

From Tabloids to Twitter: The Galvanisation of Gossip

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Abstract

Tabloid journalism has been met with misunderstanding and disdain with regard to false reporting and sensational story lines. The history of tabloid newspapers and its purveyors tells a different story. Created with the intent to satisfy the reading appetite of the working masses of the late 19th century, gossip became a business. From the originator of the tabloid format, Lord Northcliffe, to the new journalism of the twitter age, this article briefly documents the evolution of tabloid journalism and the creation of a reading community.

Key Words

Tabloid, journalism, Lord Northcliffe, Twitter, gossip, scandal, Lord Beaverbrook, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror, The Daily Express, The Sun

Introduction

On the surface, tabloid journalism may appear to be a relatively new concept but the practice of spreading gossip has been around for centuries. To better understand how the public consumes and solicits such material, this article will present a brief history of tabloid newspapers in Britain, the reception of these titles, how tabloid journalism has evolved, and finally, how dissemination of gossip and scandal has been perpetuated by the use of Twitter. While the times and modes of distribution have changed, the public desire for scandal and intrigue has not.

A short history of Tabloids in Britain

Why is gossip a business? To answer this question, one need look no further than the Napoleon of Fleet Street, Lord Northcliffe (*A Tabloid is Born!* 2007). Known to his staff as 'The Chief', Lord Northcliffe recognised the 'aspirational and escapist culture' (Bingham and Conboy 2015) that existed during the late 1800s. Gossip was not a new construction as the Sunday press, launched in 1779, was the catalyst of the newspaper revolution, full of 'carnal business and secret sin' (Engel 1996). With the introduction of the Education Act in 1870 and the subsequent Royal Commission on the Factory Act in 1876, education became compulsory for children (The 1870 Education Act), which resulted in the masses becoming more literate. While it is widely assumed that before these acts were passed the masses were mostly illiterate, research shows that the working class could read, but most of the papers were aimed toward an 'elite group' (Engel 1996), and did not appeal to the public at large, nor could the public afford the cost of a daily broadsheet. Northcliffe, however, realised that the public wanted to be entertained so he created a newspaper that 'gave Edwardians something that was missing from their lives: crime, scandal, murder' (*A Tabloid is Born!* 2007).

Launched on 4 May 1896, the first edition of *The Daily Mail* was filled with human interest stories and sensational headlines. *The Daily Mail* was significantly smaller in size than the typical broadsheets of the day and provided a compact and succinct view of newsworthy

events. As explained by Dr. Nick Hiley in the documentary *A Tabloid is Born!*, Lord Northcliffe coined the term 'tabloid' which is a combination of the word tablet and alkaloid to highlight the concentrated language used in the paper. Mimicking the style of 'New Journalism' that was pioneered in the United States with 'American-style decks and frank sensationalism' (Engel 1996) that had been popularised by Pulitzer and Hearst, Northcliffe created a specifically 'British' format (Conboy 2006, 7) that highlighted the 'style of language used, making it more precise, simple, snappy, condensed, lively and more consistently populist' (6). As 'verbosity was an established Victorian trait' (Engel 1996), the format and journalistic style of *the Daily Mail* was presented in direct contrast to the broadsheet style and reporting of other daily newspapers. Northcliffe had a simple mantra that he required of his journalists: 'explain, clarify, simplify'. This formula and affordable price turned *the Daily Mail* into a success (*A Tabloid is Born!*). During this period, *the Daily Mail* was selling more than one million copies per day (Bingham and Conboy 2015).

Following the success of *The Daily Mail*, Lord Northcliffe launched *The Daily Mirror* in 1903. Lord Northcliffe realised that women were an underrepresented market so the tabloid was to be produced for women by women. Within a month, the paper began to fail, so Northcliffe brought in Hamilton Fyfe to turn the paper around (*A Tabloid is Born!* 2007). *The Daily Mirror* was the first newspaper to use photo journalism and sensational photos to sell the story. *The Daily Mirror* operated on a photo for hire scheme that produced 'fresh, new, and different' (Engel 1996) images to titillate the public. While *The Daily Mail* operated under a strict moral code of ethics, its success was maintained by 'staying faithful to a core set of conservative beliefs and interpreting the world in a compelling way for its particular audience' (Bingham and Conboy 2015), whereas *The Daily Mirror* focused on celebrities, scandal, 'sex, sensation, pet, and heroism' (Engel 1996). By the 1930s, the film star craze had begun and 'newspapers encouraged glamorous actresses to reveal their style "secrets" – although the difficulties of achieving the "screen look" without the Hollywood budget (and photographic trickery) were glossed over' (Bingham and Conboy 2015). The lasting impact of *The Daily Mirror* is highlighted by the fact that this type of reporting is still in practice and

serves to preserve the influence of Lord Northcliffe. *The Daily Mirror* would soon outsell its sister publication due in large part to the exceptional photography.

According to Martin Conboy (2015), the writer of *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community Through Language*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror* found success in a new type of journalism because:

the popular tabloids in Britain provide a view of a community with a strong sense of nation. They do this to a large extent through the deployment of a range of language appropriate to that sense of national belonging. This language betrays all of the political and cultural limitations of national identification but it remains a highly successful commercial strategy. (213)

Through this language, Northcliffe introduced a new form of literature that Peter Hohenhahl describes, 'served the emancipation movement of the middle class as an instrument to gain self-esteem and to articulate its human demands against the absolutist state and hierarchical society' (Furedi 2015). The working classes now had a voice: a voice given to them by a 'legend' (*A Tabloid is Born!* 2007).

It is clear from these examples that tabloid journalism was not a passing trend. Hoping to tap into the success of the market, C. Arthur Pearson launched *The Daily Express* on April 24, 1900 (Engel 1996, 93). The mission of *The Daily Express* was not to 'pander to any political party' but to 'please, amuse, and interest' (93). The tabloid was full of stories that employed 'imaginative fiction' (9), which stood in direct contrast to the fact-based *Daily Mail*. *The Daily Express* found success under the leadership of Lord Beaverbrook who determined that his paper would emphasise 'what it wished to be the truth rather than what it feared' (136). Lord Beaverbrook was determined to outsell *The Daily Mail* even at the expense of the integrity of the tabloid. While Lord Northcliffe was not able to maintain his dominion, Fleet Street found a 'new master of journalism, alive, and kicking at everything in sight' (117). *The*

Daily Express enjoyed robust circulation until the death of Lord Beaverbrook in 1964 (Bingham and Conboy 2015).

As the tabloid format matured and gained momentum, there were others who were willing to innovate and further develop the form. It is clear from these examples that:

Northcliffe, Rothermere (brother and financial advisor to Northcliffe), and Beaverbrook [...] also recognized the vicarious enjoyment that could be obtained by reading about wealthy lifestyles and luxurious goods. Most popular papers thus filled their gossip columns with snippets about the privileged and wealthy, in the process helping to sustain and even glamorize the inequalities that disadvantaged their own readers. (Bingham and Conboy 2015, 105)

One such innovator, Rupert Murdoch, launched *The Sun* in November of 1969 in an effort to push the envelope of the tradition of tabloid journalism. *The Sun* presented itself as ‘a competitor willing to exploit celebrity, sex, and scandal with unprecedented aggression’ (120). The most popular editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, was ruthless in his search of exclusive stories that straddled the line between inappropriate, intrusive, and detrimental. In 2007, *The Sun* was penalised by the British Government for a story published regarding the pregnancy of Charlotte Church. While *The Sun* claimed the story was based on speculation due to the marked change in her public drinking and smoking habits, Church was not far enough into her pregnancy to make a public announcement as the viability of the pregnancy would be unknown until the twelve week scan (Brook 2007). This type of reporting highlighted a remarkable change in the form and content of British tabloids.

While the news-gathering practices of the tabloids are questionable, there is no doubt that tabloids have been and continue to be successful. This is due in part to the fact that ‘journalism still reliably generates controversy and continues to infuriate critics’ (Bingham and Conboy 2015). The appeal is found in the ability of tabloid newspapers to appeal to the

masses through the use of specific and targeted language, human interest stories, and portability. The tabloids discussed in this article have found continued success by providing ‘an explicit sense of place, a textual locus for a popular national community’ (Conboy 2006, 9). The tabloids also aims to create a relationship with the reading community: ‘the form of intimacy generated through this concentration on the parochial between reader and tabloid is an important element in establishing and developing a resonant and authentic sense of print community in Britain’ (2006). These tabloids would not find the same success in another country due to the ‘national and linguistic specificity’ (1). Tabloids are able to reach the reading public by speaking the language of the people and presenting interesting and sensational stories.

The appeal of the content found in the tabloids surrounds ‘scandalous information about well-known people [that] has become a marketable commodity’ (Bingham and Conboy 2015). The content has changed little since the inception of the tabloid and the stories are presented with a healthy dose of ‘dramatization, exaggeration, and hyperbole [...] to make the news more exciting’ (Conboy 2006). Before the advent of the tabloid, the Royal Family was an enigma to the public. With the increasing tenacity of photo journalists, King Edward VII determined to work with the tabloids to protect the privacy of his family. When the King died, the rumour began to spread that a photo existed of him on his death bed. Lord Northcliffe sourced the photo, paid £100 for it and it appeared on the front page of *The Daily Mail*. While other news outlets were certain Northcliffe would be tried for treason, he had obtained permission from the Queen to use the photo as the *Mail* was her ‘favourite paper’ (*A Tabloid is Born!* 2007). Thus began the obsession with the royal family.

The tabloids also create a unique sense of community. Northcliffe knew his readers wanted to be informed as well as entertained so he created a newspaper that would achieve both (ibid). The tabloids and subsequent publications provide a unique space for the reading public to find themselves in the stories being told. As the tabloids gained readers, the act of ‘reading provides people with access to different views and ideas about their predicament, and fosters an attitude that encourages readers to view their world in new ways’ (Furedi

2015, 4). Never before having been represented, the working class readers were finally able to connect with others suffering from the human condition. The study regarding Twitter press coverage performed by Noah Arceneaux and Amy Schmitz Weiss introduces the term 'ambient intimacy' to describe this community, 'through which we acquire a greater awareness of many individuals, a group far larger than what we could keep up with through personal contact' (1269). Further, 'media have 'no natural edges', and their function within society is not determined by inherent technical issues, but instead dependent upon a range of cultural, social, economic and political factors' (1263). While the current reporting of tabloids is scrutinised for accuracy and honesty, the 'language and content of popular newspapers as historical source material' (Stoddart 2015) is evidence of the effect tabloids have had on politics, society, and culture. This sense of community is further enhanced by the 'role of the popular press in enhancing public safety' and 'crusading to ensure it is never repeated' (Engel 1996). *The Daily Mail* never shied away from a creating a movement that would save the lives of the public to whom it satisfied. As Paul Harris, Chief News Feature writer, for *The Daily Mail* describes:

Early campaigns included a drive to install telephones in police stations and another to equip fire brigades with modern rescue and emergency equipment. When in 1909 motor taxis were depriving London's hansom cab drivers of a living, the *Mail* was there to raise cash to help their families and organize instruction in motor driving for more than 500 drivers. (2013)

The power of the press is evident. While modern tabloids are not seen as a legitimate news source, the opportunity for social and cultural change still exists because the audience remains engaged and ready to act. However, the reading masses are not described in a positive light by media theorist Marshall McLuhan. He believed 'that the culture of print had a distorting and constricting effect on human consciousness. Those who took their reading seriously were likely to be unimaginative, conformist and isolated individuals' (Furedi 2015),

but quite the opposite is true due to the collaborative and cultural nature of the early tabloids.

The Daily Mail would become a template for all future tabloids and newspapers because the format and content was so innovative and successful. This is underscored by the fact that ‘other media forms [...] took on board, and adapted themselves to, the populist priorities of the tabloid, embracing the drive for speed, brevity, accessibility, drama and controversy’ (Bingham and Conboy 2015). Although the market is not as viable as it once was, it is clear that the influence of the pioneering voices is still felt today.

The Future of Tabloids: Is Twitter the new tabloid?

In the current media landscape, reporting the news is about speed and agility so journalists and news organizations are turning to Twitter. Launched in 2006, the site boasts 319 million users world-wide who have direct access to stories as they develop (Wagner and Frommer 2017). Twitter gives the user the ability ‘to see what’s happening in the world right now, share stories and information instantly, and connect to anyone, anywhere’ (Broersma and Graham 2013), thus making Twitter the best extension of tabloid culture.

In traditional print tabloids, the content was and is focused on scandal, crime, sensationalism, and stories of human interest. As the content is driven by the interests of the public, ‘this results in the tabloids, and the broadsheets in their slipstream, being more oriented towards conflict, celebrity news and personalized news stories. The ingredients for such coverage are widely available on Twitter’ (Ibid.). As the public is still interested in ‘vicarious enjoyment’ of the lives of those more privileged than themselves:

the British tabloids have almost categorically redefined what qualifies for them as news, so that tabloid news is now utterly personalized and dominated by the actions of well-known people – politicians, public officials, sportsmen and women, celebrities, soon-to-be celebrities, and wanna-be celebrities. (Conboy 2006)

Just as Northcliffe used a new format and style of journalism to gain a wide readership, 'This social media service features short, instant bursts of information shared to one's followers, in a system designed for viral distribution' (Lasorsa et al. 2012, 20). With a simple format, direct language, and a 'new form of journalism' (23), 'Twitter represents, if its current evolution is sustained, a potential blueprint for a path that leads from an initial simple communication tool to a large-scale platform for presence management, one that can ultimately shape new social practices' (Doueihy 2011).

While Twitter has its critics, all new forms of technology have been met with skepticism: 'technologies, such as Twitter today and the telegraph in the past, inspire negative responses because they disrupt established concepts of communication, prevailing notions of space and time and the distinction between public and private spheres' (Arceneaux and Schmitz Weiss 2010). The same argument could have been made regarding the advent of the tabloid newspaper. Despite this, through Twitter, tabloids practice the art of affiliation which 'is the process of publicly performing a connection between practitioners and fans using language, words, cultural symbols, and conventions' (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Thus, tabloids have the ability to connect 'ordinary people to the popular, powerful, rich and influential' (Broersma and Graham 2013), in the same way as the traditional print model. The goal of both forms of publication surround the opportunity to create 'a richer relationship with audiences which can translate to higher ratings, circulations and potentially higher profits' (Hill 2010). Twitter allows the organisation to 'attract an audience' (Lasorsa et al. 2012) and provides the 'best way for a news outlet to get closer to their readership' (Coyle 2009). Twitter provides an unmatched connection to a captive, yet active and responsive, audience.

Twitter as a news source

Tabloid content is created to engage and excite the reader so it logically follows that 'tabloids are bulk consumers of tweets' (Broersma and Graham 2013). As previously discussed, the purveyors of tabloid journalism have redefined what constitutes news as involving well-known people, thus 'part of the appeal of Twitter, is the perception of direct

access to a famous person, particularly “insider” information, first-person pictures, and opinionated statements’ (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Tweets are typically written by the account holder or someone in direct affiliation, which gives ‘reporters the opportunity to tap into the private sphere of well-known and newsworthy people, ranging from celebrities to politicians, and to peep at their thoughts, opinions and experiences’ (Broersma and Graham 2013). Armed with this direct access, reporting becomes more ‘nimble’ (Bingham and Conboy 2015, 231), immediate, and provides the opportunity for reporters to ‘take greater risks than the print and broadcast media, and [the internet becomes] a rich source of revelation, accusation, and commentary (230). While the internet is saturated with competitors, it also provides an ‘ever-flowing feed of real-time information’ (Coyle 2009).

Due to the real-time environment, Twitter is now a reliable source for breaking news. Most reputable news organisations have a Twitter feed and journalists are encouraged to create and maintain a Twitter profile (Hart 2011). News and tabloid organisations use Twitter to ‘provide stories we think the community would find interesting, provide customer service and interact with our readers as much as possible’ (Hill 2010). Because of the public nature of the information found on Twitter, journalists can use information that fits the narrative they are creating and determine accuracy when the story is less immediate. The critics of Twitter journalism worry that ‘Twitter is fast and efficient but it’s not reliable’ (Hart 2011) and that ‘Twitter is an evolving story and verification of sources and information happens over time’ (Broersma and Graham 2013). As content becomes more internet based and tabloids are no longer focused on the political and cultural content that led to long-term success (each of the tabloids discussed is still in print), there is concern over ‘loss of reputation and influence’ (Bingham and Conboy 2015). As reporting subsequently becomes more about speed, while accuracy is an afterthought, there is a danger of the public losing confidence in the organisation and looking elsewhere for their information.

In the case of celebrity deaths, the news typically breaks on Twitter before traditional news outlets receive word. In 2009, when Amy Winehouse died, news of her death was broadcast over Twitter within twenty minutes after she was found. Her death became a trending topic

on Twitter which led other users to search her name to find out why her name was trending (Hart 2011). Twitter also broke the news of the deaths of Whitney Houston in 2012 and Michael Jackson in 2009. Just as *The Daily Mail* changed the landscape of journalism in 1896, according to Ross Dawson, Twitter 'absolutely changes the media landscape. Twitter is extending our senses to tens of millions of people who are often right on the scene where things are happening' (Coyle 2009). This begs the question, how would Lord Northcliffe and his contemporaries have used Twitter had it been available to them? Would his mantra: explain, clarify, and simplify still hold true? Twitter employs the same short, snappy language of the original tabloid headlines, allows for a cultural and engaged community, and reports the sensational news stories of the day as did its tabloid predecessors. It is not difficult to imagine that Lord Northcliffe would find a way to use Twitter to expand his audience and influence.

As Lord Shawcross, the chairman of the Second Royal Commission of the Press stated:

although as individuals we may not be averse to wallowing vicariously in stories of sexual perversion and promiscuity, although we enjoy the spark of malice and listen curiously to the tongue of scandal, we do not approve of those who, for profit, purvey these things. (Bingham and Conboy 2015)

History would disagree. Lord Northcliffe understood what the public craved and was able to expand the horizon of his readers (Engel 1996) with content that had been crafted specifically for the working masses. Similarly, Twitter allows the reader to engage with content in a more immediate way while perpetuating a community of users who share the same language: the language of gossip.

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