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Between information, dramatization, and entertainment

An analysis of the role and self-image of tabloid journalism

Abstract: Hack or entertainer? Masterly investigation or fearmongering? Tabloid journalism and its actors live by exaggerating content and emotionalizing issues. Although they are regularly criticized for this, their products are consumed by a majority of the population. Much research has been conducted into the balance between information, drama, and entertainment, but the personal perspective of the journalists is frequently neglected. How do the journalists describe their role? A qualitative survey of 14 German journalists shows that tabloid journalism and sensitivity are not mutually exclusive and that digitalization is bringing with it entirely new opportunities and challenges.

»What he says, goes, right darling?« Helmut Fischer asks his wife Annette von Söttingen (played by Ruth Maria Kubitschek) as *Monaco Franze* (BR production from 1983, episode 1) in the cult series of the same name. He is talking about the literary critic Hans Böttner-Salm from the fictional newspaper »*Abendzeitung*.« Wily Monaco gets his hands on the review of the performance of Wagner's opera *Walküre* from the paper in advance, thus gaining an advantage in the cultural scene he hates so much. This brief sketch takes a humorous look at the interaction between tabloid journalism and its audience. One aspect remains unchanged to this day: Tabloid journalism content is based on economic and often political interests, with the specifics lying in the way the content is selected and presented (cf. Engesser/Krämer/Ammann 2010: 136). Journalism Studies and Communication Studies have long viewed this kind of reporting as more of an evil than an academic challenge (cf. Lünenborg 2005: 97). Renger calls tabloid journalism »a process that falls from top to bottom,« finding that tabloid journalism is »the apparent downfall of high-level information journalism that is dedicated to the quality standards of objectivity and communication of truth to a lower-quality sensationalist journalism that panders to the audience's lusts and desire for entertainment« (Renger 1998: 28). This paper picks up on this criticism and plays

it back to the tabloid journalists in constructive form. How do they see their own role and professional image? Which problems and solutions can they describe? To find out, guided interviews were conducted with 14 German tabloid journalists.

1 Is tabloidization omnipresent?

Tabloid-style content is no longer the reserve of classic tabloid media. The strong focus on reach and interaction makes many websites an almost indistinguishable mix of celebrities, crime, and scandal (cf. Berg 2018: 58). Tabloid journalism is seen not only in print and online services, but also as a form of entertainment journalism on television and radio (cf. Pürer 2003: 155). According to this, the critical role models vary only minimally between »market crier, (...) entertainer, a cheerful mate of some level of fame« (Löffler 1997: 23). When it comes to content, tabloids are often accused of a »loss of depth,« with reporting lacking in completeness, distance, and/or objectivity (cf. Leidenberger 2015: 132). We thus take the word 'tabloidization' to mean a variety of journalism that expresses itself predominantly through the integration of tabloid-esque content. As a result, tabloid journalism is largely determined by the level of entertainment and is clearly distinguishable from quality journalism (cf. Friedrich/Jandura 2012: 404).

Academia's view of tabloid journalism was long dominated by one perspective: differentiating tabloid journalism from quality journalism and complaining about it as a threat to journalistic quality (cf. Weischenberg 1997; Langer 1998). Yet the established media have not been spared tabloid-esque trends, providing academic discourse with a constant source of content. Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl (2006: 16) ask questions that are as provocative as they are concerned: »How far can one dilute holy water before it loses its effect? How and when will journalism have lost so much substance through the tabloidization process that it becomes useless as an instrument of self-observation in society?« This question is picked up on regularly to this day.

Lünenborg (2016: 325) argues on a different level, finding that the differentiation of tabloid formats can be observed in all forms of media. However, a de-differentiation can also be observed, »in which tabloidization strategies influence and alter traditional forms of information journalism.« That is why developments in and around tabloid journalism are so highly relevant at a journalistic, economic, and social level, he argues. Almost 20 years ago, Sparks (2000: 1) criticized that: »The high standards of yesterday are being undermined by sensationalism, prurience, triviality, malice and plain, simple credulity.«

But content is not the only factor: The economic dimension must also be examined. According to Büscher (cf. 1996: 24), there are two key elements in the design of tabloid content: attracting readers and retaining readers. Attracting readers is a short-term approach achieved by exaggerating content and creating an appealing

look. Retaining readers has a more medium to long-term focus and is intended to encourage loyalty to the brand by maintaining an image. Given the falling sales and advertising revenue that many media face today, other providers are also beginning to use this two-pronged strategy. In other words: »Tabloidization is the means, commercial success is the end« (Weischenberg 2003: 72). Various indicators (e.g. diversity, professionalism, relevance) make it »clear (...) why tabloidization is often seen as a danger to quality journalism« (Landmeier/Daschmann 2011: 184). This fits in with the findings of a qualitative study by Lieske (cf. 2008: 157ff.), which examined the image of journalists. The recipients surveyed make a clear distinction between tabloid journalists and »serious journalists,« the former being accused of »lack of consideration,« »dishonesty,« and »sensationalism.«

There are numerous studies on this, the vast majority of which are conducted through content analysis, operationalizing different quality criteria based on tabloid content. Donsbach and Büttner (cf. 2005), for example, showed that television reporting in news formats displays a »significant rise in stories that mix news with opinion,« regardless of the broadcaster. A quantitative content analysis by Schäfer-Hock produced similar findings, showing that tabloid content increased significantly between 1992 and 2012 in all daily newspapers examined (the analysis looked at national daily newspapers and tabloid media) (cf. Schäfer-Hock 2018: 300). The content analysis by Landmeier/Daschmann (cf. 2011: 184) demonstrates that even »Germany's conservative journalistic institution« (Siering 2002: 86), the *FAZ*, shows a slight trend towards tabloidization, with the prominence of soft topics increasing over the period of the study. The proportion of »hard news« fell from around 60 percent in 1982 to just under 53 percent in 2006.

Although the tabloidization of traditional media has been verified by further studies with comparable results, some questions remain unanswered, especially with regard to the future: If traditional media puts more focus on tabloid content, what will happen to the original tabloid journalism? A Publicom study (cf. Publicom 2016) suggests that difficult times are ahead. If one believes the 40 experts' responses to questions about the future prospects of tabloid journalism, information journalism, investigative journalism, and interpretive journalism, the type with by far the worst prospects is tabloid journalism. Only 38 percent consider it likely that tabloid journalism will still be able to pay for itself in future. Interpretive journalism is considered to have the best prospects (83 percent).

2 Question and method

This bleak outlook is a good starting point for looking at the following research questions:

- 1) How do tabloid journalists see the current situation and the future of their profession?

2) Which roles and self-images do they describe?

The investigative method used was a qualitative survey with guidelines (cf. Häder 2010: 261). Qualitative surveys are subject-oriented – not guidelines, but the interviewees themselves, determine the course of the interview through their responses. 14 interviews were conducted with tabloid journalists from television (7), print (2 newspaper, 3 magazine), and online media (2). When potential interviewees were researched, care was taken to ensure that all the channels named above were represented and that the interviewees worked for established tabloid media. The interviews had an average length of 55 minutes and were authorized before publication. As some interviewees requested anonymity, no names, ages, editorial offices, or media are named here – a distinction is merely made between television, print, and online.

3 Results

14 tabloid journalists aged between 25 and 57 years were interviewed for the survey. Their average age was 38 years. When it comes to their position in the editorial office, the majority of the interviewees (5) work as deskmen; there are also managers (4), a presenter, a freelance journalist, an editor, a reporter, and a trainee. Most work for between six and nine hours per day, corresponding to a normal 40-hour week on average. It can be assumed that most have regular contracted working hours – an assumption supplemented by this statement from a print journalist:

»As a tabloid journalist, [...] you are always working. As I say, whether I am having dinner with friends, as I used to, or am at an official press event. There are no regular working hours, plus: A working day might even go on until 2 am, if there is a party after a film event« (print deskman).

Another journalist, who works in television, states that he has now reduced his working time from 70 hours a week to start with to around 50 hours now.

In the next question, the interviewees were asked to give more detail on the content of their products, listing the topic areas that are most important at the moment (unprompted). Almost all state that reporting in tabloid media is dominated by topics from society. All the interviewees emphasize the importance of »putting oneself in the reader's shoes« and choosing topics that interest them. It is vital to mention the emotionality of the reporting at this point. For the tabloid journalists interviewed, this form of news selection is essential and a connection to the reader is an indicator of the quality of the media production.

»Celebrity« is named particularly often (a total of nine times), with some editorial offices focusing almost exclusively on this field. Needless to say, the core topics vary between media and formats. As well as current topics such as the »refugee crisis,« many of the interviewees count »crime,« »scandals,« and »accidents« among the topics that arise frequently in tabloid news. Current events are often

presented in »service pieces« intended to aid understanding, such as short question-and-answer formats that aim to make topics less complex.

3.1 *The competition and the audience shape the choice of topics*

In the next phase, the interviewees are asked to report more on the news factors. Their responses show that relevance and up-to-dateness are seen as the most important criteria when selecting topics. Research is usually conducted by looking at competing news services (online or print) and PR agencies. Journalists often uncover social trends online and on social networks, although public events such as galas are also often used as angles for the reporting. All the journalists interviewed also stated that direct and indirect competition plays a significant role. For most of them, regularly observing both the large print media and competing news services is part of their day-to-day work in the editorial office. The competition is used not only for comparison, but also as a source of ideas. Efforts to be the best and the fastest at all times appear a particularly important factor shaping the tabloid landscape. The editor in chief of a newspaper gave a reason for the focus on lightweight, entertaining topics:

»We do not set out to change the world. We leave that to the others. Of course, I am happy that they are there.«

3.2 *Humble self-image*

Next, the tabloid journalists are asked what they like about their job. One thing the interviewees particularly enjoy about their job is the opportunity for individual fulfillment – characterized by terms like ›freedom,‹ ›teamwork,‹ and ›variety.‹ When it comes to teamwork, the journalists emphasize not only the human aspect within the editorial office, but also external relationships, such as with interviewees and celebrities. In terms of variety, phrases such as »no two days are the same« and that it is »never boring« are just as important as the fact that journalists travel a lot, giving them the opportunity »to gain unfamiliar impressions.« Talking about freedom, the interviewees highlight the opportunity for self-determination, working independently to select topics and compile pieces. The profession of tabloid journalism sets great store by individual initiative. The privilege of being able to ask questions is also addressed. Just two interviewees mention negative aspects: »time pressure« and »frequent evening appointments.«

In order to examine the self-image in more detail, the interviewees were asked to describe themselves in their role as a tabloid journalist. Their responses vary widely.

One print journalist, for example, describes himself as the »first point of recourse for this magazine«; another emphasizes the fight for his position and

his stories, which he wants to see in the most prominent position possible in the magazine. A television journalist sees himself as a »service provider« who tries »to put a complex world view [...] into a form and flow that can then be understood.« Another interviewee characterizes himself as »captain and chief editor«; a print deskman argues that he is »not just a headline machine.«

In general, tabloid journalists differentiate between their role in relation to interview partners, the external perception of their role, their role within journalism, their role in the editorial office, and their role in relation to the recipients.

The survey also shows that tabloid journalists do not see themselves only as »tabloid journalists, but as journalists in general« – even though the external perception varies and tends to be critical. In their view, the role is »not a question of tabloid,« as the interviewees see themselves primarily as journalists who need to excel at their craft. Another interviewee, who previously worked in public service television, also highlights the fact that »the same rules [apply there] as in a tabloid program now.«

The interviewees consider that they bear a responsibility to the recipient to structure content in a light, easy-to-understand, yet still interesting and exciting way, thus offering entertainment to the viewer or reader. Reports need to be relevant and arouse the interest of the recipient. Only one of the 14 print journalists interviewed sees himself in the role of a lone warrior – the rest describe themselves as team players, coordinators, or organizers.

Referring to the characteristics and interests that bring him and his colleagues together, a print journalist says:

»What unites us is a love of writing, a love of people – that is very important. And openness is also important. What I said at the beginning: curiosity – without curiosity you cannot do this job. That and an appetite for our topics.«

What should a tabloid journalist bring to the role? The majority of the interviewees agree that assertiveness and the ability to work in a team are crucial criteria for success in the sector.

3.3 *Two types of tabloid journalist*

Next, the interviewees were asked for more detail on the working environment in tabloid journalism. At this point, it is notable that almost all of them confirm a simplified theory to some extent: the idea that there are »good« and »less good« tabloid journalists. All the interviewees are familiar with these two types from their own experience and attribute certain characteristics to them. Firstly, a »good« tabloid journalist is primarily characterized by his innate humanity. This makes it easy for him to make contact with public figures and protagonists and to establish a good connection to them. Empathy plays a particularly significant

role here, as journalists with this trait »really manage to tease a lot out of the celebrities; they trust them immediately. Not everyone can do that.« According to the interviewee, this also means that people are more willing to open up to this journalist.

This »good« journalist is in stark contrast to the »bad« tabloid journalist, who is often associated with »gossip« and would do a lot or even »stop at nothing« for a good story or the best picture, as one television journalist puts it. He is simply »dead keen on celebrity stories, on sensations.« This type of journalist is characterized by a high level of self-confidence, an arrogant manner, and artificial curiosity. His work is primarily typified by a very forceful, outspoken approach often intended to touch celebrities' sore spots. Attempts are made to »capture them in a private situation and [to ask] questions that are a little below the belt.« »The difference simply lies in respect,« describes one television journalist. All the respondents agree that these types exist and that they shed a poor light on the entire sector. The interviewees argue that economic pressures further strengthen the characteristics of these types and that media are increasingly deliberately looking for just this kind of person.

While discussing the different types of tabloid journalist, half of the respondents again highlight the particular importance of quality criteria and proper research. »However, it is always important to stick to all the journalistic principles: using multiple sources, not simply copying from the competition, conducting one's own research, and enriching the articles with one's own material.«

3.4 *Outlook for the future of tabloid journalism*

In the final question, the interviewees were asked where tabloid journalism is going in the long term and what challenges it faces. The majority have worked in the sector for a long time and have experienced the changes of the last few years first hand. One of the tabloid journalists is optimistic, especially with regard to the print market: »Millions of copies are still being sold on the market. That means that younger people also still like to read tabloids.« However, the responses indicate that the role of the recipient has changed a lot. In the past, published stories were simply consumed and accepted without comment, with readers and viewers not challenging the content. »People took what they could get.« Several interviewees stressed that the audience has become more critical. Exaggerated or even fake reporting on celebrities is seen through immediately and punished. After all, »viewers do not want to be lied to.«

In order to prevent incorrect information being broadcast accidentally, research has become much more demanding than it was in the past. Although digitalization has made it easier to access new stories and images, the flood of information and the high number of channels and sources are confronting journalists with

new challenges. The fast pace of the sector brings with it potential sources of errors that have to be eliminated before the content is published.

One of the journalists interviewed believes that this need for extensive research has resulted in the emergence of an entirely new field of work: »I think that, at some point, the large media houses will have to employ hordes of people just to look at one question: Is this real or not?« One online deskman calls for vague statements to be labelled as such: »Sometimes, you just have to say that you don't know for sure.«

In stark contrast to the complex research is the opportunity for celebrities to publish their stories and thoughts on their social media channels themselves, thus preempting the work of journalists. Some media companies even see this as reducing their workload:

»For us as a tabloid medium especially, the Instagram channels are of interest, seeing whether they have made any interesting posts recently. Where we might even be able to use the image.«

There is consensus in how the interviewees describe today's tabloid journalism compared to in the past, stating that it has become »more sensitive,« »more respectful,« »less provocative,« and »milder.« They also stress that tabloid journalism should set greater store by the principles of journalistic work, explicitly criticizing the approach on online and social media channels. Although the interviewees see the race for users as a significant cause for concern, when asked about this again, the majority comes to the conclusion that »we have to sell our content somehow.«

On the other hand, smaller changes in reporting are appreciated more positively. In particular, the respondents list increased protection for the children of celebrities as an example of an issue that has long been relevant but has not been sufficiently implemented. Television media has become more careful, they say, with one interviewee emphasizing that »one cannot report without regard for morality.« In contrast, a television journalist argues that »the basics have not changed, namely conducting clean research and telling proper, balanced stories.« The change, he says, lies in the fact that journalists now have to deal much more with technical aspects.

Based on these responses, we can see that there are concerns regarding the implementation of journalistic standards. The interviewees argue that the required quality cannot be delivered if editorial offices continue to insist on fast publication, causing immense time pressure. However, they also differentiate here: When researching television and print productions, the question of the highest possible quality is omnipresent and the subject of discussion within the editorial offices on a daily basis; online, the only currency that counts is that of the greatest possible reach.

4 Conclusion

In summary, it is clear that the changes in tabloid journalism have led to a highly ambivalent image of the sector. A statement from a television journalist demonstrates this: »The term [tabloid journalism] has simply become outdated to some extent; one can no longer define it, it is becoming increasingly blurred.« Rather self-critically, the 14 interviewees describe their view that tabloid journalism has long ceased to stick rigidly to the usual criteria for clean journalism and that all media now use tabloid-style marketing strategies on social media. All the interviewees confirm that digitalization has made their work hugely more dynamic and that constantly revising topics and news can be hard work and lead to errors in the long run. Despite this, the interviewees value their profession as tabloid journalists. They enjoy the diversity and the opportunities it gives them to conduct research and write independently. This is particularly interesting given that the television and print journalists interviewed are particularly likely to highlight the opportunity to spend more time on research.

The survey also showed that, in the view of the interviewees, the profession of tabloid journalist does not differ significantly from that of journalists in other fields in terms of perception and activities. Journalism is subject to constant and ever-faster change. This ambivalence in the sector is clear to see in the responses regarding the challenges facing tabloid journalism in the future. According to the interviewees, sensitivity, complex presentation, and tabloid journalism are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but are the subject of constant scrutiny due to the pressure of profit and digital processes.

Another finding from the survey is that there is still a need for more academic research into tabloid journalism. The interviewees often feel that they are shown in a poor light and openly criticize research and errors in their own sector. Little attention has previously been paid to the views of journalists in the tabloid sector. This paper is an attempt to frame their perspective at least to some extent.

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