INTRODUCTION

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The central concern of this journal has always been with the relationship between the mass media and political and social life. Specifically, we have held to the proposition that, in contemporary large scale societies, it is only in and through the mass media that democratic political debate, and thus democratic political life, can be articulated. It is for this reason, as the very title of the journal suggests, that the idea of the public sphere has been at least an unstated presence in many of our contributions.

It is well known that, in its original, Habermasian formulation, the public sphere was constituted as a space within which rational debate could take place. Translated into journalistic terms, such a conception implies mass media that have, amongst other important characteristics, a definite content and definite discursive strategies.

As regards content, the notion of the public sphere implies that the media make available to the citizen the range of information and opinion essential to reach informed conclusions on matters of public interest. In the hierarchical and centralised states, and vigorously competitive businesses, that characterise the contemporary world, this must perforce contain substantial material on abstract issues of politics and economics. While this may not exhaust the range of desirable content in the mass media, it is certainly essential to it.

As regards discursive strategy, it seems axiomatic that rational debate requires that the protocols of logic and evidence at least be present in, if not the actually constituting the defining characteristic of, contributions of both a factual and polemical nature. Again, in contemporary conditions, it follows that there must be provision for a range of material, factual and interpretative, to be presented, and for the provenance of evidence and opinion to be transparent.

All of this might seem quite elementary, but there are three important objections to this position which are frequently aired in current debate. The first is that no such media exist in the world today, and never have

existed in the past. This is, of course, true, but it is hardly a serious objection to the normative concept of a public sphere — any more than the presence of political corruption is an objection to the normative concept of democracy. On the contrary, the normative concept is essential as a standard against which we may measure the actual practice of particular media systems.

The second is that the focus on the provision of this kind of material, and on debates of this nature, is an unnecessary limitation on the kinds of things for which people read newspapers and watch television. Human interests, it is objected, are much wider and more diverse than the public interest, and the mass media do, perfectly reasonably, cater for those broader concerns. Again, this proposition is evidently true, at least for the dominant, commercial, media. The real issue, however, is not whether the mass media should, or do, cater for, as the saying goes, what interests the public, but whether they also cater for the public interest. Here, the record is much more mixed. It is at least open to argument that the exigencies of commercial life place very severe limitations on serving the public interest, and indeed can sometimes render that task altogether impossible.

The third objection is by the far the most serious. It takes a number of forms, but the essential point is that, in focusing on the provision of public interest information and debate, the school of thought with which this journal is associated displays a narrow, and distinctly anti-democratic, élitism. The "reason" with which we are so concerned is demonstrably the product of a bourgeois, male, western European historical development, and its wider relevance is distinctly questionable. There are other possible sources of political action and other political rationales: "traditional Christian/Islamic/Asian/family/national values;" "female intuition;" "popular experience," and so on. Some, or all, of these might be at least equally valid and significant as the springs of human conduct, alongside or instead of the pale and dispassionate abstractions of Enlightenment. Again, there is obviously truth in this: anyone looking at the recent history of Europe can see that reason most emphatically does not rule. We all know that there are men who cite as the motive for their political actions the need to commemorate, and to sustain the heritage of, the Battle of the Boyne (1690), or the Battle of Kosovo (1389), and in the name of those traditions commit acts of barbarity. We know, too, that their rhetoric, and too often their deeds, command substantial popular support within their particular constituencies. They certainly command a place in the mass media both there and within the wider society. To Protestant obscurantists and Serb nationalists, the reader can add at will, from far too long a list. But again, the problem does not lie in recognising the obvious fact that human beings are more than simply reasoning machines, and that the mass media contains material that addresses a wide range of human motivations, but in determining whether it is practicable to have a mass media that adequately caters for the rational, the irrational, and what Peter Dahlgren calls the "a-rational," all in the same package. Here, too, the issue of whether the material appropriate to the "rational" aspects of human life can survive as a central element of contemporary media is extremely problematic

It is in this context that the issue of "tabloidisation" is particularly relevant. There is undoubtedly widespread concern that changes are taking place in the mass media that are leading them to concentrate less and less attention on matters of political and economic importance, and to articulate what attention they do give to such issues in a personalised and trivialised form that transforms even the most significant matters

into mere entertainment. This belief is very widespread. It stretches far beyond the confines of academic media and communication studies, let along those persuaded by aspects of Habermas's analysis, into the worlds of serious journalism and professional politics. *The Economist* of 4 June 1998, for example, led on precisely this issue, debating whether the paradox "that in this information age, the newspapers that used to be full of politics and economics are thick with stars and sport" really represents a major crisis for democracy.

Such a diffuse set of concerns obviously means that the debate itself is diffuse, not to say impressionistic, anecdotal and, in general, thoroughly unsatisfactory to the tidy academic mind. The scholarly impulse is to try to impose the (rational) criteria of order, logic and evidence on this chaos. Any serious discussion of tabloidisation must therefore begin with definitions, distinctions and questions.

The first, and most obvious, of the definitions that must be made is that of the term itself. There is, of course, room for serious debate about this, but my own preference would be for a two-part definition which would run something like this:

Tabloidisation is, first of all, a process in which the amount and prominence of material concerned with public economic and political affairs is reduced within the media. It is, secondly, a process by which the conventions of reporting and debate make immediate individual experience the prime source of evidence and value.

Naturally, such a definition remains abstract, and it would be necessary to be much more concrete about what is meant by its various components in order to subject it to an empirical test. This, I think, would be fairly easy to do, at least in principle. Both "amount" and "prominence" are susceptible to operational definition. For example, we might reasonably say that a news programme on prime time television was "more prominent" than one outside these golden hours. While we might want to argue about exactly how to define and measure "amount," that is obviously susceptible to the well-known procedures of content analysis. The tasks of gathering empirical evidence do not seem novel or difficult in this context.

There are a number of other elements in this definition which are more problematic, and need expansion in order to be clear. In offering a compound definition, I obviously lay myself open to the charge that I have conflated two quite distinct processes. The first concerns the nature of the topics covered; the second, the manner in which topics are covered. I shall try to explain in more detail below why I wish make this move, but at this stage I only want to signal that in my view tabloidisation involves not only the "what," but also the "how," of media content. These may not be logically connected, but they both seem to be elements of contemporary tabloid practice.

Secondly, the above assumes that tabloidisation is a process. That is, something which takes place over time. In making this assertion, which is of course empirically testable, it is not necessary to assume that there was some point in the past in which the media were "non-tabloid," nor that they have been subject to continuous, uninterrupted, uni-directional and uniform transformation into "tabloid" media. In content, the tabloid long predates the form of the modern newspaper. Historians find its equivalent in the ballads and street literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Parallel to, and distinct from, the grand narrative of newspapers as the fourth estate, there has always been another story of printed popular entertainment, and, at least for much of this century in Britain, the tabloid "newspaper" has been its dominant form. A comparative examination of the news values of the broadsheet and tabloid

press in Britain during this century suggests that the kinds of divergence that are so striking today have long been evident. Interestingly, however, there are two periods in which this normal divergence is replaced by a marked convergence: the periods of the two great world wars. Neither does the content of tabloids remain constant. Matters like the pictorial content are obviously affected by the boundaries of public taste; the kinds of diversions and leisure activities that are popular have obviously altered over time; even such an apparent staple as sports reporting has had a different character at different times. It seems unlikely that there is any fixed and stable tabloid "essence" that we can discover through theoretical or empirical analysis.

What the stress upon process in the above definition is trying to address is the widely held perception that, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, we are now living through a period in which there is a sharp increase in the extent of tabloid-type material in the newspaper press and on television. Whether this is true or not, either in these countries or elsewhere, must be one of the central questions of any serious research programme in this field. There is a lot of evidence which tends to suggest that it is not true. In the case of the US press, it is a commonplace to talk about the "tabloid" character of *USA Today*, and while it is true that this is a great circulation success, it is not so great a success as the distinctly non-tabloid *Wall Street Journal*. In the case of the local circulation daily press in the US, it again seems to be the case that, in the drive towards monopoly, it has been the newspapers with higher quality levels that have survived best. The economic reasons for this, in the relative commercial advantages to be gained from providing content that super-serves the affluent and influential, are well-known. Again, in Britain, although there has certainly been a polarisation of the market into tabloid and quality press, the fact remains that while the tabloid market has gradually declined, the quality market has increased in size steadily over the last forty years. Over the last five years, the decline of the tabloid press has accelerated, while the quality press has grown very rapidly in circulation. It is often argued that this has been achieved at the expense of the tabloidisation of the quality press itself. So far, there is no empirical evidence to settle this debate, but it is by no means clear whether, even if the relative amount of serious coverage has declined, the absolute amount has also declined as a consequence of the explosion of sport, culture, and other material, since there has been a major expansion in pagination.

It is, in my view, likely to be the case that studies of different situations will reveal that there is no uniform tendency towards tabloidisation, and that there are circumstances in which it proceeds apace, others in which there seems to be no substantial change, and those in which it is actually reversed.

It is my hypothesis that the decisive factor in deciding which of these is actually present in a given situation will be the nature and degree of competition present in a particular market. Thus, the highly competitive British national newspaper market developed the tabloid form early on. When serious competition entered this market in the late sixties, with Murdoch's purchase of the *Sun*, there was an intensification of the process in the tabloids themselves. In contrast, the largely monopolistic US press has been able, indeed has been economically obliged by the profile of its advertising market, to maintain markedly serious standards. The recent concern with tabloidisation of television, in any number of markets, can be seen as a function of the competition following from the new entrants made possible by increasing available bandwidth.

Irrespective of the progress of tabloidisation, or the reasons for any changes, in a particular market, there remains the question of what the implications of the tabloid

form are. Views on this tend to polarise between those who regard it as the negation of the kind of journalism that is essential to democracy and those who argue that it represents some kind of popular empowerment. I suppose that I am notorious as one the proponents of the negative view of tabloidisation. The debate between these two positions has been fierce, and is probably now stalemated on the verge of insult. In order to re-animate the debate, and advance our understanding, it is necessary to make a number of important clarifications of problems that participants have tended to gloss over in the past.

In the first place, the question at issue is not whether it is desirable to develop forms of journalism that allow people besieged by the pressures of time, of limited resources, of poor education, and of multiple distractions, in a phrase, the working class, an insight into the world which treats them so shabbily. Obviously, that aim involves consideration of the physical size of newspapers, of the kinds of language employed, of the length of articles, of the amount and quality of illustration, and so on. Many of the features of the tabloid press are indeed attempts to wrestle with those real problems, although they almost certainly make patronising assumptions about the capacities of their audience in the answers they give. The real issue is: to what end are these techniques of popular discourse put? Here, we need here to recall a distinction made long ago by Raymond Williams, between those media forms produced for working people and those produced by working people. The papers produced by working people, from the radical press of the nineteenth century through the social democratic and communist apparatuses down to the struggling contemporary heirs of that tradition, have invariably had a didactic intent, even when they were popular in the sense that they commanded very large audiences, as for example with Willie Munzenberg's various enterprises. The intention has always been to explain, to enlighten, to teach the readers about the world and about their place in it. If they have had a vice, it is that they have devoted themselves to the proposition that "you should never underestimate your readers." Papers produced for working people, on the other hand, have had as a primary motive to win large numbers of readers, and the harsh reality is that the route to this end, in normal times at least, lies through entertainment, not education. Even when they have not been particularly successful, they have devoted themselves to the proposition that "you should never overestimate your readers."

The second clarification to be made is about the nature of personalisation. Common sense and scientific research are here united in telling us that the individual human personality is the central reference point of the tabloid press. Again, this is not in itself an issue in the debate. Anyone who has spent any time at all as a radical journalist knows that human experience, articulated by participants in a situation, is the magic key to explaining the abstractions that govern the world. It is certainly not the case that all reliable knowledge and understanding of the world must demonstrate the protocols of the most positivist versions of social scientific research. The real issue is whether the kinds of illumination that the personalisation of information and controversy can undoubtedly provide are integrated into a whole in which other kinds of insight, equally necessary to an understanding of the world, also have a place. Tabloidisation, it seems to me, is precisely that kind of journalism in which the personal is not only the starting point but also the substance and end point. That is an obstacle to Enlightenment.

To argue such a didactic position is to invite horrified cries of: "élitism!" I do not see how it can be "élitist" to recognise that some people know things that others do not, or have better worked out and informed opinions about things than others. The fact is that I am not an expert on astrophysics, or palaeontology, or Chinese porcelain, or any one of a myriad of other subjects. To acknowledge that obvious truth in no way entails that I think people who know much more than I about these subjects are better human beings than me, or that their views on contentious issues should be accepted without question, and still less that they have entitlements to decision making that should properly be denied to ignoramuses. It simply means that if I want to know more about any of this, these are the people who can help me. Neither does it imply that, should I develop an interest in one of these fields, I will automatically believe exactly what I am told, or read. Nor does it follow that I will be the prisoner of the views of the experts and be completely unable to form opinions of my own.

Obviously, politics are more important than the things I have used as examples, because they are the primary mechanism through which we can determine our collective life. But the same principles apply. To state that some people know more about the labour unions in South Korea than others, or more about the likely social cost of retirement pensions in the next century, or the ecology of whales off the coast of Norway, in no way implies that these people should be the ones entitled to decide on issues involving their expertise. On the contrary, particularly since, due to the conflicting interests that are often involved, opinions, and the evidence cited in their support, often diverge widely, it is extremely valuable that this expertise is widely diffused and subject to intense scrutiny. It is only when those latter conditions are met that a common view can be achieved. The plain fact is that the charge of élitism is a baseless populist jibe, the actual effect of which is to deny "the people" the resources they need to run their own affairs effectively.

It is for these reasons, amongst others, that the issue of tabloidisation is a particularly important focus for this journal. Embedded in this question are issues of philosophy, of politics, of economics and of ethics that go to the heart of the relationship between the mass media and democracy. The articles in this issue are part of a much wider debate, and reflect a range of different positions, experiences and methods. Perhaps because of our Enlightenment heritage, we have not tried to impose a uniform perspective on our writers. We believe that they all provide evidence and argumentation that helps to clarify the vital issues that are at stake.