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Foreword to "Tabloid Tales"

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Disciplines
Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences
Foreword

Barbie Zelizer

The need to make distinctions between high and low culture has occupied us for as long as we have recognized that phenomenon we call “culture.” Journalism is no exception to this rule. The thrust to identify certain forms of journalistic practice as “good” journalism and the prevailing counter-thrust—excommunicating certain practices from the elevated journalistic standard—have remained a consensual way of encountering the journalistic world.

The high-low argument has permeated discussions about journalism in different ways. Distinctions between high and low, information and entertainment, substance and style, responsibility and sensationalism all have motivated the elevation of a slew of “desirable” journalistic practices and the simultaneous degradation of others: word over image, expository prose over sound bite, black-and-white photography over the color still shot. The excommunication of certain practices is an act that bears a certain fluid quality: if we follow it over time, we see that the critique of television (and simultaneous valorization of print) transforms into the ridicule of TV news magazines (alongside the praise of hard television news programming), that in turn becomes the displacement of tabloid TV news magazines (next to the favoring of mainstream news magazines). In other words, there is always some member of the journalistic neighborhood to look down upon, and even the most recent denigrations of online journalism bear the familiar ring of an argument heard many times over. In each case, the need to identify a lowlife in journalism, in all of its forms, underscores a very basic fact about journalism itself. It tells us that journalism is and always has been adverse to change.

Tabloid Tales tackles these impulses head-on. Colin Sparks and John Tulloch have put together a marvelous, and much-needed, collection that tracks the tabloid across nearly every pertinent continuum in which it has taken hold—across historical time periods, international boundaries, and different cultural
formations. In the chapters that follow, we encounter a broad range of conversations about the shape of tabloid journalism, in both its pragmatic and subjunctive forms. The collection, which brings together scholars in Britain, the United States, Germany, Japan, Scandinavia, and elsewhere, identifies not only what is singular and different about the tabloid but underscores how the tabloid’s unique features extend and enrich conventional journalism. Tabloid Tales thereby makes a statement worth heeding: that the tabloid impacts upon the conventional world of journalism in form and content, as well as in our very basic understanding of journalism.

The book rightly begins by addressing the moral panic over tabloid news. It hits at the fear that lurks in the hearts of many journalists—namely, that “journalistic standards” will disappear once there is a downward spiral into the world of scandal, crime, and intrigue that pepper the pages of the tabloid. Yet the tabloid’s very longevity suggests that that prospective encounter may not be only damning. Scholars alternately have dated its association to oral tradition itself, to the broadsides and newsbooks of both Europe and the Americas, to the American penny press, to both the British and American new journals, to the 1880s American yellow press, and to the American jazz journalism of the 1920s. Occupying organs that range from the British Tidbits and Daily Sketch to the NY Daily News and television’s Hard Copy, the tabloid has outraged the journalistic world each time it embraces personalities like William Randolph Hearst, in earlier times, and Jerry Springer, in more recent ones. Beyond a concern that predictably emerges in discussions of the so-called tabloid-style format and growing proportions of sensational content, we can now surmise that it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that the tabloid enriches journalism at the same time as it supposedly downgrades it. Consider the staying power of its features: the bold headlines and extensive use of photos and other visuals, the vivid language and emphasis on sensory detail, the interest in lives that are private and barred from collective consciousness, the moral imperative of its messages. The presence of these features not only in tabloid news but also in the highest-ranked publishing organs of the journalistic world suggests that “the tabloid” is not an either/or notion. Rather, it offers a continuum of practices, that exist in degrees which must be judged against their immediate context. Fears over a potential loss of the elevated standard in this scenario thus become an illusion, a persuasive tease, but hardly a reality.

Additionally, tabloids do not work in a vacuum. They address certain features of the culture at hand, and they do so in a way that the mainstream media have long been reluctant or unable to accomplish. Tabloids fill a need for moralistic tales and gossip, for stories of human gore and human interest, for sensational and intrigue-ridden narratives about both everyday life and the unreachable world of the celebrities. Those needs emerge as relevant in every other arena of cultural production: fiction, cinema, poetry, art. Why,
then, are we so outraged when they surface in journalism? From coverage of
the Ennis Cosby killing in the National Enquirer to The Sun’s stories over Prin-
cess Diana or the Drudge Report’s accounting of the Clinton–Lewinsky saga,
we have seen events that have forced conventional journalism to adapt its
worldview to new parameters that are suspiciously akin to a tabloid sensibil-
ity. In this sense, the tabloids offer mainstream news both a way to examine
itself and to come to grips with the impulses motivating the world at large.
They offer journalism a bridge back to the public and the public sensibility
which it is supposed to serve.

Why is the tabloid ultimately so important to what we know about news
and how we know it? It may be because the tabloid forces us to strike linkages
across different forms of expression, both those that are elevated and desired
and those that are out of favor, and because it urges us to link journalism with
the world that goes beyond it. Equally important, the tabloid pushes journal-
ism beyond a self-examination that employs its own predetermined terms, be-
yond a dependence on overused frames of reference. In examining the tabloid,
then, we are forced to look anew at mainstream journalism itself.

Consider how important this is by attempting to recall any other institution
that is immune to its own self-examination. Not many such institutions, if
any, come to mind. Tabloid Tales underscores the need to continually ponder
journalism’s givens. After years of increasing angst over the tabloid’s so-
called growing intrusion into mainstream journalism, this collection finally
gives shape to the tabloid. It tells us what the tabloid is, where it is, when it is,
and how it ultimately functions. And in so doing, it not only addresses the
question of why we should care about the tabloid and tabloidization, but
about all of journalism in all of its forms.
Tabloid Tales

Global Debates over Media Standards

edited by Colin Sparks
and John Tulloch

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