority). And the often-criticised appeal to emotions prevalent in tabloid journalism can actually stimulate political participation, by speaking to the senses and feelings as well as the rational mind.

Similar points have been raised before. Sparks provides a very good analytical overview of the "defence of the tabloid" both from academics and the media industry itself (Sparks, 2000, pp. 24–8). There, he identifies in this defence an element similar to our critique presented here: that tabloid journalism in some ways represent a broadly anti-elitist, populist discourse that can provide coverage of issues of more direct concern to its audiences than the prestige press. This view ranges from a wholehearted celebration of tabloid journalism as essentially subversive, to a more moderate standpoint where it is more the potential of tabloid journalism to be an inclusive space that is commended. Sparks, however ends on a significantly more critical note: "...there is no doubt that the successes of the tabloid form demonstrate very clearly that it can address the individual as consumer, but there can be equally little doubt that it has little or nothing to contribute to the life of the citizen" (Sparks, 2000, p. 29).

Sparks himself freely admits that this is "...a banally conventional opposition", but even so it

merits a closer look. Because this opposition between citizen and consumer is based on a Habermas-like view of the public sphere as a locus for political power, and a view of citizenship that stresses voting, political organisation and other formal aspects of political participation. But if we instead use Fraser's conceptualisation of the public sphere as a site of cultural recognition and representation, the perspective shifts slightly (even though, as we have pointed out before, cultural recognition and political power are related).

Relating our historical and conceptual discussion to contemporary concerns about tabloid journalism and tabloidisation, we present a defence not covered by Sparks: that tabloid journalism—both in its worst excesses and in its most subversive moments—represent the failure of other societal institutions, among them the more prestigious news organisations and traditional political organisations, to address adequately issues of vital concern to many members of the public. Because of the limitations inherent in its discourse, tabloid journalism may well come up short if the goal is providing coherent as well as critical information about the political public sphere that we need to make political decisions (see Sparks, 2000, pp. 28–9)—but this evaluation is also based on a somewhat limited notion of what *political* means, a notion that does not include cultural recognition nor participation outside the arenas of traditional politics as major elements with an importance of their own.

Let us, for example, interpret the distinctively tabloid form of spectacular and sensational self-confession in the same way that we interpreted the emergence of the interview as a new journalistic form. The tabloid genre of self-confession has, just like the interview, been criticised for being rude and disrespectful—but it also represents a new possibility for people not normally covered by the prestige news media to speak in public and to gain attention and, perhaps, cultural recognition. Tabloid forms may provide new opportunities for representation and recognition for groups outside the mainstream, something that has been pointed out by both Gamson (1998) and Grindstaff (2002). Thus, the alternative forms of tabloid

journalism also can create a kind of alternative public sphere, where new issues can be debated, and new audiences addressed—as well as given access to the mediated public sphere. Of course this discourse had its limits—so did the tabloid discourse of the mid- and late 19th centuries. But for many, early tabloid journalism represented the only part of the public sphere where issues relevant to their daily life and work were reported, debated and discussed.

Further parallels between history and the contemporary situation can be drawn. The penny press and later the Yellow Press spoke to new audiences, previously ignored by other newspapers. They did so with sensational narratives, simplifications, blatant appeals to emotion and with an eye on the bottom line, to be sure—but along the way, they also managed to bring to attention a number of problems that faced the urban working classes, and campaign [...] against these problems. Today, with widespread concern about decreasing political participation and increasing political apathy, maybe emotional appeals are what is needed? Political participation builds not only on rational processing of information, but also on emotion, engagement and sometimes even outrage—something that tabloid journalism can possibly provide. With just modest changes to make the wording more contemporary, the headlines of W. T. Stead's crusade against child prostitution could appear as tonight's subject on *Jerry Springer*. Sensationalism does not always need to be used as a cynical ploy to attract audience attention, because sometimes, facts *are* sensational.

Likewise, the tabloid stress on the private seems, at first, to be anathema to what the public sphere is all about. But, as authors such as Fraser (1992) and van Zoonen (1994) point

out, battles both for recognition and power have often been fought by first having to redefine issues previously viewed as belonging to the private sphere as issues of public concern (Fraser's examples are sexism, sexual harassment and domestic violence against women, see Fraser, 1992, pp. 123, 132). We think that both academic and non-academic commentators on the political effects of tabloid journalism need to think more explicitly about what the concept "political" means. The standards and values by which journalism is judged needs to be reassessed to take into account the *potential* of tabloid journalism to expand public discourse and the public sphere. Just criticising "the market" for addressing people as consumers rather than citizens does not answer the question why these tabloid strategies are successful, and why they are apparently viewed by many people as valid. The most important political problem facing us in the 21st century may well be that large groups of disenfranchised people (migrants and immigrants, lower-income groups, for example) do not feel included in the body politic, and do not feel that their issues and concerns are addressed by traditional political institutions or the prestige news and media outlets. In the face of this, it would be foolish to condemn tabloid journalism according to a limited set of values and a limited conception of what politics is and should be.

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