



Obituary for the newspaper? Tracking the tabloid

Journalism
12(4) 449–466
© The Author(s) 2011
Reprints and permission: sagepub.
co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1464884910388232
jou.sagepub.com


David Rowe

University of Western Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Discussing newspapers in the 21st century commonly entails a narrative of impending extinction arising from technological, demographic, and cultural change. This article reports on research into three Australian newspapers (two broadsheet, one tabloid) that is concerned, in the first instance, with the concept of ‘tabloidization’, and the proposition that identifiable tabloid properties, such as the simplification and spectacularization of news, are increasingly characteristic of contemporary newspapers. Adaptive changes to newspaper design, style, and content in the interests of survival and renewal are addressed through quantitative content analysis in tracking formal changes to newspapers, and qualitative research through interviews with journalists in exploring their everyday negotiation of the role and trajectory of newspapers. These questions of industrial context, textual form, occupational practice, professional ideology, and politico-cultural judgment are raised in seeking to understand the dynamics of the shifting forms and contested readings of contemporary newspapers through a critically reflexive analysis of tabloidization discourse and process.

Keywords

broadsheets, cultural taste, journalists, media, newspapers, occupational culture, tabloidization

Introduction: newspaper obituaries and tabloid births

Considering the current condition and prospects for the newspaper involves frequent encounters with highly pessimistic judgements of their demise. Newspapers now carry both the obituaries of prominent citizens and intimations of their own mortality. Such pronouncements, emanating from within the newspaper industry, the wider media sphere, and journalism academe, may be exaggerated and even a little hysterical, but have begun

Corresponding author:

David Rowe, Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, South DC, NSW 1797, Australia
Email: d.rowe@uws.edu.au

to take on the character of both professional and popular wisdom, supported by such predictions as 'By 2013 the US newspaper market will have lost [US]\$25 billion from its peak in 2005' (Saba, 2009), mainly attributable to the progressive loss of print advertising revenue.

Of course, in the context of the global financial crisis ending the first decade of the 21st century many industries, from motor vehicles to finance, have suffered deep downturns. The media industries' dependence on the health of *other* industries might, therefore, distort analyses of their internal health. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009) has found, however, that the post-2007 crisis only exacerbated an already established downward trend:

Some papers are in bankruptcy, and others have lost three-quarters of their value. By our calculations, nearly one out of every five journalists working for newspapers in 2001 is now gone ... Even before the recession, the fundamental question facing journalism was whether the news industry could win a race against the clock for survival: could it find new ways to underwrite the gathering of news online, while using the declining revenue of the old platforms to finance the transition?

Even Rupert Murdoch, Chairman and Chief Executive of the transnational News Corporation, declared to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 2005 that 'Scarcely a day goes by without some claim that new technologies are fast writing newsprint's obituary' (quoted in Allan, 2006: 2). Murdoch's persistent faith and investment in newspapers alongside broadcasting and new media, as signified by his 2007 purchase of the *Wall Street Journal*, and the continued (though declining) overall profitability of the key US newspaper market, indicate that, despite many closures and operational mergers, newspapers are far from consigned to history.

Indeed, the problems of the newspaper in its more established western markets frequently contrasts with its prosperity in non-western emerging sites like India and China. Death notices for newspapers might not only be premature but ethnocentric in the light of such data as:

Paid daily newspaper circulations were up or stable in nearly 80 percent of countries where figures were available in 2007. Over the past five years, they were up or stable in 75 percent of the countries.

More than 532 million people buy a newspaper every day, up from 486 million in 2003. Average readership is estimated to be more than 1.7 billion people each day.

74 of the world's 100 best selling dailies are published in Asia. China, Japan and India account for 62 of them. (World Association of Newspapers, 2008)

Nonetheless, there is considerable momentum to the narrative drive that the future of newspapers involves impending extinction brought about by technological, demographic, and cultural change. In this regard, 'old' news media with interests in sustaining previous levels of profitability (some of whom seek state protection in the form of tax concessions – *Editor and Publisher*, 2009) may make common diagnostic cause with

'new' media (especially internet) advocates, entrepreneurs, and media scholars in proposing general, often totalizing trends that attempt to crystallise the direction of change within the contemporary media order (Everett and Caldwell, 2003; Hewitt, 2005).

The media sphere is subject to constant, sometimes dramatic change and could even be judged to be 'chaotic' (McNair, 2006). Bromley and Tumber (1997: 74) have noted that increased reader-journalist interactivity in areas such as electoral politics has provoked 'fears of a "dumbing down" effect in offering an open door to users', and suggest that one-to-many communicative forms are being transformed by more porous, citizen-oriented 'creative industries' (Hartley, 2005). But it is possible to exaggerate the unprecedented nature of such shifts, and to underestimate the capacity of existing media organizations (especially those that are globalized and highly capitalized) to adapt to them (Chun and Keenan, 2005). Those with a material interest in developing the news media (such as the recently-merged industry group World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA)) and with a professional interest in analysing them (see Franklin, 2008) confront a media sector that is unquestionably in flux, but in which the pace, extent, and consistency of trends, and their causality and consequences, are uncertain. For example, World Association of Newspapers (2009) notes that, in a period of economic crisis, newspaper growth (though not necessarily profitability) in the developing world may help mask decline in the developed world. Adjudicating between competing knowledge claims, especially those that are predictive in nature, is a difficult analytical task demanding theoretically informed and empirically based critical reflection.

A potentially productive way of advancing understanding of both continuities and discontinuities in the media domain is to examine, critically and reflexively, a trend that is widely held to be discernable, and to analyse both the extent to which it might be empirically measurable and also discursively prominent in framing interpretations of change in the media. The trend addressed in this article is the highly controversial process of tabloidization through which newspapers might be said, in the interests of preservation, to have been re-formatted and re-constituted as vehicles for news, and which has been frequently subject to complaints of representing the degradation of newspapers (Conboy, 2006). In addressing an issue that goes to the heart of the mission and future of newspapers, this article addresses research¹ into changes to three Australian newspapers (two broadsheet, one tabloid) over a key decade when the tabloidization process was seemingly well underway. It is concerned, in the first instance, with the proposition that identifiably tabloid properties, such as the simplification and spectacularization of news, are increasingly characteristic of contemporary newspapers of all kinds (Franklin, 1997; McNair, 2003; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; Turner, 1999). It addresses the adaptive changes to the design, style, and content of newspapers under circumstances where 'Journalism is threatened on all sides in the contemporary climate', and 'needs to fundamentally reconsider itself and its relationship within the contemporary cornucopia of popular media' (Conboy, 2009: 306, 308).

The study used quantitative content analysis in tracking formal and textual changes to newspapers, and a qualitative interview method involving editors and journalists that explored the operation of everyday occupational values surrounding the role and trajectory of newspapers. In addressing questions of industry, textuality, occupational practice,

professional ideology, and analytical critique, it is possible to illuminate some of the ways in which contemporary forms of newspapers and interpretations of newspaper culture are related. This discussion is concerned, then, both with whether newspapers are being 'tabloidized' and, relatedly, how those who produce newspaper texts – editors and journalists – negotiate the changes to their working environment and its publicly available products.

Analysing the tabloid: an Australian case study

The term 'tabloid' has been used to describe changes to newspaper size and format for over a century, although the processual concept of 'tabloidization' has only been in use for the last two decades. 'Tabloid' is not necessarily a pejorative term, and for some social and cultural analysts (a minority, it must be conceded) it describes the desirable infiltration into the news media of the everyday concerns of non-elite readers (including women and young people) alienated by the traditional, patriarchal guardians of the serious press whose critique of the tabloid masks their interest in maintaining cultural hegemony (Fiske, 1992; Hartley, 1996; Lumby, 1999). More commonly, though, the process of tabloidization is condemned as representing the deterioration of serious news gathering, reporting, and analysis (Franklin, 1997; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000), with defence of the tabloid presented as Panglossian concessions to the individualism, market liberalism, and relativism of the more banal forms of postmodernism (Norris, 1996).

A key question in such debates concerns how 'tabloid' the media were before the late 20th century, and the balance between their news and entertainment functions. The term was first used pharmaceutically in the late 19th century, and only later deployed to describe the physical size of smaller newspapers. By the early 20th century, however, its critical application to the print media had taken hold, reinforced later by expressions of disapproval by renowned authors such as Arthur Koestler and Vladimir Nabokov (Greenberg, 1996). Subsequently, the term was extended to embrace the electronic commercial media in general, especially television (Harrington, 2008; Langer, 1998), in the context of widespread concern about the power of the media and the quality of journalism (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992). An important consequence of the expansion and diversification of the media sector was a 'necessary rethinking of the nature and function of journalism' (Hartley, 1999: 27) and the taken-for-granted binary distinctions that tend to mark out its discourses and debates (Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004), in order to 'move beyond pejorative comparisons between "modern" and "postmodern" forms; between the "serious" and the "sensational"; investigative journalism for "newspapers of record" and popular entertainment for the tabloids' (Hartley, 1999: 27). Indeed, in historical terms, newspapers can be said to have always been concerned with everyday matters beyond orthodox politics, policy, and economics (Conboy and Steel, 2008; Hartley, 2008).

Such challenges to the philosophical and historical foundations of critiques of tabloidization have questioned the analytical value of the concept. While still in continuing popular circulation, and also within professional journalism ranks – for example, some German journalists have accused German newspapers of "trivialization", "emotionalization" and "tabloidization" (*Deutsche Welle*, 2006) – the last may be in decline as an academic concept. Turner (1999: 70), for example, has determined 'to

jettison the category of tabloidization as too baggy, imprecise and value-laden'. However, although seeing anxiety about tabloidization as an example of a 'moral panic' (Turner, 2004: 78), he retains it for use as 'a widely accepted label for a set of established debates about contemporary shifts in media content, production and consumption' (2004: 76). To rescue and restore the concept of the tabloid from its all-purpose and so unhelpful use in much academic and lay discourse is not a straightforward exercise in textual taxonomy. It is especially difficult to 'fix' texts that are polysemic, complex in their constitution, and subject both to macro and micro institutional imperatives. A degree of analytical and methodological consensus is required that has not been typical of research and scholarship on the subject to date (Uribe and Gunter, 2004). In seeking to move beyond an intellectual *impasse* that threatens to turn the concepts of the tabloid and of tabloidization into 'lay', floating signifiers of little analytical utility, it is necessary to anchor analysis through empirical research. In seeking a more rounded analysis, I have sought to understand the broader institutional and industrial context in which newspaper editors and journalists operate, as well as examining the textual content and form of contemporary newspapers (following, among others, McLachlan and Golding, 2000; Winston, 2002) in 'testing' a selection of commonly ascribed attributes of tabloidization.

The content analysis covered the decade spanning the early 1990s into the new century. The Australian newspaper industry is different from that of, say, Britain, and more closely resembles its American counterpart, given that it is dominated by metropolitan rather than national publications (Tiffen, 2006). It is also heavily concentrated, and dominated by News Limited (the Australian subsidiary of News Corporation) and its rival, Fairfax Media. Australia both shares characteristics with other national media contexts and has its own specific histories shaping its present condition and trajectory (Cunningham and Turner, 2009). The selected newspapers were Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald* broadsheet (Australia's oldest major newspaper, first published in 1831, and one of the five oldest, continually-published newspapers in the world); News Limited's *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney's only daily tabloid and the city's largest selling newspaper; and *The Australian*, also a Murdoch newspaper, which is based in Sydney but is Australia's only daily national broadsheet (first published in 1964).² Interviews with editors and journalists included those based in Australia, but also others in Britain and the USA, so enabling an international dimension to the research. Tracking continuities and changes, similarities and differences, enabled analytical reflection on both the characteristics of broadsheet and tabloid newspapers and of potential tabloidizing trends *within* broadsheets and tabloids. While only selected aspects of the study can be presented here, they indicate important features of the evolving future of newspapers in both Australia and in other countries during a key moment when many newspapers were changing shape and size and when online journalism was increasingly supplementing, and even supplanting, print news formats. As 'debates about tabloids have once again come to the fore in scholarly debates and popular discourses, as familiar concerns about "falling standards" of journalism and the global spread of entertainment media coincide with fear about the future of traditional media, especially newspapers, in the advent of interactive media' (Wasserman, 2009: 338), it is timely to reconsider the place of tabloidization within current analyses of the future of newspapers.

Table 1. Average Monday to Friday net sales, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Newspaper	1992	1997	2002
<i>The Australian</i>	1 14,664	1 19,530	1 29,408
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	485,724	440,277	407,837
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	243,756	234,695	225,865

Table 2. Average Saturday net sales, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Newspaper	1992	1997	2002
<i>The Australian</i>	3 11,183	3 10,901	296,378
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	355,245	358,739	338,306
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	396,742	405,418	392,830

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations (2003).

Sales, circulation and size

Audit Bureau of Circulations (2003) statistics for the sample period revealed a general (though not consistent) decline in newspaper circulation (see Tables 1 and 2), and a particular concern about the future of broadsheets. In the light of this threat to the viability of the future of the Australian newspaper industry, the case of the Fairfax-owned *Newcastle Herald*, Australia's oldest surviving regional newspaper, offered some encouragement to move to a tabloid format (Rowe, 2000). The *Newcastle Herald's* audited Monday–Saturday circulation (net paid sales) had dropped to below 45,000 (44,388) in the month (June 1998) before it went tabloid. Four years later (June 2002), its circulation was 53,456, an increase of 20.4 per cent, leading the paper to claim to be the most successful in Australia. By 2007, its circulation increase across almost a decade since going tabloid was over 21 per cent (Oakley, 2007), although substantial investment in new printing technology, a raised promotional budget, and 'de-spatializing' of the newspaper to encompass a wider geographical area also need to be taken into account. In March 2006, News Limited's broadsheet *Courier Mail* in Brisbane followed suit and went tabloid. As is discussed below, however, neither the *Newcastle Herald* nor the *Courier Mail* emphasized themselves as 'tabloid', preferring the less ideologically loaded term 'compact'.

These initiatives in Australia both preceded and followed developments in the United Kingdom, with the *Independent's* early success in sales and circulation after going tabloid in 2003 reportedly encouraging over 20 broadsheets across the world to change to that format (either exclusively or in tandem), including the *Times* (Greenslade, 2004a, 2004b), constituting what one commentator in the *Chicago Tribune* described as 'The Next Brit Invasion: Tabloidization' (quoted in Preston, 2004). Nonetheless, neither *The Australian* nor *Sydney Morning Herald* has to date gone tabloid. In 2007, though, the latter (along with its sister paper, Melbourne's *Age*) announced its intention to follow the UK's *Guardian* (which adopted the so-called 'Berliner' sizing in September 2005) in

the compromise strategy of narrowing its pages along the lines of the *New York Times*. Its then editor noted that the newspaper was partially returning to a much earlier size:

One of the challenges facing newspapers around the world is to ensure they are accessible and convenient to use. This is a particular issue for a broadsheet such as *The Sydney Morning Herald*. In recent years, many readers have signalled that the large page format of the *Herald* can be difficult to handle, particularly those who use public transport or wish to read their copy on a plane ...

As a result, we have decided to reduce the width of the *Herald's* broadsheet page by approximately the width of the column you are reading (exact dimensions are yet to be finalised). The depth of the newspaper will remain unaltered. This would create a newspaper the size of *The New York Times*, for example, and would be almost exactly the width of the first *Herald* published 176 years ago. (Oakley, 2007)

As the *Sydney Morning Herald* planned to move (though later postponed) from 40.6cm wide to 34cm, while retaining its length at 58cm, the 56cm long *New York Times* reduced its width from 34.5cm to 30.5cm (Tabakoff, 2007). While both newspapers would remain longer than the tabloid, which is generally around 40cm, their width now 'inched' closer to the conventional tabloid size of a little below 30cm. Tables 1 and 2 also indicate that a tabloid format is no guarantee of success (a judgement made by the UK's *Telegraph*, which also remains a broadsheet). These sales statistics over the sampled decade reveal that one crude version of the tabloidization 'thesis' – an inevitable sales and circulation decline of broadsheet newspapers in favour of the tabloids – is not supported by the data. Between 1992 and 2002, among the sample the tabloid sold the largest number of weekday newspapers, but also experienced the greatest sales decline (*Daily Telegraph's* -16% compared to *Sydney Morning Herald's* -7.3%), while a broadsheet actually increased its Monday to Friday sales (*Australian* +12.8%). In relation to the crucial Saturday edition, with its large classified advertising sections constituting the fabled (but drying up) 'rivers of gold', the tabloid is not the market leader (which is the *Sydney Morning Herald*), its proportional sales decline in a shrinking market matching that of the broadsheet *Australian* (both -4.8%, compared with the *Sydney Morning Herald's* -0.98%), while the sales gap with the biggest selling Saturday paper in Sydney increased by over 13,000.

But sales (and circulation) statistics are not the only significant aspect of trends in the contemporary media. It could be proposed that the relative decline of tabloids in relation to some broadsheets is attributable to the latter taking over some of the generic characteristics of the tabloid. It is important, therefore, to consider changes to newspaper content, form, and style, including to the 'space budget' (especially of the key news pages referred to in journalist parlance as 'the front end of the book'); news content and focus; range of stories; size and composition of news articles; use of headlines and visuals; and reporting style and reader address (Rowe, 2000). In this context I deploy Uribe and Gunter's (2004: 390) abbreviated but useful understanding of tabloidization as 'less proportional space dedicated to text, and more to visuals and headlines' in relation to the composition of articles.³ These characteristics are consistently emphasized as pivotal elements of print tabloid texts (see, for example, several contributions on print

media in Biressi and Nunn, 2007), and provide a useful platform for the exploration of the tabloid as a set of textual properties that relate, in various ways, to tabloidization discourse within the newspaper organizations whose personnel were interviewed as part of the study.

Article composition: Less text, more image and headline space?

Examining article composition in the principal news pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian*, and *Daily Telegraph* (pages 1–3 for the broadsheets, 1–6 for the tabloid) provides some clues as to whether tabloidization, defined as less text and more headline and image space, occurred consistently across the sample period. A range of changes was detected but not an entirely consistent trend. In the case of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a slight decrease in the textual element (-1.9 per cent), and an associated increase in the image (+1.1 per cent) and headline (0.8 per cent) element of articles from 1992 to 2002 was found (see Tables 3 and 4), but the distribution of story compositional elements fluctuated little over the sample period.

With regard to article composition, then, this broadsheet did not become markedly more 'tabloid' by substantially reconfiguring the relative proportions of text, image, and headline. *The Australian's* actual and proportional space devoted to news article text, image, and headline also fluctuated slightly, as noted in Tables 5 and 6. There was a noticeable increase in the percentage of total article space devoted to images (+7.9%) and a corresponding decrease in the text space of articles (-7.3%), but the headline, as a percentage of the total article space, remained fairly constant, and in fact fell slightly in relation to the other elements (-0.6%). By this criterion, *The Australian* went a little

Table 3. Article composition in cm² of pages 1–3 of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Components	1992	1997	2002
Article text	12,285.45	10,832.44	9087.44
Article image	7721.05	7986.43	6110.58
Article headline	3098.41	2850.09	2509.46
Total article space	23,104.90	21,669.00	17,707.50

Table 4. Article composition in cm² of pages 1–3 as a percentage of total article space of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Components	1992	1997	2002
Article text	53.2	50.0	51.3
Article image	33.4	36.9	34.5
Article headline	13.4	13.1	14.2
Total article space	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 5. Article composition in cm² of pages 1–3 of *The Australian*, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Components	1992	1997	2002
Article text	14,580.56	11,735.70	12,441.66
Article image	6360.05	6826.37	8025.67
Article headline	3073.20	3227.39	2835.65
Total article space	24,013.81	21,789.46	23,302.98

Table 6. Article composition in cm² of pages 1–3 as a percentage of total article space of *The Australian*, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Components	1992	1997	2002
Article text	60.7	53.9	53.4
Article image	26.5	31.3	34.4
Article headline	12.8	14.8	12.2
Total article space	100.0	100.0	100.0

‘more tabloid’ than the *Sydney Morning Herald* between 1992 and 2002, but there was no strict linear development, with both broadsheets in some respects displaying more tabloid characteristics in 1997 than in 2002 (for example, proportionately more image space in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and more headline space in *The Australian*).

With regard to the principal news pages of the tabloid *Daily Telegraph*, there were slight fluctuations (see Tables 7 and 8). Proportionately, there was a consistent increase in news article image space over the 10 year sample period (+3.5%), but the textual component fell only very slightly (-0.7%) and rose in 1997 (+3.7%), while the headline component fell, and then rose, but only to sub-1992 levels (a decline of -2.8%).

Once again, these data do not support the proposition that there has been a consistent process of tabloidization – here measured by the composition of news articles – in any of the newspapers analysed in either absolute or relative terms. There was often considerable stability or, alternatively, fluctuation in both directions, while some consistent trends, in fact, might be interpreted as countering a tabloidization trend. Variations were

Table 7. Article composition in cm² of pages 1–6 of the *Daily Telegraph*, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Components	1992	1997	2002
Article text	6907.92	8769.81	7263.28
Article image	8360.17	9793.00	9687.45
Article headline	4248.34	3859.77	3988.02
Total article space	19,516.43	22,422.58	20,938.75

Table 8. Article composition in cm² as a percentage of pages 1–6 of the *Daily Telegraph*, 1992–2002 sampled at 5-year intervals

Components	1992	1997	2002
Article text	35.4	39.1	34.7
Article image	42.8	43.7	46.3
Article headline	21.8	17.2	19.0
Total article space	100.0	100.0	100.0

also apparent within and between newspapers – but none on this measure could be said to have become progressively and conspicuously ‘more tabloid’. If these examples of sales and article compositional analysis across a decade do not entirely support sweeping pronouncements that tabloidization can be detected in all newspaper types, there is no doubt that newspaper editors and journalists have been required to negotiate it in their everyday professional discourse. In the next section, there is an exploration of how working journalists have responded to the conditions noted above in seeking to manage the changing contexts of their occupational environment and the nature of their textual production. The above data have revealed the necessity of working within a medium in flux in which the stigma of the tabloid is both resisted and reinforced.

Working with and against the tabloid

As discussed earlier, the classification of newspapers has tended to be binary (broadsheet versus tabloid) and hierarchical (broadsheet over tabloid). Despite the self-justifications of tabloid journalists, personnel movement between tabloids and broadsheets, and some favourable comments about tabloid professional ‘discipline’ by broadsheet journalists (Rowe, 2005), there is little doubt that tabloids have rather less accumulated cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). For this reason, precisely at the point when many broadsheets are going physically tabloid, they assiduously avoid the term and its negative connotations. Declining sales and circulation, and consequent pressures to re-format from proprietors, managers, and shareholders, provoke anxiety among those wishing to maintain a distinction between their new ‘quality’ tabloids with inherited broadsheet ‘cachet’ and the much-denigrated ‘red tops’. At the same time, the remaining broadsheet newspaper journalists and their readers are likely to perceive professional and cultural advantages by representing such shifts as ‘dumbing down’. As noted, being ‘compact with impact’ was far preferred to that of ‘going tabloid’ when the *Newcastle Herald* re-formatted in 1998, and its management, editors, and journalists went to considerable lengths to avoid the tabloid stigma, especially that attached to their British counterparts where it is frequently used as a defining element of national consciousness and the politics of everyday life (Conboy, 2006; Horrie, 2003; Johansson, 2007). Similarly, when the UK’s *Independent* and then *Times* went dual format and then exclusively tabloid, great pains were taken to represent these as only adjustments in shape and convenience, rather than constituting a reduction in quality. The *Independent* promoted itself as the ‘same newspaper, different size’, while Rupert Murdoch told the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 2005:

And most recently, at *The Times* of London, circulation decline was immediately reversed when we moved from a broadsheet to what we call our 'compact' edition. For nearly a year, we offered readers both versions: same newspaper, same stories, just different sizes. And they overwhelmingly chose the compact version as more convenient. This is an example of us listening to what our readers want, and then upsetting a centuries old tradition to give them exactly what they were asking for. And we did it all without compromising the quality of our product. (News Corporation, 2005)

This is a curious double movement – the newspaper is changed at considerable cost and for reasonably clear reasons (economic viability and enhanced profitability by gaining a new readership), but seeks to reassure its existing readership that the modification is minimal, while signalling to new, potential readers that it has, indeed, changed in a significant way to meet their clearly expressed needs. Indeed, as Greenslade (2004a) noted, when the *Times* went dual format before going exclusively tabloid, there were substantial editorial differences between broadsheet and compact editions, judging the former to be 'vastly superior'.

The present and future tabloid is, then, the object of considerable emergent discursive contestation in interviews with editors and journalists in their capacities as professional knowledge workers positioned within an occupational labour market in which parity of esteem, remuneration, and conditions are unevenly distributed. For example, Ivan, a senior journalist on an Australian broadsheet newspaper that had switched to tabloid format, experienced a difficult transition, seeking to combine a broadsheet 'seriousness' regarding 'background and depth' with 'the best of tabloid form' in being 'shorter and more succinct' in accordance with the needs of busy readers:

Ivan: [Tabloid means] being a shorter page, different column widths, smaller format. Means you're looking at shorter stories, shorter sentences, and then, therefore, a different way of telling the story. And *The Bugle* is a paper that's a tabloid in size, but I would argue that we've tried to maintain the kind of seriousness that the paper strove for when it was a broadsheet, and so it picks the best of tabloid form, in that we realise that people no longer have the time to sit down and read a paper cover to cover, and so they want that information in the shortest way. And that's one of the positive sides of tabloids, I suppose, that it's taught journalists to be shorter and more succinct. On the other hand there is that constant battle to get some of the background and depth into a story that is missing in the ten 'para' sort of [story].

In seeking to handle the demands of changes in 'craft' and occupational status precipitated by the newspaper's re-formatting, the disparaged word 'tabloid' was, as in advertising, marketing, and public relations treatments of the transition, somewhat submerged:

Ivan: I don't think it's a word that we use that much. We talked about it when the paper was going tabloid, you had to start thinking about things in a different way. But one of the things that hadn't sunk in until we started turning out tabloid papers was the sheer volume of, the sheer amount of change in the way that you wrote a story ...

... To be ten years into your craft and suddenly have to start changing the way that you write ... it was a bit of a shock at first to really cut those sentences up. I think academically people who study media look at tabloid and see it as inferior. I think it has a negative concept in that way, I

think the general public must see it as quite a positive thing otherwise they wouldn't be responding to it. Broadsheet is high brow and tabloid is for the masses, if you like ...

Ivan emphasised that broadsheets and tabloids can never be the 'same newspaper, same stories, just different sizes,' and that different forms of journalistic practice are required according to newspaper form. Maintaining a distance between newspaper form and cultural prestige is a difficult task, given that journalists themselves have often been inculcated with the same professional value set, and understand the different conditions under which newspapers are produced in different contexts. For example, Gordon, a senior broadsheet journalist who had also worked for tabloids and valued the 'discipline' acquired there, observed that, while broadsheet journalists devote considerable professional time to refining codes of ethics, 'in the tabloid world, whilst they are bound and covered by the code of ethics, there is less of an emphasis placed on how the product is collected, and how it is presented, and by what basis it is presented'. Not only was this investigative journalist of note troubled by what he saw as less attention to ethics in the 'tabloid world', he also felt that it did not do enough to develop the skills of its workforce, and was not committed to quality journalism across the whole newspaper:

Gordon: There is little or no ... regard for investing in your talent, and building up your stocks of talent. The turnover in terms of journalists on a tabloid newspaper is far higher than on a broadsheet. The demographic of a tabloid is far younger than that of a broadsheet, hence the experience is not as advanced on a tabloid, and you get the feeling from time to time, despite the high points that tabloids do attain sometimes in getting great news stories, that, so long as they have two or three great stories, it doesn't necessarily matter that much what fills the rest of the pages.

Indeed, even in the foregrounded tabloid stories to which considerable resources had been devoted, he also felt that a campaigning style of journalism had come to distinguish much of the output of the tabloid press, 'something I instinctively abhor', although he had also observed legitimate infusions of 'tabloid tendencies' within broadsheets brought about by the movement into the broadsheet of some journalists trained in the tabloids: 'There are still tabloid tendencies that have a legitimate place in a broadsheet newspaper, and which are carried into the broadsheet by dint of the fact that people like myself are tabloid refugees in a broadsheet environment'.

From these brief examples – broadly borne out in many other interviews – it is clear that the broadsheet-tabloid divide persists despite the 'shrinking' of broadsheets and any actual or imagined trend towards 'tabloid tendencies' among them. Jennifer, a senior journalist in Australia whose background was in small, regional papers before moving to a broadsheet-turned-tabloid in a large provincial city, noted that there 'does seem to be a hierarchy from city broadsheet at the top, down to the little weekly newspaper in country New South Wales somewhere'. She expressed regret that she had never worked at the newspaper when it was a broadsheet, while also explaining the reader relations shortcomings that had prompted its reconfiguration as a tabloid:

Jennifer: I've always loved broadsheets, I love the *Sydney Morning Herald* and I love it because it's a broadsheet, but I think that has more to do with a tactile thing and the way I read

newspapers, and a history, than it does really necessarily with the content ... Just because it was a broadsheet didn't make it a good newspaper ...

... Part of the advantage of a tabloid, too, is that market research tells us that people like it because it's easier to handle. So if that's being relevant then, yes, we are more relevant, purely because people like reading tabloids these days just because they're easier to fold when you're standing on a bus, or easier to read regardless of where you are.

For this journalist, and others such as Tania, who when interviewed was working on an 'upmarket' tabloid daily financial paper, the future of newspapers is irrevocably tabloid: 'I think it's inevitable because of the competition from internet, people's time, competition on time, their inability to really concentrate on anything for very long, and I think communication is becoming simpler and simpler, it's a trend'.

To some degree, the traditional rivalry between broadsheets and tabloids has begun to dissipate as what united them (print) seemed more important than what divided them (journalistic organization, approach, and content). The spectre of the internet and of various forms of converged media for many journalists overshadowed the broadsheet-tabloid cleavage. For Terry, a broadsheet sport journalist, tabloidization, conceived as a general trend within newspapers, has been accelerated by online media:

Terry: I think the greater urgency of news in the past 10 years has brought that [tabloidization] about, the emphasis is more on speed and getting it out there, rather than in-depth analysis. I think the internet has played a large role in this because news is so readily available now, so instantly available, so yeah I think that's led to, you know, papers are trying to keep up a bit with the internet and in that sense the urgency is more on, like I say, immediacy rather than in-depth analysis.

A shift towards easier, more digestible news content – what Thomas, a senior journalist on a regional tabloid, called 'a wide range of information, in easily assimilatable [sic] format' – has for many journalists, whose love of print is palpable, shaped the future of newspapers. According to Simon, a broadsheet journalist, the newspaper reading experience is a resilient one, but also threatened by new technologies and generational change:

Simon: ... well, it's portability, easy access you have to a newspaper when you think about it. You don't have to log on, switch the phone off, switch things over, even if you're at work you kind of have to stop your work, switch screens or whatever. The newspaper sits on your desk. I, living in la-la land, I firmly believe that the newspaper will continue to exist. I am worried about lots of figures coming through that the younger demographics aren't reading newspapers and don't read any news, so that would sign the death knell for *The Australian*. I think having said that, what newspapers will become is far more articulate from an IT point of view, from what their product's going to look like on website. Now, very rudimentary, they call it interactive some of it, but it's not, and there is a way that's a lot more accessible, that newspapers can truly, possibly leave the shackles of paper, the newsprint, and move into a completely different area not occupied by anything they've got online now.

As noted above, the concept of the tabloid often goes unnamed within newspapers in deference to less stigmatized terms like 'compact' and 'convenient.' The move towards shorter, more striking stories with a strong 'impact factor' requires a corresponding

modification of the textual labour process that many – including journalists – denigrate, but it is still a professional or craft activity, and one that demands the transformation of raw information into recognisable journalistic form that can engage the reader. As Thomas argued:

Whether it's in a physical paper, newspaper, or whether it's in an electronic form, that editing process, and that personal time and space, I don't think they can be replaced, to be honest ... But I don't fear the future of newspapers, not at all, and I don't think that's got much to do with the tabloidization. That's a slight accommodation to the faster mindset, but it's only a slight accommodation. I don't think we've given in completely. We haven't yet anyway.

The language of besiegement, of an embattled professional workforce and of hard-pressed readers, is a theme that runs through the discourse of contemporary newspaper journalism. But the shape of the present is not entirely clear, and the future even less so, for those knowledge workers whose output now often appears in broadsheets and tabloids, print and online, and are now accustomed to regular pronouncements of occupational crisis.

Conclusion: a 'tabloid effect'?

Although mentioned, I have not concentrated here on the progressive integration of newspaper print and online forms, the proliferation of free titles, and the possibility that tabloidization might be advancing more speedily in the online and free daily environment, with their rapid turnover of content, digest-style short stories, entertainment gossip, 'blogs', 'citizen journalism', and heavy reliance on the visual (Allan, 2006; Greenslade, 2004c). Instead, I have attempted to demonstrate that tabloidization, even where it can be shown to be occurring in some respects, is more complex and uneven than many media industry analysts and academics will allow. The volatility of the current newspaper industry is revealed by, for example, the *New York Times* taking front-page advertising for the first time in January 2009, just as the broadsheet *Chicago Tribune* rolled back some of its bold design changes (including more white space, more prominent photographs, and advertisements) because of reader complaints that they were 'too loud', and then introduced a weekday tabloid sold in newsstands, retail outlets, and street boxes. The place and role of tabloid newspapers, furthermore, may be quite different in contexts like post-apartheid South Africa than in the Western sites that dominate media debates (Wasserman, 2008).

The expansion and diversification of the mediasphere, and enhanced interactivity through such means as 'citizen journalism' and 'user generated content', do not, though, render inadmissible traditional questions surrounding media power and the role of journalism. The need for critical scepticism is well demonstrated not just in research concerning media forms and styles, or in professional ideologies and practices, but also in media consumption and use. For example, Couldry et al., (2007: 97–8), in researching the media use of 37 diarists in Britain, found that all had access to television and radio, and a little over half (57%) to the internet. While 23 (62%) read a newspaper every day, there was a 'clear age and gender stratification of those who didn't: all were under 40 (two-thirds under 30), and three-quarters were women'. These findings are consistent with those in

newspaper readership research encouraging moves to tabloid formats. However, only one diarist used the internet as their principal news source, and the use of mobile news media sources was negligible (practices that may have become more prominent, given technological innovations and enhanced access, since their empirical research was conducted in 2004–05).

The researchers concluded, therefore, that, ‘For our diarist sample, then, the traditional media – television, radio and the press – were overwhelmingly the key news sources from which they selected’ (Couldry et al., 2007: 98), a finding that was broadly supported in their parallel survey of a random sample of 1017 adults (aged 18 and above). Yet, rather counter-intuitively, they found, after controlling for levels of respondent political interest, trust, efficacy, and demography, a small negative correlation between the amount of time spent reading a newspaper and voting likelihood: ‘One might ask, what is left after removing political interest from reading the paper? Since the answer seems to be – the sport, the weather, the gossip, etc. we term this a “tabloid effect”’ (Couldry et al., 2007: 159).

While no relation was found between voting likelihood and attachment to the key ascribed tabloid characteristic of ‘celebrity culture’, interest in celebrities was negatively correlated with level of political interest (Couldry et al., 2007: 162), and reflected a substantial disconnection between celebrity culture and public political engagement, thereby challenging ‘writers who have celebrated popular culture as bringing the democratisation of an old-fashioned and elitist political culture [who] ignore a more fundamental divide in how audiences orient themselves in the world’ (Couldry et al., 2007: 182).

Much more can be said about issues of public connection and the media, but it is notable that a ‘tabloid effect’ was discerned in this case. Tabloidization, then, is a complex conceptual process in that it encompasses a range of technical, economic, social, cultural, political, ideological, and ethical concerns. The empirical research reported here – of course, mainly in one country, medium, and context, but with clear echoes in other places, media, and times (see, for example, Curran et al., 2009) – reveals a shifting ‘mediascape’ in which the tabloid figures strongly in symbolic terms, even when unequivocal evidence of its irresistible rise is absent. The characteristics and implications of the tabloid may be highly contested, but the concept remains deeply installed within contemporary media discourses of press viability, quality, and responsibility. Its discursive power is no more evident than in the ways in which the tabloid is systematically repressed and delicately negotiated within newspapers’ public projections of their changing forms and styles, active within everyday taxonomies of the practice and status of professional journalism, and conspicuous in both health reports and obituaries for the newspaper.

Notes

- 1 The pilot study, “‘Compact with impact’ or numbing and dumbing? Assessing the tabloidization process’, was funded by The University of Newcastle, Australia, and the ensuing project ‘Disposing of the tabloid? A critical analysis of contemporary developments in the print media’ by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. All interviewees and some newspapers have been disguised in order to protect agreed anonymity. Peter Wejbor and Ruth Sibson are

- thanked for their research assistance, and Colin Sparks and Toby Miller for their advice and assistance. My gratitude, finally, to the editors and journalists who agreed to be interviewed.
- 2 Although there is a broad ideological difference between the newspaper groups, with News tending to be on the political Right and Fairfax on the Left (Hobbs, 2007), and a greater concentration of tabloids in News (Fairfax does publish a daily business tabloid, *The Australian Financial Review* and a Sunday tabloid, *The Sun-Herald*), it is beyond the scope of this article to address the specific aspects of their organizational politics.
 - 3 A comparative section of equivalent print space across all three newspapers was taken in the base year of analysis (1992) and replicated in the 1997 and 2002 sample years. Six issues per annum of the first three pages of the broadsheets and first six pages of the tabloids were sampled. For example, in 1992 this 'space budget' over the six sampled issues amounted to 34,591 cm² in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 32,289 in *The Australian*, and 33,223 in the *Daily Telegraph*. Sampling was on a rolling week basis to account for both weekly as well as seasonal variations. The total news pages space budget; average size of article (all-text); number of articles/images; number of page one articles; spatial location of news (for example, national, international); reader address and article reporting style; and news focus (for example, crime, politics, sport), were also measured and analysed. Over 50 journalists, including several editors and some in the broadcast media, were interviewed for the project in Australia, the UK, and the USA between 2003 and 2005. The interviews concentrated on Australian print journalists, but also involved media personnel in other media and countries in order to provide a broader perspective on tabloidization patterns and interpretations, a local/global approach to the subject advocated by Wasserman (2009), among others. In this article, only a small sample of Australia-based interviews is directly used.

References

- Allan S (2006) *Online News: Television and the Internet*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Audit Bureau of Circulations (2003) Sydney: Audit Bureau of Circulations.
- Biressi A and Nunn H (eds) (2007) *The Tabloid Culture Reader*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.
- Bromley M and Tumber H (1997) The First Cyberspace Election. *British Journalism Review* 8(2): 68–74.
- Chun WHK and Keenan T (eds) (2005) *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Conboy M (2006) *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community through Language*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Conboy M (2009) A Parachute of Popularity for a Commodity in Freefall? *Journalism* 10(3): 306–308.
- Conboy M and Steel J (2008) The Future of Newspapers: Historical Perspectives. *Journalism Studies* 9(5): 650–661.
- Couldry N, Livingstone S, and Markham T (2007) *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cunningham SD and Turner G (eds) (2009) *The Media and Communications in Australia* (3rd edition). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Curran J, Iyengar S, Lund AB, and Salovaara-Moring I (2009) Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study. *European Journal of Communication* 24(1): 5–26.
- Dahlgren P and Sparks C (eds) (1992) *Journalism and Popular Culture*. London: Sage.
- Deutsche Welle* (2006) German Newspapers Accused of Mixing Journalism with PR. 28 November. Available at: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2251302,00.html>

- Editor and Publisher* (2009) Newspapers in Washington Get Key 40% Tax Break. 2 July. Available at: http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003990307
- Everett A and Caldwell JT (eds) (2003) *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*. New York: Routledge.
- Fiske J (1992) Popularity and the Politics of Information. In: Dahlgren P and Sparks C (eds) *Journalism and Popular Culture*. London: Sage, 45–63.
- Franklin B (1997) *Newszak and News Media*. London: Arnold.
- Franklin B (ed.) (2008) The Future of Newspapers: Special Issue. *Journalism Studies* 9(5): 629–843.
- Greenberg GS (1996) *Tabloid Journalism: An Annotated Bibliography of English-Language Sources*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Greenslade R (2004a) Little Echo: Are Readers of the Compact *Times* Getting Everything the Broadsheet has to Offer? *Guardian*, 19 January. Available at: <http://media.guardian.co.uk/mediaguardian/story/0,1125898,00.html>
- Greenslade R (2004b) It's the Most Effective Promotion in the History of Newspapers. *Guardian*, 26 July. Available at: <http://media.guardian.co.uk/mediaguardian/story/0,7558,1268882,00.html>.
- Greenslade R (2004c) *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda*. London: Macmillan.
- Harrington S (2008) Popular News in the 21st Century: Time for a New Critical Approach? *Journalism* 9(3): 266–284.
- Hartley J (1996) *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*. London: Arnold.
- Hartley J (1999) What is Journalism? The View from Under a Stubby Cap. *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy* 90: 15–35.
- Hartley J (ed.) (2005) *Creative Industries*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hartley J (2008) The Supremacy of Ignorance Over Instruction and of Numbers Over Knowledge: Journalism, Popular Culture, and the English Constitution. *Journalism Studies* 9(5): 679–691.
- Hewitt H (2005) *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Your World*. Nashville, TN: Nelson Business.
- Hobbs M (2007) 'More Paper than Physical': The Reincorporation of News Corp and its Representation in the Australian Press. *Journal of Sociology* 43(3): 263–281.
- Horrie C (2003) *Tabloid Nation: From the Birth of the Mirror to the Death of the Tabloid Newspaper*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Johansson S (2007) *Reading Tabloids: Tabloid Newspapers and their Readers*. Stockholm: Södertorns Hogskola.
- Langer J (1998) *Tabloid Television: Popular Journalism and the 'Other News'*. New York: Routledge.
- Lumby C (1999) *Gotcha: Life in a Tabloid World*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- McLachlan S and Golding P (2000) Tabloidization in the British Press: A Quantitative Investigation into Changes in British Newspapers, 1952–1997. In: Sparks C and Tulloch J (eds) *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 76–90.
- McNair B (2003) *News and Journalism in the UK*. 4th edn. London: Routledge.
- McNair B (2006) *Cultural Chaos: Journalism and Power in a Globalised World*. London: Routledge.
- News Corporation (2005) Speech by Rupert Murdoch to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. 13 April. Available at: http://www.newscorp.com/news/news_247.html
- Norris C (1996) *Reclaiming Truth: Contribution to a Critique of Cultural Relativism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Oakley A (2007) The Future of Your Newspaper. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 27 April 27. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/the-future-of-your-newspaper/2007/04/26/1177459878762.html>

- Örnebring H and Jönsson AM (2004) Tabloid Journalism and the Public Sphere: A Historical Perspective. *Journalism Studies* 5(3): 283–295.
- Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009) *State of the News Media Report*. Available at: <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2009/index.htm>
- Preston P (2004) Are Newspapers Burnt Out? *The Observer*, 21 November. Available at: <http://media.guardian.co.uk/columnists/story/0,7550,1356015,00.html>
- Rowe D (2000) On Going Tabloid: A Preliminary Analysis. *Metro* 121/122: 78–85.
- Rowe D (2005) Working Knowledge Encounters: Academics, Journalists and the Conditions of Cultural Labour. *Social Semiotics* 15(3): 269–288.
- Saba J (2009) Study: US Newspaper Biz Expected to Lose \$25 Billion by 2013. *Editor and Publisher*, 16 June. Available at: http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003984791
- Sparks C and J Tulloch (eds) (2000) *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tabakoff N (2007) Latest Newspaper Shrinkage is a Sign of the Times. *The Australian*, 8 August, p. 33.
- Tiffen R (2006) The Press. In: Cunningham S and Turner G (eds) *The Media and Communications in Australia*. 2nd edn. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 97–112.
- Turner G (1999) Tabloidization, Journalism and the Possibility of Critique. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2(1): 59–76.
- Turner G (2004) *Understanding Celebrity*. London: Sage.
- Uribe R and Gunter B (2004) Research Note: The Tabloidization of British Tabloids. *European Journal of Communication* 19(3): 387–402.
- Wasserman H (2008) Attack of the Killer Newspapers! The ‘Tabloid Revolution’ in South Africa and the Future of Newspapers. *Journalism Studies* 9(5): 786–797.
- Wasserman H (2009) Book Review: Sofia Johansson, Reading Tabloids: Tabloid Newspapers and their Readers. *Media, Culture and Society* 31(2): 338–339.
- Winston B (2002) Towards Tabloidization? Glasgow Revisited, 1975–2001. *Journalism Studies* 3(1): 5–20.
- World Association of Newspapers (2008) World Press Trends: Newspapers are a Growth Business. 2 June. Available at: <http://www.wan-press.org/article17377.html>
- World Association of Newspapers (2009) World Press Trends: Digital Revenues Won’t Replace Print. 2 June. Available at: <http://www.wan-press.org/article18330.html>

Biographical notes

Professor David Rowe is with the Centre for Cultural Research (CCR), University of Western Sydney, Australia, which he joined in 2006 (and of which he was Director, 2006–09) from the Cultural Institutions and Practices Research Centre (CIPS) at the University of Newcastle, Australia, where he was Founding Director and Professor in Media and Cultural Studies. David’s interdisciplinary work ranges across the field of popular media and culture, and has been published in many journals, including *Media, Culture and Society*, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *Journalism*, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *Social Text*, *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, *Social Semiotics*, and *Journal of Media Practice*. He has contributed many chapters to edited books, including Curran and Gurevitch’s well-known text *Mass Media and Society* (Hodder Education), and also entries for major reference works, including *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Wiley-Blackwell), and *Routledge Companion to News and Journalism Studies* (Routledge). His books include *Popular Cultures: Rock Music, Sport and the Politics of Pleasure* (London: Sage, 1995); *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World* (co-authored, London: Sage, 2001); and *Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity* (second edition, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004). Professor Rowe’s work has been translated into several languages, including Chinese, Italian, Arabic, French and Turkish.