# Research Note: The Tabloidization of British Tabloids

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#### ABSTRACT

■ This research presents a content analysis of the major British tabloids over the last decade of the 20th century. Using the conceptual lens of tabloidization and the framework of McLachlan and Golding, this study shows that the coverage of tabloids can be characterized by a dominance of 'soft' and home stories, by a significant presence of headlines and visuals and a personalized angle of coverage. Over time, the coverage has become more 'tabloidized' in its form and style, but has remained constant in its range of contents. Theoretically, the results indicate that the evolution of tabloid coverage has been heterogeneous, which supports the idea that the press can be in a process of homogenization only in the areas of form and style of coverage, but not in terms of range of content. Moreover, these changes suggest that tabloidization (as a feature directly related to tabloids) should not be considered a static concept. ■

Key Words content analysis, homogenization, infotainment, polarization, tabloidization

#### Antecedents

The assumption that the news media are becoming more tabloid-like has generated a particularly poignant debate in pan-European discussions about media and democracy. Scholars have consistently disputed not only

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the nature of changes in the quality and diversity of information that media supply, but also whether or not these changes can have potentially harmful consequences in society (see, for example, Blumler, 1999; Brants, 1998).

These debates, however, have been frequently carried out using conceptualizations that embody a multiplicity of approaches (Esser, 1999; Sparks, 2000). Notions such as 'tabloidization' and 'infotainment' have veered between the cultural analysts and 'critical traditionalists' (Blumler, 1999), who have reported assessments as diverse as macro-level cultural examinations (Fiske, 1992) and studies evaluating the manifest changes in news content (Winston, 2002).

Even within surface-level content studies, important differences have emerged. The vast majority of these studies have defined tabloidization as a trend characterized by emphasis on both private life and 'soft' news coverage (Sparks, 2000). However, scholars have also incorporated other dimensions such as changes in the journalistic behaviour (Esser, 1999), simplification of formats (Connell, 1998) and 'feminization' of news presentation (van Zoonen, 1998).

McLachlan and Golding (2000) proposed an integrative examination of tabloidization that incorporates different levels of analysis: range, form and mode of address. *Range* has been traditionally understood as a variation in terms of contents, including less space devoted to information (Rooney, 2000) and less attention to 'hard' and foreign news (Winston, 2002). Changes in *form* of coverage, which mean the use of more simplistic formats, have been traditionally measured as increased visuals and decreased text (Djupsund and Carlson, 1998). Finally, *style* has usually been defined as an increasing personalization in the coverage (Sparks, 2000; van Zoonen, 2000).

Throughout all these perspectives, 'tabloid' news outputs have represented a benchmark against which to compare the changes in the news profiles of 'serious' press (see Broomley, 1998), which has usually been considered the last bastion of *proper* journalism (see, for example, Grabe et al., 2001). Research into tabloidization has mainly, if not uniquely, focused on the assessment of the broadsheet content (Rooney, 2000), leaving tabloids in a secondary analytic place.

This focus on broadsheets can be problematic. First, it has impeded an empirically informed conceptualization of tabloidization (Rowe, 1998). Since this process directly refers to tabloid coverage (Sparks, 2000), this lack of empirical attention has made it difficult to provide a reliable and valid conceptualization of tabloidization. Second, it has also complicated the proper exploration of the potential homogenizing or

polarizing tendencies in the media (Connell, 1998). While some authors have proposed that the differences between tabloid and 'serious' journalism are disappearing (Franklin, 1997), others have suggested that the boundaries between those styles of journalism remain clear because they embody divergent conceptions of news and journalism (Sparks, 2000).

In this context, the current research stresses the issue of tabloidization and focuses on changes in patterns of news coverage in British tabloid newspapers. The central research question is to what extent news coverage in these newspapers has changed over time in terms of tabloid-characteristic elements. In other words, have the tabloids themselves become more 'tabloidized'?

## Evolution of tabloids: empirical evidence

Data on changing tabloid newspaper news profiles are limited. Only a few studies have provided information on this issue and their findings can be summarized in three main areas: range, form and style of coverage (McLachlan and Golding, 2000).

Range has been the most frequent variable used in the studies in this field (Grabe et al., 2001). First, Rooney (2000) proposed that the space devoted to news information decreased over the period 1968–92, though he did not provide figures. In terms of agenda, McLachlan and Golding (2000) and Rooney (2000) observed that soft stories were more prominent than hard items and that they remained constant during the 1990s. Finally, British tabloids carried considerably fewer international news stories, in comparison with broadsheet papers in 1995 (Connell, 1998). There is no available information in terms coverage patterns over time for home/foreign news.

The examination of formal features has not been very extensive. McLachlan and Golding (2000) provided an analysis of the *Daily Mirror* up to 1992, that indicated it had decreased its text content (from 320 to 160 words per story between 1982 and 1997) and increased its picture content (the average number of visuals increased to approximately 2.4 photographs per page from 1970 to 1992).

An even less often incorporated indicator of tabloidization is the style of coverage. Franklin's (1997) work gave examples of this, although he presented limited data. The *Mirror* had, for example, increased its coverage of the private lives of politicians. This newspaper had been giving growing prominence to the coverage of scandals and misconduct, which in 1993 comprised up to 10 percent of its parliamentary stories.

## Methodology

A quantitative content analysis was carried out, over time, comparing the news coverage in the two largest tabloid newspapers, by circulation, in Britain – *The Sun* and the *Mirror* (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2001). The analysis covered a 10-year period and focused on a number of indicators of tabloidization derived from the research literature, but shifted the emphasis from the more usual analysis of broadsheet newspapers to tabloid newspapers.

### Definition of tabloidization

This was based on McLachlan and Golding's (2000) three-level operational characterization of this process – range, form and style – and incorporated operational definitions that other studies have used:

Range This was defined as a decreasing proportion of page space<sup>1</sup> devoted to (1) the provision of information (news items) as compared to other items (i.e. entertainment and service) (Rooney, 2000); (2) foreign affairs news stories as compared to home news (Riffe et al., 1993); and (3) hard in respect of soft news (stories about sports, racing, entertainment, crime, show business, the royal family and human interest [Hartley, 1982]).

Form This was understood as less proportional space dedicated to text and more to visuals and headlines (Djupsund and Carlson, 1998).

Style This was defined as more space devoted to stories including a personalized angle of coverage, understood as the presentation of public figures as private persons (Latimer, 1984).

## Unit of analysis

This comprised specific items that appeared in the newspapers sampled: news stories, comments, letters, puzzles and so on.

## Coding procedure

A coding schedule was devised to catalogue features about each item analysed at a number of levels. First, items were differentiated into 'news' and 'other' (letters, crosswords, horoscopes, etc.). Second, news items were measured at different levels: focus (national vs international), main topic (politics, sports and so on), and form and style features in the news item (headline size, picture size and personalization).

Table 1	Sample of newspapers	
	1991	1996

	1991	1996	2001	Total
Mirror	10 editions	10 editions	10 editions	30 editions
	(2 weeks)	(2 weeks)	(2 weeks)	(6 weeks)
The Sun	10 editions	10 editions	10 editions	30 editions
	(2 weeks)	(2 weeks)	(2 weeks)	(6 weeks)
Total	20 editions	20 editions	20 editions	60 editions
	(4 weeks)	(4 weeks)	(4 weeks)	(12 weeks)

Two content coders were used. The main coder analysed all sampled content. A support coder analysed a random selection of 5 percent of the total sample. Inter-coder reliability was based on the Scott's pi formula of inter-coder agreement: a minimum threshold level of agreement was set at 0.80 (Riffe et al., 1998).

#### Sample

This comprised a sample of newspapers from weekday editions of *The Sun* and the Mirror. At the time of this research, they jointly commanded more than 80 percent of the total tabloid market share in Britain (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2001). The total sample comprised 60 editions: for each newspaper, two weeks were randomly selected in 1991, 1996 and 2001 - taking Monday to Friday editions. The sample considered oneweek blocks, because different days can be associated with diverse emphasis on the coverage and different newspaper number of pages (Riffe et al., 1998) (see Table 1).

# **Findings**

#### Range

A first indicator of this attribute was the proportion of page space devoted to news information (see Table 2). In terms of prominence, news items occupied approximately three-quarters of total editorial space<sup>2</sup> (76.9 percent). A comparison between the distributions for 1991 and 2001 showed no evidence of long-term changes. The year 1996, however, showed an increase in proportional presence of news items ( $\chi^2 = 12.125$ , d.f. = 1, p < .001), which was reversed in 2001 ( $\chi^2 = 15.439$ , d.f. = 1, p < .001).

The analysis of this variable separately for each tabloid newspaper showed similar evidence. The average presence of news items was similar

Table 2 Presence of news and other editorial items

	1991	1996	2001	Total
Total Sample				
News	76.4%	80.3%	75.7%	76.9%
Other items	23.6%	19.7%	24.3%	23.1%
Total editorial space	100%	100%	100%	100%
•	$(361,683.2 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(401,078.7 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(609,858.9 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(1,372,620.7 \text{ cm}^2)$
Mirror				
News	76.2%	83.3%	74.1%	76.8%
Other items	23.8%	16.7%	23.9%	23.2%
Total editorial space	100%	100%	100%	100%
1	$(178,477.5 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(188,677.5 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(296,798.2 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(663,953.2 \text{ cm}^2)$
The Sun				
News	76.5%	75.9%	77.7%	77.0%
Other items	23.5%	24.1%	23.3%	23.0%
Total editorial space	100%	100%	100%	100%
•	$(183,205.7 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(212,401.2 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(313,060.7 \text{ cm}^2)$	(708,667.6 cm <sup>2</sup> )

Base: Total editorial space.

in both newspapers (about 77 percent). However, no evidence emerged of consistent change over the entire 1991–2001 period. As in the total sample, an increase was observed in the year 1996 for the *Mirror* ( $\chi^2 = 10.289$ , d.f. = 1, p < .001), which was reversed in 2001 ( $\chi^2 = 24.030$ , d.f. = 1, p < .001).

The second indicator of range was the prominence of soft news stories (see Table 3). First, such stories were demonstrably dominant in these newspapers. Approximately two-thirds of space devoted to news items (average of 66.8 percent) comprised soft stories and a little over a quarter of page space was devoted to hard news (27.7 percent). This finding occurred for each time period analysed and for both newspapers.

Finally, the third indicator of tabloidization in terms of range was increased presence of home news. Around nine-tenths of page space (89.8 percent) was devoted to home news stories (see Table 4). Analysis of the distribution of home and foreign news over time, however, indicated no significant change between 1991 and 2001. Similar results were detected in both the *Mirror* and *The Sun*.

On cross-tabulating home/foreign news items with soft/hard stories, it emerged that only 3 percent of news space was devoted to hard international news. In addition, 7 percent of foreign stories comprised soft topics. Finally, roughly 60 percent of the proportional space was devoted to local soft news stories.

#### Form

The examination of the amount of space devoted to headlines, visuals and text demonstrated that the latter was the most prominent layout element (41.3 percent), followed by visuals (33 percent) and, finally, headlines (23.8 percent) (see Table 5). Over time, the space devoted to headlines decreased by a significant margin from 25.5 percent in 1991 to 22.5 percent in 2001 (t = 10.386, d.f. = 3873, p < .001). This significant difference incorporated small changes in both five-year subperiods (1991–6 and 1996–2001). Text also decreased from 43.3 percent in 1991 to 40.4 percent in 2001 (t = 8.136, d.f. = 3873, p < .001), but much of this change occurred between 1991 and 1996 (t = 8.472, d.f. = 3893, t < .001). Conversely, visuals showed an increase in page space occupied in 2001 compared with 1991 from 29.2 percent to 35.8 percent (t = -7.832, d.f. = 3873, t < .05), which occurred evenly across both subperiods: 1991–6 (t = -2.358, d.f. = 3873, t < .05) and 1996–2001 (t = -2.768, d.f. = 3873, t < .05).

Table 3 Presence of soft and hard news items

	1991	1996	2001	Total
Total sample				
Soft news	66.5%	68.0%	65.8%	66.8%
Hard news	28.5%	26.8%	28.1%	27.7%
Other	5.0%	5.2%	6.1%	5.6%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
	$(276,160.5 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(318,206.1 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(461,558.4 \text{ cm}^2)$	(1,055,925.2 cm <sup>2</sup> )
Mirror				
Soft news	65.9%	67.5%	64.9%	66.3%
Hard news	28.4%	25.1%	28.6%	27.9%
Other	5.7%	7.5%	6.5%	5.8%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
	$(136,059 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(157,076.1 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(217,024 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(510,159.1 \text{ cm}^2)$
The Sun				
Soft news	67.6%	70.4%	67.6%	68.6%
Hard news	27.0%	25.5%	27.3%	26.5%
Other	5.4%	4.1%	5.1%	4.9%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
	$(141,002 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(161,131 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(244,534 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(546,667 \text{ cm}^2)$

Base: Total news items.

Table 4 Presence of home and foreign news items

	1991	1996	2001	Total
Total sample				
Home news	89.0%	89.4%	90.7%	89.8%
Foreign news	10.5%	10.5%	9.2%	10.0%
Not specified	0.5%	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
	$(276,160.5 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(318,206.1 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(461,558.4 \text{ cm}^2)$	(1,055,925.2 cm <sup>2</sup> )
Mirror				
Home news	87.5%	89.8%	90.2%	89.2%
Foreign news	13.0%	9.6%	9.6%	10.0%
Not specified	0.5%	0.5%	0.2%	0.2%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
_	$(136,059 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(157,076.1 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(217,024 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(510,159.1 \text{ cm}^2)$
The Sun				
Home news	90.6%	89.0%	90.9%	90.4%
Foreign news	9.0%	11.0%	10.9%	10.0%
Not specified	0.4%	0%	0.1%	0.2%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
-	$(141,002 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(161,131 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(244,534 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(546,667 \text{ cm}^2)$

Base: Total news items

Table 5 Space devoted to titles, text and visuals

	1991	1996	2001	Total
Total sample				
Title	25.5%	24.3%	22.5%	23.8%
Text	43.3%	40.4%	40.4%	41.3%
Visual	29.2%	32.7%	35.8%	33.0%
Blank space	1.9%	2.5%	1.3%	1.9%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
_	(276,160.5 cm <sup>2</sup> )	$(318,206.1 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(461,558.4 \text{ cm}^2)$	(1,055,925.2 cm <sup>2</sup> )
Mirror				
Title	24.5%	24.2%	21.5%	23.2%
Text	42.6%	42.9%	41.4%	42.3%
Visual	31.5%	30.1%	34.6%	32.2%
Blank space	1.3%	2.7%	2.5%	2.3%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
_	$(136,059 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(157,076.1 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(217,024 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(510,159.1 \text{ cm}^2)$
The Sun				
Title	26.5%	24.4%	22.7%	24.5%
Text	44.0%	37.9%	40.1%	40.7%
Visual	27.0%	35.3%	36.3%	33.1%
Blank space	2.5%	3.4%	0.9%	1.7%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
_	$(141,002 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(161,131 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(244,534 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(546,667 \text{ cm}^2)$

Base: Total news items

Separate analyses by newspaper demonstrated a similar presence of these layout elements in each case and analogous changes over time. There was a significant decrease in 2001 compared with 1991 in space devoted to headlines in the *Mirror* (t = 10.161, d.f. = 1786, p < .001) and *The Sun* (t = 5.081, d.f. = 2085, p < .001). Visuals increased across this period in the *Mirror* (t = 4.422, d.f. = 1786, p < .05) and in *The Sun* (t = -7.402, d.f. = 2085, p < .001). However, the change in the space devoted to text was detected only in the case of *The Sun* (t = 5.081, d.f. = 2085, p < .001), which was the only discrepancy detected at this level.

## $Style^3$

On average, professional/issue-oriented articles tended to dominate the coverage in the tabloids studied (see Table 6). However, it is interesting to note that if purely personal elements are summed with those concerned with professional/issue areas, together they occupy the majority of the space. Separate analyses by newspapers showed similar prominence given to the coverage of professional areas in both titles sampled.

Over time, a significant increase in personalization was observed between 1991 and 2001 ( $\chi^2 = 8.175$ , d.f. = 2, p < .05). This variation is mainly explained by the change detected between 1996 and 2001 ( $\chi^2 = 7.204$ , d.f. = 3, p < .05). Across newspapers, this variation occurred principally in the *Mirror*, which exhibited a decrease in professional-focused news and an increase in personal-focused news between 1991 and 2001 ( $\chi^2 = 22.330$ , d.f. = 2, p < .001), and between the subperiods 1991–6 ( $\chi^2 = 8.039$ , d.f. = 2, p < .05) and 1996–2001 ( $\chi^2 = 8.891$ , d.f. = 2, p < .05). The same analyses for *The Sun* yielded no significant changes over time.

#### Discussion

This research explored the nature of news coverage in a sample of two major British tabloids over a period spanning 1991 to 2001. Using the conceptual lens of tabloidization (McLachlan and Golding, 2000), this study examined the news profiles of these newspapers and found evidence of a process of increased 'tabloidization' in news coverage in respect of form and style attributes, but not so significantly in the case of range of content components.

In terms of range, 'news' items dominated the editorial space of British tabloids (70 percent). The proportion of page space devoted to

Table 6 Presence of personalization

	1991	1996	2001	Total
Total sample				
Personal focused	29.4%	30.0%	37.2%	32.9%
Mixed	22.6%	25.7%	22.7%	23.6%
Professional focused	48.0%	44.3%	40.1%	45.3%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
_	$(152,743.7 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(182,310.9 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(258,609.2 \text{ cm}^2)$	(593,663.8 cm <sup>2</sup> )
Mirror				
Personal focused	27.4%	28.8%	41.5%	32.6%
Mixed	17.1%	25.3%	22.7%	21.7%
Professional focused	55.5%	45.9%	35.8%	45.7%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
_	$(79,907.7 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(84,207.2 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(121,038.8 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(285,153.7 \text{ cm}^2)$
The Sun				
Personal focused	31.6%	31.1%	33.1%	24.5%
Mixed	28.6%	26.1%	22.6%	40.7%
Professional focused	39.8%	42.8%	44.3%	33.1%
Total news space	100%	100%	100%	100%
•	$(72,836 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(98,103.7 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(127,570.4 \text{ cm}^2)$	$(298,510.1 \text{ cm}^2)$

Base: Showbiz, parliamentary, Royal Family and sports stories.

information was more than twice that dedicated to content such as promotions, games, horoscopes and other items. Moreover, though the total pages of these newspapers increased, the proportions allocated to informational and other items remained stable over time.

As suggested by many authors, the tabloid news space has been dominated by soft topics – more than two-thirds (Rooney, 2000; Connell, 1998) – and home news – about 90 percent of the space (Connell, 1998). That is, news coverage of tabloids strongly stresses these attributes over hard and foreign news. Moreover, that emphasis has been constant over time as it was previously suggested by other authors (McLachlan and Golding, 2000).

In terms of form, text has been the dominant feature in British tabloids. But the space devoted to text and headlines was less prominent in 2001 compared with 1991. Conversely, visual elements became more prominent over this period. It is interesting that the increase of the space devoted to headlines was not confirmed here. In sum, tabloids have become more visual and less verbal (text and headlines) over time. The separate analyses of *The Sun* and the *Mirror* illustrated the same changes in headlines and visuals. However, only *The Sun* changed in terms of text. The increase of visuals observed here is consistent with the results reported by McLachlan and Golding (2000) for the *Mirror*. However, those authors also observed a decrease in text, which was not confirmed by this research. This difference may be related to different ways of measuring this element: the former research did it in terms of number of words while the current research measured it in terms of page space occupied.

These results show that, though these newspapers increased their overall page space, the available area has been filled up with visuals and not with headlines. It reflects a tendency described by Franklin (1997) as consolidation of the visual rather than literary character of the popular culture represented by tabloids. In fact, bigger pictures can be observed on the front page as well as in relation to the classic tabloids topics such as celebrities, crime and sports (see Becker, 1992).

Finally, style was examined as the presence of personalized elements. Proportionately, personal-focused items occupied more space over time. In contrast, professional-focused news items occupied less space over the same period. This shift occurred mainly during the 1996–2001 period and mostly in the *Mirror*. This result was consistent with Franklin's (1997) finding that the coverage of the private lives of politicians had increased in the *Mirror*. The current study expanded upon this assertion

indicating that it held true for other public figures (e.g. members of the British Royal Family, artists, sports players and politicians).

In summary, these results indicate that British tabloids can be characterized by a dominance of space devoted to soft and home news stories. The presentation of these items is still dominated by the text/headline and by an important use of personalization. While such changes in news profiles have usually been associated with tabloidization trends in the broadsheet newspaper market, it is clear from this research that they have also occurred with mainstream tabloid newspapers. Even those newspapers traditionally classified as 'down-market' have introduced editorial changes that represent a shift in the nature of their news provision. Since that tendency is detected at particular levels (format and style), the importance of a multidimensional approach to the analysis of news is underlined (McLachlan and Golding, 2000).

Considering this degree of complexity, the current findings offered less than full support for the ideas of media homogenization in news provision (Franklin, 1997). Range indicators provided some evidence in support of this hypothesis. If tabloids have remained constant in this area, as indicated here, and broadsheets have decreased attention to hard and foreign stories (Franklin, 1997), they would be converging towards a common point on this indicator. In contrast, form and style indicators provided support for the idea that more simplistic and personalized coverage are parallel processes across the whole newspaper market.

In addition, these results allow one to assert that tabloidization should not be considered as a static concept. If tabloid characteristics are changing over time, the very concept of tabloidization may also need to be constantly revisited in order to determine whether or not it is describing the actual tendencies followed by popular journalism.

Finally, this study suggests a couple of challenges. First, there is a need to apply this kind of investigation to a larger sample of tabloids not only from Britain, but also from the rest of Europe in order to draw richer and more representative conclusions. Second, in the context of the lack of a consensual definition of tabloidization, the authors are developing an alternative approach to the evaluation of news quality. Based on the assumption that tabloidization is importantly associated with increased sensationalism – and that in itself infers an orientation towards greater emotionality in news (Grabe et al., 2001) – news can be assessed in terms of its ability to provoke particular types of emotional reaction in the audience. There is a wealth of research on how audiences respond emotionally to media content that can provide the basis for an alternative

examination of news that may reveal more subtle but unrelenting shifts in news construction.

#### Notes

- 1. Proportions are used because the actual newspaper size for each of the tabloids analysed here had changed over time (Rooney, 2000).
- 2. Excluding the space devoted to advertising.
- 3. This variable was measured only in relation to sports, Royal Family, entertainment/culture/showbiz and parliamentary/party news. These were all topics that included coverage of public figures.

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