NEWS WE CAN USE:
AN AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE ON THE TABLOIDISATION OF NEWS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

In the United States, television news is where the issue of tabloidisation is most loudly debated, as news merges into the countless talk shows and syndicated "reality" programming. While critics often place the blame on the journalism profession itself, I focus on the audience drive toward tabloidisation, critiquing both the uncritical celebration of the "active" audience, and the view that audiences are simply mindless recipients of whatever journalists feed them. Using data from a small study of news audiences, I argue that we must understand the value of dramatic, narrative news in everyday life. At the same time, I argue that the storytelling news style, characterised by disconnected, highly personal narratives, is in danger of replacing rational, considered, and critical analysis in news. In particular, young people are becoming less interested in news, and less critical of the techniques typical of tabloid style. I conclude that we must strive to develop a journalism that could embrace tabloid style, while still inviting audiences to participate more fully in a civic democracy. If journalism cannot rise to that challenge, it may be that in the tabloidised environment of the American news media, the battle for large-scale, serious public discourse is already lost.

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Introduction: Tabloidisation in the United States

Although the process of tabloidisation is understood rather similarly in Britain and the United States, we need to understand differences in the way news has developed in both countries, especially in the way audiences have been characterised.[1] Sparks (1992, 27) writes about the clear dichotomy between the quality and tabloid press in Britain, which differentiates the popular from other journalism as clearly as Bach is distinguishable from Motorhead. In Britain, this distinction tends also to be applied to the audiences for both types: readers of the *Sun* do not read the *Guardian,* and vice versa. In the United States, the term "tabloid" most commonly refers to weekly supermarket tabloids. While these share a style with their British counterparts, and many U.S. tabloid writers are former British or commonwealth journalists, they are different in that they cover only personality-driven feature stories, in keeping with their weekly publication schedule (Bird 1992). In other words, they cover no news about politics, the economy, or any subject we might think of as traditional hard news. Because there is no U.S. national press comparable to those of Britain and other European countries, (with the arguable exception of the *New York Times),* most newspaper readers take a local or regional newspaper. Few cities, other than New York and Chicago, have a quality/tabloid choice, and thus we do not see newspaper readers divided into quality/tabloid classes in quite the same way, since weekly tabloid readers are also likely to be reading a regional newspaper.

Nevertheless, the huge success of the supermarket tabloids has had a significant effect on the U.S. news market, and they have come to epitomise the worst of the unworthy, in much the same way as do the British dailies (Pauly 1988). In the 1980s, sales of traditional newspapers fell, while those of tabloids rose to unprecedented levels (Bird 1992). Clearly there was an audience response to the tabloids' offerings of human interest stories, celebrity gossip and life-style advice. At around the same time, we saw the development of tabloid TV shows, many of which were staffed by print tabloid writers. Shows like *A Current Affair, American Journal, Inside Edition, Extra,* and so on flourished. They in turn influenced news magazines, which have proliferated to the extent that at least on of such shows as *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, *Prime Time Live*, or *Dateline* is aired every night of the week. In fact, it is probably in the field of television news that the issue of tabloidisation is most loudly debated, as news merges into the countless talk shows and syndicated "reality" programming.

The success of the TV versions of supermarket tabloids was made possible not just by audience demand, but also by changing technological and regulatory conditions, as Hallin (1992) points out. For 20 years, since the early 1960s, network news programming held a privileged and profitable position, safe from competition. In the mid 1970s, local television news began to emerge as a potentially profitable product. As Hallin comments, it became "far too important to the bottom line of local stations to be left under the control of journalists" (1992, 21), and local news evolved into a popular hybrid of traditional hard news and gossipy chat. A little later, the appearance of cable TV and VCRs, and changes in broadcast regulation, forced the networks to deal with a truly competitive market, which saw their share of the news audience fall from about 90 percent to around 60 percent. It is still falling, with only 42 percent of the public now claiming to watch national network news (Pew Research Center for the People and Press 1996).

By the late 1980s, television news was at the mercy of ratings as never before, and it is in this context that we see the proliferation of news and information programming. Of course, print media have been affected too, and have responded with colour, glitz, flash, and tabloid style gossip, but most people now get their news from the electronic media, and here the issues around tabloidisation are most extreme.

Tabloidisation and the Audience

Critics often place the blame for tabloidisation on the journalism profession itself. Thus Krajicek (1998, 3) writes: "Initially, tabloidization occurred not by conscious decision but by collective assent among reporters and editors. It happened because too many journalists like me were willing to acquiesce to a series of breaches of the traditional values of our occupation." These critics often seem to overlook the impetus coming not from journalists, but from the audience. Krajicek does ask an important question: "Does society define news or does news define society? Do the media condition reality or reflect it?" (p. 12). While critics agree that the audience has a role in determining the direction in which journalism is going, limited empirical work has been done on how audiences actually view news, how they define it, and what they do with it. These are the questions I wish to address here.

In fact in most cases, with the obvious exception of such studies as Morley (1980) and Jensen (1990), analyses of news make assumptions about the audience from the texts themselves. Some critics have applied psychological explanations for the preference for sensational stories, defining the audience as "sensation seekers" who need increasing doses of exposure (Zuckerman 1984), or as "morbidly curious" (Haskins 1984). These explanations have the effect of neuroticising the audience as sick or abnormal if they are attracted to unwholesome news. Or if the audience is considered at all, it is often to condemn them as lacking in taste and judgement, as Langer (1992) discusses. In more recent developments, cultural studies scholars have discovered the active audience for sensational news. Thus Fiske (1992) and Glynn (1990) celebrate the tabloid style in print and television, arguing that audiences may epitomise De Certeau's "textual poachers" (1984), characterised by "sceptical reading competencies that are equivalent of the social competencies by which the people control the immediate conditions of their everyday lives" (Fiske 1992, 54). From this perspective, tabloid news, with its mocking, irreverent style, is actually subversive, allowing the "people" to challenge the hegemony of the "power bloc." However, as Sparks (1992) ably points out, there is little evidence that readers and viewers of news actually take the ironic stance that Fiske celebrates, and empirical work on American tabloid readers challenges Fiske's assertions (Bird 1992). Fiske posits an active, critical audience which is able to read critique of the status quo into all kinds of popular journalistic texts, but as Sparks suggests, most popular news actually reflects a reactionary stance.

As I have written elsewhere (Bird 1992), I am also unconvinced that the sceptical, carnivalesque reading of tabloid style is actually typical of most consumers of this kind of news. I do not see tabloid consumption as essentially subversive or transgressive, but neither do I see enjoyment of tabloid-style news as a symptom of mindlessness either. Rather, I am more inclined to see audiences as active, selective readers, who approach all kinds of news with the unstated question: "What can I get from this information, or this story. How does it apply to my life, and why should I pay attention?" Journalists and critics fret about what people *should* want to know,

and readers and viewers are also frequently torn between what they ought to be interested in and what actually captures their attention. Perhaps if we can understand what does capture attention, we might be able to develop a journalism that could embrace tabloid style, while still inviting audiences to participate more fully in a civic democracy.

Following from my earlier work on supermarket tabloids, a preliminary, small-scale study has been an attempt to throw some light on the role that news stories play in everyday life. What kinds of stories do people find memorable? What do they do with them? How does an understanding of what readers and viewers actually do with news help us in understanding both the value and the dangers of the tabloidisation trend. In this study, I used a two-phase, somewhat experimental technique, aimed at eliciting data that tried to approximate everyday experience. For the study, I prepared a videotape made up of excerpts from the Rupert Murdoch tabloid TV show, *A Current Affair,* the reality show *Unsolved Mysteries,* and an episode of ABC's *World News Tonight.* Copies were lent to a small sample of people (22), who watched the tapes in their homes with a family member or friend, and then discussed the tapes, recording the conversation with a small audio tape recorder. Some guiding questions were included, asking, for example, which stories they found most memorable and why. Later, I interviewed the same people by phone, asking them a range of similar questions, such as what the idea of "news" meant to them; which kind of news stories they paid attention to, and so on. Through all of this, I was trying to get a sense of how news fits into people's lives on an ongoing basis.[2]

At this point, I wish to focus on some of the aspects of the study that speak directly to the issue of tabloidisation. Although there is no single, clear definition of the term, some themes are consistent. Among them are the rise of a "storytelling" news style, focusing on personal narratives about individuals. Indeed, Sparks (1992, 39) suggests that one of the hallmarks of popular journalistic style is that, The popular conception of the personal becomes the explanatory framework within which the social order is presented as transparent. Second, we see the increasing predominance of the visual image over analysis and rational description, a trend remarked upon by countless cultural and media critics, and certainly not confined to the genre of news (see, for example, Ewen 1988; Jhally 1987). Related to both points is the growing use of dramatic techniques, such as photo enhancement and re-enactments.

News and Storytelling

Journalism's emphasis on the personal, the sensational and the dramatic is, of course, not new. Street literature, ballads, and oral gossip and rumour have all contributed to the development of news as we know it (Bird 1992; Bird and Dardenne 1988; Stephens 1988). Critics have been pontificating about the salacious excesses of newspapers for generations; even mainstream news has always been torn between what practitioners see as a duty to inform, and their need to entertain and engage their audience. The human interest story in itself is not to so much a symptom of tabloidisation, which is better characterised as the triumph of the human interest story as the *central* component of news. My study does suggest that the growing personalisation of the news is indeed audience driven, although there are other factors involved.

Existing surveys confirm the preference for human interest stories, while at the same time describing many people's feelings of guilt about this preference (see, for example, Price and Czilli 1996). The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press concluded that in 1997, Americans were happier with their own lives, felt more religious conviction and were less attentive to the news than at any time in recent years (1998, 1). From 1986-96, 25 percent of respondents closely followed the news stories tracked by Pew, while only 19 percent did in 1997. The death of Princess Diana was the only story that attracted the close attention of a majority of people surveyed, while for the second consecutive year, not one domestic policy story made the annual list of top 10 news stories (p. 1). Parker and Deane (1997) write that although only small percentages of people claim to follow stories about scandal and entertainment, the data suggest that the public *knows more* about these types of stories than it does about virtually any other category of news. On average the public answered 60 percent of the questions dealing with scandal, entertainment and crime correctly (p. 6), a percentage far higher than any other category.

Critics often seem baffled by this. How can people spend so much time thinking about such obviously "trivial" topics? Part of that bafflement comes from a difference in the way journalists/critics and audiences define news and how it is used. Journalism critics tend to define news in terms of how effective the texts of news stories are at conveying information about the world to readers and viewers. They assume that readers consume news in order to learn facts about the world around them and be informed. In that respect, they follow what Carey (1975) calls a "transmission" view of communication. Audience definitions also include this "informing" function, although I believe the cultural pressure to be informed is felt less and less today. But everyday definitions of news focus more on how these stories are inserted in people's daily lives, growing and becoming the subjects of speculation and discussion. As Dahlgren writes: "Audiences can take the stories and 'run' with them, in many directions" (1992, 15). Much of the news that readers and viewers are exposed to is either ignored or forgotten almost immediately; from the audience perspective, relevant news consists of stories that take on a life of their own outside the immediate context of the newspaper or television broadcast.

Stories that do take on life tend to be dramatic and personal — these are the stories that people actually remember, as I shall show. This is not necessarily a bad thing; the rise of talk shows, tabloid news, and other forums has allowed concerns to be raised that otherwise would not be. Showing the personal side of public events is probably the most effective way to make people understand the impact of those events. And people want personal stories because they are memorable. Anthropologist John Rayfield (1972) showed quite convincingly years ago that the kind of stories people remember are chronological narratives, with a clear structure, a moral point, and vivid imagery. Traditional inverted pyramid news stories, with the standard "who, what, where"- format, were the most difficult to remember.

My research bears this out. Invariably, the stories the participants recalled and wanted to talk about were the *Current Affair* and *Unsolved Mysteries* ones, even those people who said they despised such shows. By contrast, most respondents found it hard to remember any of the *World News* stories, even though they had just sat through them. Respondents aged over 35 were far more likely to say the more traditional *World News* approach was better, more accurate, and what news was about. For these viewers, being informed was a value in itself, yet even they were not moved to talk with

enthusiasm about hard news. Compare, for example, these two exchanges between a middle-aged (40s), married couple. First, they discuss the *World News* segment:

Wife: Oh yes, there was something about the economy

Husband: They were discussing the economics, where Clinton says he's going to do something about it, and the Republicans say, well, don't fix it if it ain't broke. And more or less to that effect ...

Wife: Well the Republicans kept saying things were getting better, and the Democrats kept saying they weren't ...

Husband: Yeah.

Wife: And then the growth for the last three months of the quarter were 3.8, which is a pretty good ...

Husband: Which is a pretty good growth, yeah.

Wife: Growth. Umm ...

Later, the same couple talks about the segment on *Unsolved Mysteries,* which involved a story about a purported UFO landing. The difference in their tone is clear:

Wife: I think the show about the UFO was interesting in that there are so many unanswered questions.

Husband: Yes, why did the guy get burned? Was he burned because of the radiation that was in the ground, apparently there before?

Wife: But why in circles? Or buttons, as he called them himself ...

Husband: Where he got burned. Yeah, I don't know.

Wife: And I was surprised ...

Husband: Yeah, and why did his shirt catch on fire when that ship took off? How does that, how did that occur, it looked like he was a decent distance away from it.

Wife: Oh, he was running away from it, though. They didn't show that they found the burned shirt, that's, I wondered if that was anywhere around ...

Husband: And why did the compass go bonkers? There's lots of questions ...

The couple went on to discuss the story animatedly for several more minutes, returning to it later. In contrast, participants generally found it difficult to discuss hard news stories at all, except in terms of their personal interests. This applied especially to those who expressed a clear disdain for news as "boring," the word used most by as younger respondents. Males in their twenties were more negative about *World News Tonight* than any other group, reacting strongly to its lack of dramatic appeal. Even the perceived importance of a story did not change that, as this exchange between a college student and his friend illustrates:

Respondent: The, uh, all the ABC *World News Tonight,* that sucked.

Friend: Yeah, they were lame.

Respondent: Waiting for those verdicts in the LA riots. That was kinda interesting, I mean, 'cause that was such a big national deal. But the story wasn't that great.

Friend: Yeah, not that interesting.

It was only when a story actually hit a personal chord that these young men conversed about the program at all. For example, a segment on the Clinton policy on permitting gay people in the military, which tended to be ignored or dismissed by older respondents and women, made for a few minutes of conversation:

Respondent: Do you think it's bad that they're gonna maybe be in there?

Friend: I mean it's just like, I mean there's gay guys ... you know, military and everyone's close and your showering together and stuff.

Respondent: I'd hate it.

Friend: I mean, yeah, you never know if some gay guy's looking at you.

Respondent: Pick up that soap for me man.

Friend: Yeah, you're in the shower, you ain't gonna be pickin' up no soap.

This pattern continued throughout the taped conversations. Older people expressed a concern for being informed, while younger people often aggressively rejected the very notion, but both groups became engaged when stories spoke to their personal interests or convictions. In follow-up interviews, this preference for the personal story came over just as strongly. Thus a woman in her 50s says:

> Well, I'm interested in people. I just like people and I like to know about them ... That little girl that fell down the well in Texas ... The boy that had his arms got caught in the threshing machine ... I'm very interested to see how things come out on those kind of cases.

A male college student explains his preference for talk shows:

> This is the actual people talking about their problems, and you get questions from a bunch of people, instead of, you know, three or four ideas from producers or whatever, so you get all these people asking questions from different angles.

A woman in her 30s likes to see

> people living their lives, and what's happening in their lives, and how they're bettering their lives, or how they're screwing up their lives ... I guess I'm just more interested in that type of thing ... It is very important to know what's going on ... in a larger perspective, too, but I guess I just find it more interesting.

As another late-30s woman puts it, she likes emotional stories because, "life without emotion is life without feeling, life without forethought, and life without good results. You've got to feel in order to react." She continues, "there's a lot of reasons why things happen, a lot of reasons why people do the things they do, and if a person understands the story behind it, they can have a better idea and a better awareness to avoid being in that situation themselves..." These comments point to the way that news stories are applied to a person's life, an issue to which I will return. A female college student explicitly describes the value of the story:

> They (tabloid shows) seem to start from the beginning, like if they do have a person on who is in this big news event, they'll, like, start from them when they were real little, and them growing up, and them getting married, and you find out stuff, ... and they just make the whole ordeal sound like something that could happen to anybody ... Then they give a nice little conclusion about what's going on with them now, and on *Current Affair*, they give every little news item, like, a little name ... That kind of makes it seem more of a good story.

A cardinal rule of journalism has long been to learn how to put a human face on current events. I would not quarrel with that, tending to agree with John Tomlinson (1997, 77) that "Personalization can be read here not as trivialisation but as achieving greater imaginative proximity to the lifeworld of the audience." There is certainly a case for seeing the increasing move to the personal as a democratisation of news, a chance for all voices to be heard, and thus an opening up of public discourse. Feminist theorists have argued that forums like talk shows allow the private, female realm to enter the public sphere, so that feminine discourse about the personal is seen as a valuable part of public debate. Indeed, Grindstaff, while she has mixed feelings about

the value of talk shows, argues that their very success constitutes a critique of mainstream conventions in journalism: "If talk shows are to be criticised for turning the experiences of ordinary people into a circus sideshow, then the so-called respectable media must also be taken to task for rendering these people so completely invisible in the first place that daytime talk is their best or only option for public exposure" (Grindstaff 1997, 196). While journalists and media critics wring their hands because the public "needs" to be informed and is apparently perversely resisting this need, people themselves say, "why do I need to know this; what difference does it make to *my* life?"

Furthermore, elite definitions of news and popular definitions are often at odds, in that news that would be dismissed as salacious gossip by critics may be perceived as useful information by audiences, helping them discuss and deal with issues of morality, law and order, and so on, in their daily lives. A case in point is a story that became almost synonymous with "tabloidisation" in the United States in the 1992-93 Amy Fisher/Joey Buttafuoco saga, which chronicled the trial and imprisonment of 16-year-old Fisher for the attempted murder of her middle-aged lover's wife. Amy Fisher drove critics to despair. Pointing out that indexed clippings of the story topped 100,000 by 1996, Krajicek (1998, 15) writes: "For most of the 1990s Buttafuoco's every belch appeared as news in hundreds of newspapers and on scores of television news programs in the United States, Canada, and abroad ... he was covered relentlessly, beyond all reason." Each of the three network television stations produced a movie about the case, and a survey showed that by January 1993, 40 percent of Americans had seen at least one of them (Parker and Deane 1997). Buttafuoco was given massive coverage again in December 1995 when he violated his parole. "Since 1992 the mass media had been attached to Buttafuoco like barnacles. If I had chosen to do so, I could have had informed conversations about Buttafuoco with friends in California, relatives in Nebraska and Florida, and colleagues in Toronto" (Krajicek 1998, 137).

Of course, that was exactly the point. People were indeed conversing about Amy and Joey all over the country, and greatly enjoying it. A snippet of conversation between a mother and her teenage daughter in my study points to the conscious way in which people participated in the story, which was open to range of interpretations:

> *Daughter:* As many people as watched the Super Bowl watched the Amy Fisher story on all three networks. It was on all the talk shows, it was on all the news head lines. *Current Affair, Inside Edition.* And that was how America lived for four weeks, or however long.
>
> *Mother:* And didn't we like it because we could be the judge?
>
> *Daughter:* Well, yeah.
>
> *Mother:* Didn't we like it because we were being the judge of that? We could point our fingers which ever way we wanted it. We could make it Joey's fault, we could make it Amy's fault, we could make it her folks' fault. We could make it anybody's fault we wanted. We could be the jury.

As people speculate, they tend to look for answers from within their own experience. What would I do if this happened to me? How can I prevent this happening to someone I know? During the period of my interviews, the Amy Fisher/Joey Buttafuoco scandal was at its height. Although the story was not on the tape, several participants raised it as an example of distasteful sensationalism, yet were almost irresistibly drawn to discuss it. From an audience point of view, the best stories are those that leave room for speculation, for debate, and for a degree of audience "participation."[3] It was clear that people of different ages and backgrounds applied the story differently in their lives.

Thus, a 67-year-old woman said:

> Oh, I think it's rather creepy. Let me tell you, I'm retired now, but I was a social worker. And I ... worked with a lot of people ... a little bit lower in morals, and so forth ... and I guess I'm kind of hoping he gets his, too ... I think we all know things like that go on, and again you can look at it from several standpoints as the woman is blamed, although certainly she was wrong, and I just have an idea that he probably egged her on ... so I think he's equally guilty. And I think she was, oh, you know, just a young gal who thought everything would be OK if she just got rid of the wife. Naive. Even though she was well-versed in sexual matters.

A second woman, age 39, stresses different elements in the story:

> It was just an amazingly huge story, and it was this young girl, older man, and I think what made it kind of interesting was the wife being so strong behind her husband, and I found that kind of fascinating myself, because everything just seemed to stack against him ... And Amy steadfastly stands behind her story, too, they all do. And it's, I guess it's whatever you want to believe, and everybody takes it their own way ... And to think that a young girl would actually, you know, shoot another woman in a love affair, I guess ...

A 21-year-old woman perhaps reflects on her closer sense of identification with the teenage Amy Fisher:

> It's a thing I could never imagine happening to me, being involved in a murder, or having this big love triangle or something ... I mean, how did Amy get into that situation, that she had to shoot that sleazy guy's wife, I mean you'd have to be desperate, and he must have had some kind of hold on her — he was just slime, don't you think? I mean really, his wife didn't deserve that ... If I ever thought my life was bad, at least I'm not this person.

Finally, a woman in her forties saw the story as a vehicle for speculation that led into a consideration of what sort of circumstances throw ordinary people into these extraordinary events:

> You know we watched a couple of 'em here, my kids and I. Because, I don't know why we did, I think because we had read so much about it, and then they had the different sides, and it was sort of like, we watched it and then we decided who we really thought was the guilty person, and who gave us the facts and who didn't, and ... but it's garbage, I mean, really, it's garbage.

When asked why this story was so interesting, she continued:

> Just maybe human nature, I guess ... like when I hear about stuff like that, what I always ask myself is how, you know, how could they get to that point ... it's, you know, you cannot relate at all to what this person has done or why they've done it, and so you want this explanation ... And maybe that's because you're afraid that your next door neighbor could end up like that, you know.

Human interest stories, are clearly integrated into this woman's life, allowing her to interrogate boundaries, questions of motivation, and issues that seem much more relevant to her life than, say, economic news. An important aspect of this process is that it is participatory. As we struggle to make sense of a story, we involve others in the negotiation of meaning. Thus a 21-year-old man says: "When you watch by yourself, a lot of times you have ideas that you have unsolved because you can't converse with other individuals..." A 37-year-old woman agrees: "I feel that in order to really be a good conversationalist, you can't be self-centred, and I want to hear everyone's opinion about what's going on in the news. There's something in their view that I can use, and hopefully there's something in my view that can contribute to making theirs better." She considers *Unsolved Mysterie*s to be important news because "it helps others in the community feel a part of the news world ... The community or the listeners get to contribute to the story and make the news effective and be part of the results."

The Power of the Image

Another thing that makes stories memorable, and thus worth paying attention to, is the vivid verbal or visual image. Television news has always had the advantage of the visual image, and has long been criticised for misusing or sensationalising it, as was print journalism before it. The debate over what images are appropriate continues, but one often-cited symptom of tabloidisation is the way the image has crowded out rational analysis. For television, the existence of an image will actually determine whether a story is used or not, especially on that most ratings-driven genre, local news, which is watched by far more Americans than national news. As Krajicek (1998, 24) writes, "Today the possession of any 'hot' video means there *will* be a story, whether it rates a story or not." American local news is a litany of unconnected, usually violent images, often of events that have no immediate relevance to the region in which they're shown — freeway pile-ups, fires, police chases and stand-offs. A 1995 survey by Rocky Mountain Media Watch of 100 local television broadcasts found that 42 percent of air-time was devoted to such "mayhem" (Krajicek 1998, 27). In addition, local news anchors are encouraged to display visual aids whenever possible — not just the traditional charts and graphs, but such items as cans of beans to illustrate a consumer story: "I began to wonder how many of the day's stories were selected not on the basis of traditional news values ... but on the basis of prop value: how quickly and cheaply the broadcasters could find a prop to go with the story" (Heider 1998, B8). The trend in local news is exemplified perfectly in a recent promotional campaign for a Tampa Bay ABC affiliate station, comprising a series of 30-second spots that began airing in the summer of 1997. The most frequently-shown spot was shot in slow-motion with sepia colours. It began with images of local scenes and people, moving into images of the flag raising at Iwo Jima; John Kennedy Jr. saluting at his father's funeral; and the wedding of Charles and Diana, before ending with more local images and finally the faces of the two news anchors. The voice-over went as follows:

> *Female Anchor*: The best news is always about people. The look in somebody's eyes will tell you much more about what's happening than a million pages of news copy ever will.
>
> *Male Anchor*: Think about the images that will always be in your mind. They are the faces of history, faces that show in a glance what something feels like. The news is made by people, and the news should be about people.
>
> *Female Anchor*: I'm Marty Tucker.
>
> *Male Anchor*: And I'm Brendan McLaughlin. And we're part of something real. 28 Tampa Bay News. Real people, real news.

The final sentence became the signature slogan that now appears on the channel throughout the day.

Going one step further than the visually-obsessed local news channels, tabloid TV shows from their beginning were not even constrained by the availability of actual news footage. Instead, they have developed the art of the re-enactment, or dramatisation, in which actual events are recreated by actors for the cameras. According to Krajicek (1998, 42), the re-enactment was probably first used in August 1986 when *A Current Affair* aired a dramatisation of events leading up to what became known as the "Preppy Murder," a widely-publicised case in which a wealthy young man, Robert Chambers, was accused of killing student Jennifer Levin. In the following decade, the technique became a stock feature of reality shows and syndicated news magazines,

and is widely cited as one of the key elements in tabloidisation. Indeed, it seemed for a while that the re-enactment was one of the few features that separated tabloid news from serious news. But recently, dramatisations have started to creep into network news magazines such as *Dateline NBC*, *20/20*, and *Turning Point*, as well as in local news, particularly in crime re-enactments that mimic national shows like *America's Most Wanted.* Gradually the dramatisation is beginning to be seen as just another way to enhance the story, to bring it to life.

In my research, I was interested in how people perceive such techniques. While it would be unsafe to draw major conclusions from a small project, I was intrigued by a generational difference that emerged. Middle-aged and older people did not like re-enactments, seeing them as somehow cheating, as detracting from the reality of the news, probably a view shared by most journalism critics. Typical was a women in her 40s who appreciates the dramatic value of the technique, while clearly distrusting the effects:

> Well, it's a great tactic, you know, because there's nothing that sticks in a person's mind longer than the picture of something .... Visual effects like that are very effective, but you know my thought is ... how do they really know? ... I mean, were these people unkept and unshaven, or were they really pretty and sexy-looking, and smelled like Aramis? I don't know ... if I'm just looking at it and not thinking about it, it would make it more real because of the visual effects. But my mind always goes back and says, how do they know?

This woman points to the fact that the dramatisation can actually seem "more real," unless the viewer actively works against seeing it that way. Younger people, however, seemed much less bothered by the technique — in fact it may enhance their appreciation. Thus a male college student comments:

> It's sometimes hard to visualise how things happen, and when they do re-cap 'em, it does help ... For example, I was watchin' (*Rescue*) *911* one time, and an ambulance was following a car, and the car that they were following, the mother had a seizure and she fell asleep at the wheel, and there was a baby in the front seat, and they totally recapped this, the story, and the thing was, she was like bouncin' off curbs, and swervin', and one of the ambulance drivers got out and tried to run and catch the car. You know, the story went on and on and on, and just how they showed it, I mean you're like, wow, that really can happen. And I'd say somethin' like that was really beneficial to understand the story. Kind of like a movie ... I mean people want to see what happened and how it happened, and when you're watchin' the regular news, I mean, they just tell you what happened.

Later in the interview, this young man was talking about how he now believed that the government is hiding things from the people When did this come to him? "Oh, yeah, after I saw *JFK*. That really changed my view." Once again, we see how something that is actually a recreation, told for dramatic purposes, is perceived as more convincing than either traditional news or history. Another male college student agreed. "I like it because it lets you know exactly what's going on ... whereas words you can still, you know, imagine things." When asked if this might create a danger that the audience might not be seeing what actually happened, he replied, "No ... They have no reason to really lie."

If there really is a generational difference, is it because younger people are indeed the visual generation? Are they more easily persuaded by the truth of visual images, which are seen as somehow transparent, obvious, unmediated? Perhaps the "realness" of something may be more tied up with the impact of the images, rather than whether those images correspond to any outside reality. If that is true, it is a worrying thought, particularly as we get deeper into an era where technology makes image manipulation

more and more sophisticated, and where constructed images and documentary images become more seamlessly intertwined. For at the same time, the younger people in my study were also the most likely to be cynical and untrusting of *any* news or any "facts" generally, reflecting a kind of relativism that is often seen as the hall-mark of the postmodern age. From this perspective, any viewpoint, any "fact" is as likely to be as "true" as any other. Perhaps it is the fact that is presented with most drama and visual impact, the one that can "break through the clutter" as advertisers say, that in the end wins out.

Reality, does seem to be an important value for viewers. If something is real, and happening to actual people, it carries a ring of authenticity about it. The enormous popularity of shows like *Cops, America's Funniest Home Videos,* and the endless video compilations aired by Murdoch's Fox network, such as *When Animals Attack,* attests to this. Producers can get away with poor production values if the effect is "real." Yet at the same time, young viewers seem happy to accept the ability of producers to stage or re-enact events to make them more real than real. Like the young man quoted above, a young woman in the study argued that "everything that was said (on the re-enactment) was things that really came out of one of the people's mouth at one time during the case ... I mean, like ... they can't twist it too much because they have to give people rights."

Grindstaff (1997, 192) describes how talk shows respond to the very audience demands I have been discussing: "Producers want 'real' people to provide first-hand testimony about their personal experience as it relates to the topic at hand, the more emoting the better. They do not want distanced analysis, or complicated discussions of politics or law." Yet at the same time these real people can be hard to handle: "these are the guests who, in some ways, pose the greatest challenge to producers because the very qualities that make them 'real' make them more difficult to manage in routine ways. The pressure of deadlines, the nature of the topics, and the performances required of guests actually push producers toward people who *are* media savvy, have had prior talk-show experience, and may even be actors faking their stories" (p.189).

What Does it all Mean?

So we know that news audiences generally prefer lively, dramatic, human interest stories over news about political and economic issues, and this is not necessarily a terrible thing. As Dahlgren (1992, 16) writes, news can and should be pleasurable, even though "the discourses of journalism cannot admit this." He goes on to argue that "journalism ... often *does* foster ... feelings of collective belonging ... yet this is rarely recognized and even more seldom praised" (p. 17). The conversations that viewers and readers have about news stories serve to bind people together, and given them common topics of conversation in a world in which common ties are getting fewer and fewer. News stories of scandals, even of such trivial tales as Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco, offer an entry point to everyday discussions of morality, boundaries, and appropriate behaviour (see essays in Lull and Hinerman 1997).

A common line of argument against this is, of course, that knowledge of trivia prevents people from learning about important issues. As Krajicek (1998, 137) puts it, "We all knew too much about Joey, which told me that we knew less than we should have about something else." The Pew Research Center even suggests that human interest stories *cause* viewers to be ignorant: "Not surprisingly, we found that

knowledge about what was happening in Bosnia decreased with the number of Amy Fisher movies watched" (Pew Research Center 1987, 3). Unfortunately, "there is little evidence to suggest that if people were not discussing Amy and Joey, they would necessarily be discussing the situation in Bosnia."

In other words, audiences do make active choices about the news they can use, and berating them about what they should be interested in is unlikely to have much effect. However, audiences can only run with the stories they are given; as Sparks (1992, 37) comments, "the sense which people can make of newspapers depends at least in part on what the journalists have actually written in the first place." The current climate of tabloidisation in news is a product of the dynamic between audiences, journalists, and economic forces. Stories like Amy Fisher are demonstrably popular, and earn ratings. But they are also cheap and easy for news outlets all over the country to run they are delivered on the wires, and they can fill hours and inches of news space profitably, for very little reporting effort. A newspaper or broadcast that is full of Amy Fisher stories does not have a staff digging to uncover financial mismanagement or corruption. In that respect, the human interest story, especially the big, national story, *is* pushing out diversity of information from the news media. And if stories are not placed on the agenda by the media, the audience cannot discuss them.

The danger as I see it, is not the personalisation of news in itself. The best kind of human interest stories do indeed increase our knowledge and understanding of important events — it may have taken John Hersey's *Hiroshima* to make many Americans understand the human devastation of the atomic bomb. Tomlinson (1987, 73) is optimistic about the power of the personal story to have impact and genuinely inform: "Those experiences that penetrate deepest into our lifeworld are the ones that can be imaginatively incorporated into this on-going narrative of self-identity." He argues that journalists must try harder to interpret important national and global issues in personal terms in order to engage audiences. Indeed, that does happen. We may recall a famous photograph of two lovers in the former Yugoslavia, who died under gunfire while trying to reach safety. It was certainly emotional and sensational, yet that photo and the explanatory story probably introduced many Americans to the reality of a situation of which they had only been vaguely aware. People talked about that story in their leisure time, just as they talked about famine in Somalia once they had noticed the heart-wrenching pictures and stories of dying children.

But even this kind of fairly superficial reporting requires resources and the will to try. It is cheaper and easier to buy wire stories and pictures that do not require interpretation or analysis, or to focus on shocking or heart-warming tales generated locally. The real danger of tabloidisation is the trend toward personalisation becoming the *only* way to tell a story, and that these stories themselves become more and more disconnected. Sparks (1992, 41) rightly criticises popular journalistic techniques on the grounds that "they offer the experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of the social totality," arguing further that "the simple reality is that the nature of the social totality is neither constituted through immediate individual experience nor entirely comprehensible in its terms." And, as Sparks suggests, popular journalism is headed in directions where even "the urge to extrapolate from the individual experience to the social totality is declining. More and more, the tabloidised U.S. media offer stories whose aim is simply to engage our emotions, with no other purpose in mind, and where indeed the 'personal' obliterates the 'political' as a factor for human behavior" (Sparks 1992, 40).

The talk shows and magazine shows, and more and more the mainstream news, are becoming a stream of apparently random stories about individual lives, making it difficult to make connections to larger issues. Important issues become reduced to personal stories — the plight of the homeless becomes one woman's story, corruption in an industry becomes one guy pitted against each other, the complexity of the Gulf War becomes Bush vs. Saddam, and good vs. evil. The pressure toward the personal, as Hallin (1992, 22) puts it, "heightens emotion and makes black and white what is in fact more ambiguous."

And in a climate that validates personal experience over logic and reasoned argument, it becomes equally valid to pay attention to any and all personal views, no matter how uninformed, bigoted, or irrational. So in the United States we have seen a proliferation of shows in which people share their experiences with fatalities and fetishes, apparitions and angels, all without context or comment. The *Jerry Springer Show,* a talk show in which foul-mouthed guests come to blows under the auspices of themes like "I Slept with Three Brothers," or "Men who Dress Like Babies" has become the top-rated daytime talk show, proving immensely popular with young people, who egg the guests on with chants of "Jerr-y, Jerr-y." The show only reached the boundaries of acceptability when producers cancelled a program on guests who practice bestiality, titled, "I Married a Horse" (Deggans 1998, B2).

Springer's core audience also points to another troublesome trend. Younger audiences are especially unlikely to pay attention to news. A 1996 Gallup Poll showed that people under 50 were far more able to identify sports and entertainment figures than politicians and international figures (for example, 15 percent could name the prime minister of Israel, while 75 percent could name the host of the *Tonight Show).* Older Americans were still relatively ignorant (only 70 percent could name the Vice-President), but their recognition of popular and hard news figures was much more even (Newport 1996). Parker and Deane (1997, 4) reached similar conclusions: "Those over 50 are almost twice as likely as members of Generation X to say they follow national politics and domestic policy very closely, and 10 percentage points more likely to follow election campaigns and international politics." The Pew Research Center reported in 1996 that news viewership had declined among people under 30 more than among any other group, with only around 20 percent watching either network or cable news. Some of this may simply be a difference in life-stage; older people may have more time to pay attention to the news.

But more likely it both a reflection and a cause of the tabloidisation process. In the United States today, there has been an astonishing proliferation of news outlets — talk shows, TV magazines, TV "tabloids," cable networks, and most recently, the Internet. All are fighting for audiences and competing to meet the proven demand for spectacle and drama. Many of the younger generation, with access to an incredible array of entertainment, appear to have given up even the pretence that "being informed" is useful and necessary. In fact they seem to be becoming more and more unreachable by any message; even beer advertisers are struggling to find ways to break through the noise and reach college-age consumers: "It's a combination of their short attention span and the information glut," complains the editor of *Beer Marketer's Insights* (Hays 1998).

And U.S. journalism itself sometimes seems to be giving up making an effort to do anything but tell stories and provide spectacle. Instead, they have plunged headlong

into the competition. Mainstream newspapers now routinely use tabloids as sources, as in April, 1992, when *A Current Affair* declared Britain's Prince Edward to be gay. Based on that information alone, newspapers like *Newsday*, The *Boston Globe*, The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, and the *Orlando Sentinel* ran the story (Krajicek 1998, 32). The effect of competition was also demonstrated in the saturation coverage of the death of Princess Diana, and the initial coverage of the sex scandal involving President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Spurred on by countless rumours emanating from the Internet and elsewhere, the press published information without attribution, much of it later proved wrong. Although many more responsible media then stepped back and issued a *mea culpa* (see, for example, Dahl 1998), in some respects the damage was done.

For the audience relationship with the press is a complicated and ambivalent one. Although the taste for sensational news is clear, at least for now the public is still torn between that taste and a perception that the press should be more than amusing storytellers. The Pew Research Center (1998) reported this year that public criticism of the press for inaccuracy, unfairness, intrusiveness, and sensationalism is at an all time high. More than half those surveyed think news stories are often inaccurate, up 20 percent since 1985. Only a third say the news media help society solve problems, while 54 percent say the news media get in the way of society solving its problems. Krajicek (1998, 198) argues that journalists "have lost their grip on respect, trust, and confidence, their most valuable occupational commodities. Journalists may know that they are viewed as manipulative enemies by the public, but they seem not to understand what that means."

So what does it mean? Many have argued that the explosion of news outlets has democratised news, making it more responsive to what people want, even if at least the older generation feels uncomfortable about it all. People like personal stories with high visual impact. They like talk shows with their personal revelations. Many do not care if the images are faked, and the talk shows are scripted. It is certainly true that the older news style tended to present a very institutional picture, where representatives of government and the *status quo* monopolised most of the time.

But the apparent deluge of new information is in many ways an illusion. It only appears to offer variety, when it is the same old stories going round and round all the time. Cultural theorists who argue that greater popularisation leads to more democracy may be right in a way, but inherent in their theories is the notion that as more people's voices are heard, they will gain access to the wider political process. That hope appears illusory; Grindstaff (1997) suggests for example that while talk shows love to use "ordinary people," who are all too eager to air their grievances on national television, the forum they are given is guaranteed to encourage emotionalism and volatility, actually further marginalising them as entertaining but freakish "trash." We saw the illusory "more voices, less information" effect in the massive media coverage of the Gulf War, which gave us thousands of hours of discussion and countless personal stories about soldiers, their families, the personality of Bush and Saddam, spectacular computer imagery of smart bombs, and so on (Hallin and Gitlin 1994). It gave us little coverage of what was actually going on in the war, because the government censors forbade such coverage, and because journalists were too worried about competition to take a stand. Nor was there public outrage about censorship, perhaps because journalists are so widely seen as sleaze-mongers rather than courageous spokespeople for truth.

John Tomlinson (1997, 81) argues that "it does not follow that because people so readily involve themselves in the 'personalised' morality of scandals, they therefore lack the capacity or the innate motivation to engage with more 'serious' moral issues. It may be a question of how these issues are presented to them. " I believe this is true, and this closer look at how audiences actually use news tends to support the idea that potentially people will pay attention to stories about important issues when or if they are presented to them effectively, and in a form they want, rather than as bitter pill to "improve" them. The challenge to journalism is how to do this, and how to respond to the demand of the audience for "news we can use," while showing them the connections between their lives and the larger social and political world. If journalism cannot rise to that challenge, it may be that in the whirling, tabloidised environment of the American news media, "the battle for large-scale," serious public discourse is already lost.

Notes:

1. The author wishes to acknowledge the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota, which funded the ethnographic interviews through its Grant-in-Aid program.

2. Throughout this paper, I quote from transcripts of these interviews, carried out in the Spring of 1993. In selecting quotations, I attempt to choose comments that seem representative of a point of view shared by others. Space limitations preclude the extensive use of numerous quotations that make the same general point.

3. Elsewhere, I have discussed in more detail the relationship of scandalous stories to melodrama, and the role of the audience in participating in development of the story (Bird 1997).

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