Reading Tabloids
Tabloid Newspapers and Their Readers

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This book is an edited version of my PhD thesis, which I wrote at the Communication and Media Research Institute at the University of Westminster. It deals with the topic of British tabloid newspapers and their readers. In many ways, this is a specifically ‘British’ topic – tabloids dominate the British newspaper market, and their particular style of journalism is the subject of much debate. Yet, these newspapers have counterparts in a number of countries, and tabloid journalism continues to spark off controversy at an international level. My hope is therefore that the book can contribute to discussions of the press, journalism and popular culture more widely.

I am indebted to several people for managing to complete it. First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the readers of the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* who agreed to take part in the research, generously sharing their experiences.

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Some of the material in Chapters 8 and 9 has been used as a basis for two anthology contributions, in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture* (2006), published by Routledge, and in *Media and Public Spheres* (2007), published by Palgrave Macmillan. In the book chapters, I develop some of the arguments made in these publications.

Thanks to Alex Worters, my dear friend and conscientious proof-reader of the manuscript, to Stefan Melzak for checking the theory chapters, and to Mattias Hésserus for inspiring conversations.

To Jordan, for being there, and to my mother.

*Stockholm, November 2007*
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It was rush hour on the Bakerloo Line when a denim-clad man in his thirties, bolting for the door, asked if I would like his newspaper. I did not know him, but the gesture was a polite offer to help enliven my journey through the city’s underground.

Having moved to London from Sweden just a few weeks earlier, this tattered copy of the *Sun* was my first encounter with a British tabloid. I was amused by the garish headlines and surprised at, what seemed to me then, its unusually provocative content, including the eye-catching pin-ups and the savage ridiculing of official figures. Looking around the carriage, it struck me, too, how many of my fellow passengers were reading a newspaper; some buried in the voluminous news of broadsheets, but most, like myself, browsing through the colourful pages of a tabloid.

I start with this anecdote as it illustrates the prominence of tabloid newspapers in British cultural life. Their physical presence is undeniable: at newsstands, trains, cafés, pubs, buses, waiting areas, restaurants and pavements – but so is the controversy they instigate. As worries about a ‘dumbing down’ of the media abound, the British tabloids – competing for the largest group of newspaper readers, with the lowest incomes and educational levels – take centre stage. Journalist and media critic Roy Greenslade (2004) exemplifies this criticism in an inaugural lecture entitled Prejudice, Distortion and the Cult of Celebrity:

> They [the tabloids] are illiberal, reactionary, negative, pessimistic and infected with a sentimentality which appeals to readers’ emotions rather than their intellect. They play to the gallery. They whip up the mob. (…) They appeal to the basest of human instincts.

Contentious features of the tabloids include the typically sensationalist and personalised news style, and blurring of boundaries between private and public, politics and entertainment, but also their populist and partisan political interventions, their celebrity-orientated and sexualised news agenda and the use of aggressive journalistic methods such as cheque-book journalism and paparazzi coverage. Criticisms of these character traits are voiced publicly, by journalists as well as politicians. Concerns about tabloids are also echoed in scholarly texts, where these papers have been placed at the forefront of a development of ‘tab-
loidization’, thought to push the media towards increased sensationalism, entertainment and ‘sound-bite’ journalism. In this respect, the tabloid controversy interlinks with a wide-ranging discussion about media standards, with reverberations in many national and international contexts (see e.g. the essays in Sparks and Tulloch, eds., 2000).

However, despite the controversy and wide reach of tabloids, research into their role among audiences is scarce. Why are they popular? What do readers make of them? As the popular tabloids contribute to the lives of over 15 million British newspaper readers, I am convinced that in order to get answers to these questions, the readers need to be acknowledged as active producers of meaning. This book seeks to do so through presenting exploratory research with readers of tabloid newspapers.

The research topic

Research background and definition of tabloid journalism

The research is a follow-up of a previous study, which was based on four focus groups with a small number of male readers of the *Sun* (Johansson, 2002). In this study, I identified two main academic positions on tabloid newspapers, were these were either criticised as a threat to democratic processes, or perceived as liberating and playful. However, the way that the interviewed readers engaged with the *Sun* suggested that such polarisation did not give an accurate picture of the nuances involved in tabloid reading, and highlighted how ideas about the role of tabloid newspapers in society were largely based on assumptions about readers drawn from views of the newspaper content.

In this study I also discussed how ‘tabloid journalism’ has come to be used as a descriptor of a particular kind of journalism outside of the medium of its origin, and how an attempt to define it is necessary to discuss wider theories about its role in society. For the following, two complementary definitions, one focusing on tabloid priorities regarding content and one on its mode of address, have been combined to form a comprehensive base for discussion. The first definition is exemplified in Colin Spark’s outlining of the uses of ‘the tabloid’:

(…) the tabloid is a form marked by two major features: it devotes relatively little attention to politics, economics, and society and relatively much attention to (…) sports, scandal, and popular entertainment; it devotes much attention to the personal and private lives of people, both celebrities and ordinary people, and relatively little to political processes, economic developments, and social changes.

(2000: 10)
The second definition is provided by S. Elizabeth Bird, who characterises this as a ‘storytelling’ news style, which, in focusing on personal narratives about individuals, gives predominance to visual images and the sensational over analysis and rational description, and entails a growing use of dramatic techniques, such as photo enhancement and reenactments (2000: 215).

The research background underlines how tabloid journalism can be discussed as part of a wider media landscape, where analysis of tabloid newspapers has a bearing on related media forms, as well as how research with tabloid readers can be fruitful for elaborating on theories on the role of these media forms in society. It points to the relevance for the more extensive research presented in this book.

**Aims and Objectives**

The aim of the research has been to discover some of the experiences and uses that readers derive from the popular tabloids the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*, as well as to explore how these experiences are shaped through the communicative strategies of the papers. This is an attempt to shed light on the popularity of the two circulation leaders among the popular tabloids, and to gain a better understanding of how they link in with the everyday lives of their readers.

The research is a contribution to the ongoing debate about tabloid journalism, where, as stated above, so far little academic attention has been given to readers’ concerns and reasons for reading. A wider objective, therefore, is to show how an understanding of the consumption of tabloid news can complement as well as challenge theories of the role of tabloid journalism in society. On this level, the study not only aspires to discover how some of the enjoyments and understandings of the reading link in with a direct, everyday life environment, but also how these connect to wider social and cultural issues.

Finally, as a qualitative, audience-centred study, this is a response to the lack of similar research on newspaper reading in general, which exists despite the prominent role traditionally occupied by the press in media theory, and despite the growing interest in reception research in media studies as a whole. A general objective is to contribute to public knowledge of the uses of the newspaper; a pertinent topic in a changing media landscape where the press is increasingly faced with competition from other news sources.

**Research questions**

As existing research on this topic is scarce, the research questions are broad and exploratory. They are informed by the theoretical debate about tabloid journalism, but rather than drawing on a hypothesis to prove or disprove, they ac-
commodate a relatively open approach to data-gathering, suited for qualitative analysis.

Principal research questions cover three broad areas of interest:

1. Firstly, how are tabloid newspapers read? This question includes identifying reading habits, to find out how and in which situations readers use the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*, as well as looking at general perceptions of the papers.

2. Secondly, why are tabloids popular? Here, the appeal of the papers needs to be examined in relation to reading experiences, and to the way that these newspapers communicate with readers, in order to understand the attractions of tabloid newspapers. This question also takes into account aspects that readers may not like about the papers, as part of the overall reading experience.

3. Thirdly, how is the reading linked to wider understandings of culture and society? This question provides an overarching framework for the first two areas of investigation, and relates to theories about the role of journalism to democratic processes and public life.

Such broad areas of interest also open up the analysis of the consumption of different genres available within the ‘bundles’ of tabloid newspaper content, as well as allowing a comparison between how the two papers, which have evolved in close competition, are perceived. The latter is particularly interesting as the two papers at the beginning of the research had taken on different outlooks, with the *Daily Mirror* revamped as more ‘serious’ and politically focused while the *Sun*’s editor Rebekah Wade was predicted, as one journalist put it, to continue ‘giving readers “what they want” in providing further controversy, scandal and a “beefed-up” showbiz coverage’ (Byrne, 2003). The research thus provides opportunities to analyse readers’ responses to these two outlooks.

**Scope and method**

The methods used were a combination of focus group interviews and individual interviews with a sample of male and female regular readers. In addition, the book incorporates a textual analysis of the newspapers, carried out as a backdrop to the readership research. This combination of methods, which will be explained in more detail in a later chapter, pave the way for a multi-faceted analysis of tabloid reading, taking into account individual and social contexts for the reading as well as how the papers communicate with their readers.

Having explained the general topic of the book, it is worth pointing out that what is presented is a small-scale study; utilising the potential of the in-depth case study in allowing for a comprehensive overview of the research material.
and the use of rich, detailed data. As I approach the research questions with qualitative methods, my objective is primarily to expand the understanding of these, rather than to generalise the findings to a large number of readers. The study presented here should thus be seen as a starting-point for further research into the field.

Outline of the book

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first four provide background knowledge and context for the study, and the following six highlight aspects of the primary research.

Having set the scene for the research in this introductory chapter, further contextualisation is provided in Chapter 2, which situates the selected papers in their historical and economic context, in order to aid the understanding of their role in today’s society and to demonstrate how their historical development links in with the academic debate about tabloid journalism. In Chapter 3 I then discuss this debate against the background of anxieties about tabloidization, through examining the key theoretical positions and concepts used in academic literature on the topic. In Chapter 4 the research is subsequently located within a framework of relevant studies of media audiences.

Chapter 5 turns to the primary research, reflecting upon the selected research methods and the research process. The first part of this process is detailed in Chapter 6, which provides an analysis of the content of the Sun and the Daily Mirror: their stylistic and generic particularities and the way that they address readers. Chapters 7 to 9 explain the findings from the readership research. I start by looking at readers’ relationships with and perceptions of the newspapers (Chapter 7), to move on to the appeal of the papers in relation to reading experiences (Chapter 8) and finally to an examination of the way that the reading can be interlinked with wider theoretical concerns about public life and democracy (Chapter 9). These findings are further reflected upon in the concluding chapter, which synthesises the various aspects of the study.
CHAPTER 2
Tabloids in Context

Introduction

The British popular tabloids have a long and colourful history, which impacts on the way that they are discussed and read today. This chapter starts the exploration into their role in contemporary society by introducing the Sun and the Daily Mirror in relation to their history and the current tabloid marketplace. The aim of doing so is to show how historical and economic developments within the tabloid press have led to the academic debate about tabloid journalism, as well as to establish the context for a study of tabloid reading.

I start by tracing the roots of tabloid journalism back to early forms of popular street news and to the radical and mass-circulation commercial press that were to follow. I then deal with the British popular tabloid in the 20th century; examining the growth of the Daily Mirror and later the Sun. The last part focuses on current market positions, readership statistics and editorial policies of both papers.

Tracing the tabloid

Early tabloid ancestors

The popular tabloid in Britain took shape in the 20th century, but it has a long ancestry. The advent of printing allowed popular literature, such as broadsheet ballads, chapbooks and the popular almanac, to surface on the streets and markets across Western Europe from the fifteenth century onwards. These kinds of early ‘news’ formed a link between a pre-print oral folk culture and a more widespread popular culture, which depended on print for its survival.

It can be argued that this oral heritage has to be acknowledged to understand the texts and reception of tabloid journalism today, in that these early news forms developed features that were later picked up by mass-circulation newspapers (Bird, 1992: 2-4). Sold on the markets and highways, chapbooks and broadsheet ballads, as opposed to the more upmarket newsheets and
pamphlets, were predominately aimed at the lower end of the economic and social spectrum. Their printers ensured a broad popular appeal across the literate and the semiliterate, through developing conventional themes and characters from oral folk culture (see Shepard, 1962). In an historical review of the popular newspaper, Martin Conboy describes the content of such early news forms as a mix of ‘piety, adultery, women in general, monsters, disasters, freaks of nature, great men and events, criminals and executions, morality’ (2002: 25). As pointed out by Bird, this moralising tone and the ‘formulaic’ story types, for example that of a gruesome murder story followed by accounts of the trial and execution, can be traced in contemporary tabloid journalism (1992: 14)

Alongside the parallels between the content of tabloid ancestors and tabloids today there is a parallel in their form of distribution and consumption. The fairs, markets and highways were public sites of involvement, where people met, traded, argued, joked, debated and gossiped. News-peddlers and highway hawkers are likely to have been vital in connecting print to oral discourse (Conboy, 2000: 27), which would have contributed to the capacity to involve the news clientele in social activity. The news these sites produced must be seen in its aptitude for directly activating and engaging with ordinary people, which, as we shall see, is a potential key to understanding the reception of its modern versions.

The role of the radical press

While street news and ballads continued to be sold until well into the nineteenth century, parallels to today’s tabloid can thereafter be sought both to some extent in the early radical press in France, America and Britain, and in the popular commercial press that in Britain grew strong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The radical press, which developed in the late eighteenth century alongside a rise in political interest among the populace, was influenced by the radical, egalitarian literature disseminated during and after the French revolution. As opposed to the ‘respectable’ commercial press in Britain, which included highbrow papers such as the Times, the radical newspapers represented the interest of a working-class readership. They were well-read papers in the Victorian era, often by far outselling their ‘respectable’ rivals (see Williams, 1998: 32-33).

1 Another predecessor to the modern tabloid has been found in the almanac, which grew in popularity in the 17th century and provided a mix of utilitarian information about cattle, crops, and the configuration of the stars and planets with some political comment. Although it did not provide topical news in the same way as the chapbooks and broadsheets, the almanac, as highlighted by Conboy, combined elements of political comment interwoven with gossip in a way that pointed in the direction of the modern popular newspaper (2002: 31-35).
33, 38, Curran, 1997: 13). As they developed, ‘the radicals’ became produced and distributed by political activists and organisers of the workers, and became important sources for the political organisation of working people (see Curran, 1997: 17-20).

There are striking differences between the radical press and today’s tabloids, importantly the way that ownership of the tabloids are in the hands of wealthy businessmen rather than working-class activists, as well as the didactic, radical focus on politics contrasting the tabloids’ sensationalism and focus on entertainment. Yet, Conboy observes that in helping to create an interest in newspaper reading among a particular sector of society the radicals ‘provided the platform for the development of a popular press which had a role in terms of defining the printed manifestation of the interests of the working classes’ (2002: 72). Likewise, Louis James has suggested that the commercial success of the radicals, which withstood many government attempts to repress them, encouraged business opportunities to be exploited from this sector of newspaper readers (1976: 36).

A new popular press

As the British press became industrialized in the second half of the nineteenth century, a mass circulation popular press emerged that expanded on reading material in areas of crime, scandal, romance and sport. This kind of commercial journalism had flourished in the U.S. since the 1830s, with mass-circulation papers portrayed by Matthew Engel as ‘cheap, ferociously competitive, rude, sensationalist, scurrilous and insulting’ (1997: 32).

Such cheap ‘penny papers’ favoured a lighter, livelier style of journalism. The language used was close to spoken English, and the penny papers developed new journalistic techniques, such as a reliance on interviews and the emphasis on the reporter’s observations, to provide the full ‘sensory detail’ required to inform, bemuse and chock. They also changed the way newspapers looked, with improved type, a better layout which clarified the make-up of the front page, and the introduction of illustrations.

The type of light journalism that flourished in America’s penny press existed in Britain to some extent in the popular Sunday newspapers, which had a more entertainment-based agenda than the dailies3, but it was not until the 1880s that the style of the American commercial dailies, denounced by British cultural

2 The radical press, as noted by Curran, was spearheading newspaper circulation in much of the period of 1815-44. They also had a very high number of readers per copy, estimated to reach upwards 20 in the 1830s and 1840s (1997: 14).

3 The British penny paper, such as the Daily Telegraph, which from the 1850s from time to time lapsed into more adventurous reporting, for instance through covering risqué topics such as whether young men ought to stay celibate if unmarried, had begun to push to boundaries of the dry norms of mainstream Victorian British journalism (see Engel, 1997: 35).
critic Matthew Arnold's as 'New Journalism', gained a stronghold here in terms of daily newspaper journalism. With the launch of the *Daily Mail* in 1896 the word tabloid was introduced to the press, as its owner, Alfred Harmsworth, later Lord Northcliffe, stole a term trademarked by a pill manufacturer (tabloid was a combination of the words tablet and alkaloid) to describe his vision for the paper – like a small, effective news pill (Tulloch, 2000: 131). Presented in a compact format, allowing the gist of an article to be taken in at a glance and sold at the cheap price of half a penny, it became a truly mass circulation newspaper with a circulation nearing a million within four years of its launch (Engel, 1997: 101).

The introduction of the *Daily Mail* can, as suggested by Kevin Williams, be seen as 'the beginning of a trend in the British press to the polarisation between down-market, mass circulation tabloids and up-market, elite broadsheets with small circulations' (1997: 56). Such a two-tier principle in terms of content, style, target audience and reputation between popular news aimed at 'common people' and news aimed at a smaller, up-market audience emerges as a significant theme when tracing the tabloid. Tabloid news could therefore be conceived of as a journalistic 'other', existing parallel to official discourses and more reputable news forms – an idea that will be further discussed in the next chapter (see Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004), where I outline academic positions on tabloid journalism.

**The growth of the popular tabloids**

*The Daily Mirror — ‘the chap on the corner of the bar’*

While the *Daily Mail* and its competitor the *Daily Express* had a cross-class appeal, they were mainly aimed at the emerging lower-middle class. They were also, as noted by Conboy, predicated on a conservative, middlebrow sensibility to which it was assumed working people aspired (2003: 126). By contrast, the *Daily Mirror*, to some extent picking up where the radicals had left off, provided an assertive working-class identity for its readers.

The *Daily Mirror* was founded in 1903 by Northcliffe as a tabloid-sized newspaper aimed at women, but changed to an illustrated paper aimed at both men and women in 1904. With little competition in its playful outlook and fresh focus on photography and illustration, including the introduction of the American-inspired cartoon strip, it overtook the *Daily Mail* for the first time as the leading newspaper in 1913 (Conboy, 2002: 126, Engel, 1997: 151-153). At the beginning of the 1930s, opinion-stirring news stories began to appear at the front page, and heavy black headlines began to distinguish the paper from its competitors. It also pushed the boundaries of British journalism through the
introduction of agony aunt Dorothy Dix, whose advice column, according to Engel, was ‘to cast aside Victorian morality by giving readers robust daily common sense’ (ibid: 159). The tone of the Daily Mirror was young, abrasive and sensationalist, and the strict Victorian morality were undercut by more and more often showing young women pictured in flimsy clothes – Engel mentions for instance the case of actress Ann Leslie, who was pictured unashamedly flashing her legs up to a foot above the knee at the Imperial Fruit Exhibition (ibid: 160).

However, the pre-war Daily Mirror, while aiming at a more down-market audience than the Daily Mail and the Daily Express, had a serious political agenda. Its Cassandra column had a sharp populist political edge that railed against unemployment and the complacency of elite people, in a language able to provoke debate. Tracking the Daily Mirror’s character from this time, Engel describes its persona as thus:

In the fuggy atmosphere of a bare-floored pre-war pub, the Mirror was the intelligent chap leaning on the corner of the bar; not lah-di-dah or anything – he liked a laugh, and he definitely had an eye for the girls – but talking a lot of common sense.

(ibid: 161)

The common sense as brought forward by the Daily Mirror included the with other papers unpopular view that British involvement in a war against Hitler’s Germany was imminent. During the war, the political edge of the Daily Mirror was further honed, as it criticised not only the Nazis but also the wrongdoings done to battling ‘Ordinary Blokes’ by their own government. This led to the outspoken dismay of Winston Churchill. Engel gives so much weight to the Daily Mirror’s version of the war as to brand it ‘Britain’s guiding folk myth’: ‘that of the brave, good-humoured people buckling down to fight Hitler’ (ibid: 167). Conboy describes the development of the paper of this time as breaking into ‘a new paradigm: a daily popular newspaper that articulated the views and aspirations of the working classes and perfected a vernacular style which transmitted that solidarity’ (2002: 126).

The post-war Daily Mirror continued to articulate this kind of self-conscious sense of solidarity with ordinary people, as well as a determination that things would change to their benefit. In 1945 it adopted the slogan ‘Forward with the People’, and argued alongside a change in popular opinion for support for the Labour party, which won the 1945 election. In 1949 it overtook the Daily Express and became the best-selling popular newspaper. Yet, as the wave of radicalism that had helped the Daily Mirror to the top drew away in the 1950s, the paper’s support for the Labour party is described by Curran as increasingly taking the form of opposition to the Conservatives rather than a positive affirmation of socialist change (1997: 94).
However, the *Daily Mirror* kept its position as the best-read paper in Britain. On 9 June 1964 a headline could boost it had topped a circulation of 5,000,000. No daily newspaper had regularly sold that many copies before, and amidst the eventful years of the sixties, the paper's circulation continued to climb until its peak in 1967. Yet, there were signs that *Daily Mirror* had began to let slip. Engel points out that the it never quite came to terms with the revolution of the 1960s youth culture; uncomfortably placing the word ‘rock’ in quote marks and in a pop review describing the Beatles as ‘a very cute bunch’ (1997: 195-196). And while its strong affiliation with the Labour party meant it had privileged access to governmental information, for example having articles written especially by Prime Minister Harold Wilson, it also left it vulnerable for turns in public opinion.

Going through the histories of the *Daily Mirror*, an air of nostalgia emerges around this newspaper. Engel recounts former staff descriptions of the *Daily Mirror* as a paper with “pride”, “affection”, “enthusiasm”; a newspaper that “had heart” (1997: 145). Engel himself finds that the paper throughout its regime as Britain’s leading daily, while at times mischievous, basically was truthful without being intrusive, had ‘panache’ and kept its ‘moral bearings’ (ibid: 199). Curran, meanwhile, describes this *Daily Mirror* as ‘one of Britain’s greatest radical papers’ (1997: 95). It is apparent that this paper cultivated sentiments which encapsulated much of the times and politics in Britain around and after the Second World War, and that it could reach out to working people. Its success can also be sought in its astute development of the strident tabloid style. This included the ear for common speech as well as in the development of the tabloid headline, which through the use of this language according to Conboy was ‘made into a weapon of both popular indignation and sensation’ (2002: 127). These features were to be further honed by the rivalling *Sun*, which, as it began its rise on the tabloid horizon, changed the direction of British tabloid journalism. Its introduction to the tabloid market would contribute to wide-ranging concerns about media standards, and about the influence of tabloids on readers.

*The Sun – The ‘rottweiler of British journalism’*

The Sun began its days as the *Daily Herald*, a socialist broadsheet tied to the trade unions. This had been the biggest-selling British newspaper in the 1930s, but had since declined in popularity. In 1964, the International Publishing Corporation (IPC) relaunched the paper as the *Sun*. However, as the initiative proved unsuccessful and sales continued to spiral down, in 1969 Rupert Murdoch, owner of the popular Sunday newspaper *News of the World*, was able to buy the loss-making paper for the bargain sum of £800,000.
Murdoch and his new editor, Larry Lamb, aspired to give the paper a fresh start as a tabloid. Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie write in their history of the Sun:

'Together they started thrashing out a new Sun to capture the spirit of the Mirror when it had really been in its glory years in the 1950s – strident, campaigning, working class, young, entertaining, politically aware, cheeky, radical, anti-establishment, fun, breezy and, most of all, hugely profitable.'

(1999: 13)

With banners at news stands promoting the Sun as ‘the paper that CARES’, the paper emphasised being on level with ordinary people, encouraging readers – defined from the first issue as ‘the folks’ – to identify with its anti-establishment spirit. Lamb had a rule that all letters must be answered within 48 hours; the Sun involved readers in prize draws and competitions and appeared to side with ‘the folks’ on social issues, attacking bourgeois attitudes as those of the ‘silly burghers’.

Fiercely competing with the Daily Mirror, the Sun identified television as an area of importance to the lives of readers, which, according to Chippindale and Horrie, at the time was ignored by the Daily Mirror as a non-worthy competitor (ibid: 14). The Sun also broke with newspaper conventions when it pushed a wealth of upfront and seamy sexual stories in the hands of the readers. An important feature of the paper – a regular from November 1970 – was the topless Page Three girl. Thus, with the sex, a ‘folk’ image that was young but also connected to the war-time anti-establishment feel so successfully defined by the Daily Mirror, and a tabloid design brimming with graphic hooks for the eye, the Sun had a winning formula. It went from selling 650,000 to 1.5 million copies within its first 100 days. In 1978, it overtook the Daily Mirror with sales at more than four million. In direct competition for down-market readers with the Daily Mirror, and from 1978 also the Daily Star, the Sun has continued to be the best-selling British newspaper.

While the Sun refined some of the tabloid features established by the Daily Mirror, this paper also has to be understood in terms of its controversy and explicit political engagement, as it is often attributed to having played a powerful role in cultural and political events. One of these is the general election of 1979, where, despite supporting the Labour party when it was launched, the Sun persuasively urged its readers to vote Tory. As Chippindale and Horrie point out, the contribution made by newspapers to the outcome in general elections is extremely hard to judge (1999: 74). Yet, it is clear that Margaret Thatcher, elected prime minister, regarded the Sun’s support important as she sent Lamb a personal thank you letter and knighted him in the 1980 New Year’s honours list. Voters from social grade C2, the skilled manual labourers which formed the
core of the Sun's readership, had also made a difference during the election, with a nine per cent swing from Labour to Tory compared with the national average of 5.1 per cent (ibid: 74).

The Sun, from 1981 under the new editorship of Kelvin MacKenzie, continued a manifest backing for right-wing politics. Under MacKenzie, the Sun also sharpened its sting in order to follow his 'shock and amaze on every page' formula; highlighting nationalist and homophobic rhetoric, hunting down celebrities, royals, official figures and members of the public with paparazzi tactics, and making common use of cheque-book journalism. During the Falklands War in 1982, a 'GOTCHA' headline on the sinking of Argentinean ship Belgrano, which led to the deaths of 368 seamen, caused outrage among both journalists and the public, and in 1987 the Sun had caused more complaints to the Press Council than any other British newspaper (ibid: 370). In 1989, after the Sun, under the headline 'THE TRUTH', wrongly accused Liverpool supporters of being solely responsible for the 41 deaths at the Hillsborough football tragedy, readers in Liverpool and surrounding areas answered by boycotting the paper, causing ongoing financial losses for News International, Rupert Murdoch's media empire – which by now included Sky TV, as well as the Times and Sunday Times.

Taking into consideration some of the Sun's antics from this time, it is tempting to agree it deserves the label 'the rottweiler of British journalism', as coined in an article by the Economist. However, the harsh editorial decisions and outlook of the paper existed in tandem with other tabloids, particularly the Daily Mirror, which in its attempt to attract the same down-market readers followed the Sun's hard-hitting lead and, for instance in the case of hunting down the royal family and other celebrities, at times was the more aggressive of a tabloid 'pack' that continued to push ethical boundaries of British journalism.

Nevertheless, the Sun is often credited with spearheading these changes, many of which, as will be discussed in the next chapter, have been seen as degenerating the quality of popular journalism. A content analysis by Dick Rooney, also to be further discussed, showed that the percentage of editorial space of the Daily Mirror and the Sun given to what he terms 'public affairs', such as news about politics and international affairs, had shrunk from 23 per cent in the Mirror and 33 per cent in the Sun in 1968, to 9 per cent in both papers in 1998 (2000: 101-103, see also Rooney, 1998). It seems therefore that the success of the Sun had an impact on the tabloid climate, both in terms of

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4 The Gotcha headline was pulled quickly by the Sun, and did not appear in a later edition.
5 On the cover of Chippindale and Horrie, 1999.
6 The Daily Mirror, according to Chippindale and Horrie, played a pivotal role in the intensive tabloid coverage of Princess Diana, publishing secretly taken pictures of Diana at her gym and a series of reports of supposed MI5 tapes of her private phone calls (1999: 465, 495).
the type of content being pushed and the methods used by tabloid journalists to obtain this content.

Some of these developments could be seen as caused by individuals behind the scenes, for example in terms of the editorial control of the *Sun* exercised by Rupert Murdoch, or by picture editors and other members of staff at the two papers. However, they took place during a period of intensive change to the whole media landscape in Britain. The introduction of new satellite and cable TV channels, as well as the growing use of the internet, has meant increased competition for the time of media consumers. In 1988, there were four TV channels and no web pages accessible from the UK; in 2003, around the beginning of the present research, there were over 70 TV channels and a billion web pages (*The Guardian Media Guide*, 2003). Since the 1960s, there has also been a slow but steady decline in newspaper consumption as a whole, which, as noted by Rooney, has put increased pressure on the tabloid market, where ‘income from circulation is paramount’ and ‘the incentives to gain readers (from rivals if necessary) and then retain them is obvious’ (2000: 95). Horrie notes that in 1964, a standard edition of the *Daily Mirror* had 24 pages, whereas in 2003 the popular tabloids consisted of 60 or more pages, with additional supplements and magazines and with a much lower relative price per copy (2003: 232).

Likewise, the development of the popular tabloids must be seen in relation to changes in the economy, work patterns and attitudes. For instance, from the 1950s, there had been a growth of consumption in the British economy, particularly among the traditionally poorer working-class readers of the tabloids, which is likely to have been reflected in increased tabloid coverage of consumer goods and services. Rising standards of domestic consumption, increased spare time centred on the family, the emergence of youth cultures and a commercial domination of a leisure industry, again, serve as a backdrop to some of the changes to the content in the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* towards an emphasis on leisure (see Rooney, 2000: 95, 97). Likewise, the expansion of the middle-class in Britain during this period, with a shrinkage of the group of manual labourers that forms the core of the popular tabloid readership (see Roberts, 2001, for a discussion of social class in Britain) could have provided a context for changes in the tabloids’ attempt to hold on to readers. The development of these newspapers is therefore intimately linked to the national culture in which they exist. Moving on to their current context, their position within this national culture will be further examined, focusing on their location in the marketplace, their readers and editorial stances.
The *Sun* and the *Mirror* today

**Current features**

A popular press exists in other countries, and the *Sun* and the *Mirror* have in some ways taken form in an international context. An example of this is the import of ‘New Journalism’ from across the Atlantic. However, the British popular tabloids are in a number of ways unique, and require a specific form of consumption. In taking a closer look at the context of these papers today, it is worthwhile starting with an attempt to identify their distinguishable features, with some brief pointers to tabloids elsewhere helping to define the characteristics of the modern popular tabloid.

To begin with, a notable characteristic of the British popular tabloids today is their strong domination of the newspaper market as a whole. While tabloids in some European countries have a limited circulation in comparison to broadsheets or ‘serious’ newspapers, and in others simply do not exist at all\(^7\) (see Williams, 2005: 29-30), the British popular tabloids have a majority share of the total national newspaper circulation (see below). This feature is notable, too, in that the British press is dominated by the national press, produced in London (see Sparks, 1999: 42), as opposed to other countries where the regional press is strong, for example in the U.S., Germany and Sweden. If market share is an indicator of the importance of certain newspapers, the popular tabloids are clearly at the heart of British newspaper journalism.

The popular tabloids, as shown in the overview of their history, are also highly controversial in their methods and content. Although the ability to stir emotions among readers and media critics alike is an element of tabloid journalism elsewhere, contentious reporting, for example the *Sun*’s coverage of the Falklands War, or controversial journalistic methods, such as paparazzi techniques to obtain celebrity coverage, or regular pay-offs for stories\(^8\), appears to have been taken further in Britain than elsewhere, and are particularly noticeable and discussed as the tabloids constitute such a dominant element of the British national press (see ibid).

The *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* have moreover developed as stridently partisan and campaigning, overtly putting forwards their views on who to vote for, tak-

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\(^7\) It is however difficult to define what counts as a tabloid press in different countries. For example, Spain, Italy and Portugal have prominent sports newspapers with large circulation figures. But the British newspaper market can be seen as unique in the strong domination of entertainment-based news journalism in relation to the ‘serious’ press (Williams, 2005: 29-30).

\(^8\) An example of the way chequebook journalism is a common practice was given by the *Sun*’s editor Rebekah Wade, who admitted paying police officers for information in giving evidence to a committee of MPs, as well as letting journalists use bugging devices and other covert methods (Wells, 2003).
ing sides on political issues and in other ways directly engaging with political events and characters. The distinctiveness of this trait can be emphasised with a comparison to their U.S. counterparts, the supermarket tabloids, which in their focus on celebrity gossip, human interest, occult phenomena and self-help tips hardly ever cover politics (Bird, 1992: 8). American tabloids are also sold in supermarket stands, as weekly publications not considered part of the news press. Likewise, overt partisan campaigning is not a common feature of tabloid newspapers in some countries where national tabloids do cover politics and public affairs. The Scandinavian tabloids, while devoting quite a lot of coverage to these issues, tend to favour a comparatively more neutral tone in the reporting (see Gripsrud, 2000: 291, for further observations about Scandinavian tabloids).

Deserving a special mention is also their raunchy image, well illustrated by the Sun’s regular inclusion of a pin-up girl. Tellingly, Bird recounts that when Murdoch launched the tabloid Star in America in 1974, ‘the “sexy” and often self-consciously “working-class” British formula’ initially attempted had to be changed to appeal to an American readership (1992: 30). The Swedish tabloids Aftonbladet and Expressen, likewise, while trying to attract readers with revealing shots of celebrities and advice columns about sex, are more restrained in this respect and do not carry pin-ups as part of their content. Although a penchant for scantily clad girls may be common in tabloids elsewhere, there are degrees of what is acceptable and appealing to different readerships, and the British formula clearly entails a highly bawdy brand of tabloid journalism.

Finally, a point should be made about the stylistic distinctiveness of these papers. The German Bild-Zeitung, which may be the European paper most similar to the British tabloids in terms of style and domination of the market (Williams, 2005: 29) is set in a much larger format than the compact tabloid of the Sun and the Mirror – a format which, as we shall see, is important to their reception. The use of the headline, equally, is undeniably a powerful tool in developing a distinct style and vernacular of a newspaper, and the tabloids in question, as has been noted in this chapter, have effectively incorporated puns, wordplay and colloquialisms, to the extent that this is integral to their character. This style, as well as what has been described as a ‘circus-poster layout’ (Welles, in Bird, 1992: 29) will be examined in more detail in Chapter 6, and its relation to tabloid reading in the following chapters. It must be seen as important to the success of the popular tabloids in their marketplace.
The tabloid marketplace

The national daily press in Britain is highly stratified. The national dailies are divided into three groups by advertisers and market researchers, and these have different socio-economic profiles of the readerships as well as carrying different kinds of content. One group consists of five so called ‘quality’ papers, among them the *Times* and the *Guardian*, which have the most affluent and well-educated readerships, with over 50 per cent of readers in the AB (upper professional and managerial) social grades, and which carry the more ‘serious’ news. These papers have relatively small circulations, but can command high prices for advertising. Their combined readerships totalled 6,288 million in 2005. Secondly, there are the mid-market tabloids, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, which, although they share a common tabloid format and are closer to the downmarket papers in terms of content, have a higher proportion of their readers in the AB (upper professional) social grade, in 2005 between 27-30 per cent. The mid-market tabloids had combined readerships of 7,612 million the same year.

The *Sun*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Star* constitute the third and most down-market group, the popular tabloids. Sometimes called the red-tops due to the colour of their masthead, they operate in a mass market, with combined readerships of 15,238 million and with less than 13 per cent of readers in the AB social grades. The popular tabloids have had a fairly consistent figure over time of about three-quarters of readers in the C2-E social grades (Rooney, 2000: 94): those involved in skilled and unskilled manual work and those economically inactive. The characteristics of the marketplace, then, means that the popular tabloids primarily compete for readers within these specific social segments, which, looking at their readership profiles, differ sharply from the more affluent and educated reader profiles of the broadsheets, and are also distinguishable from the mid-market tabloids. This stratification has in a number of analyses of the national newspaper market been demonstrated by Sparks (1988, 1992, 1995, 1999) who has also drawn attention to a relatively small substitut-

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9 All readership statistics presented in this section are compiled by the author from the National Readership Survey (NRS) of 2005, with figures for percentages rounded upwards. All circulation figures are from Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), measuring the period of 30 Jan 2006 to 26 Feb 2006.

10 All of these were in broadsheet format at the beginning of this research project, but developments moved towards an added tabloid version or a change into a smaller format during the course of the research. The most upmarket, *Financial Times*, has 66 per cent of readers in social grades AB.

11 This figure includes the readership of *Daily Mirror*’s Scottish edition, the *Daily Record*. The NRS is based on the number of readers per copy (presently 2.6 for the *Sun*, the *Mirror*) and is thus a different kind of measurement to circulation figures. The average net circulation of the popular tabloids, *Daily Mirror, Daily Record, Daily Star* and the *Sun* reached a total of 6,044,190 in the period of 30 Jan 2006 to 26 Feb 2006. This can be compared with a total of 3,267,047 for the mid-market tabloids and 2,660,657 for the five national quality newspapers during the same time.
ability of type of newspaper overall for readers between the three groups, which is even greater for those who read the middle- and down-market papers. At the time of his analysis, for instance, only 3 per cent of readers of the Sun's vast readership read the best-selling broadsheet the Daily Telegraph (1995: 195).

In spite of the undoubted success of the redtops within this mass market, the trend for the last decade has been one of circulation decline. In 2002, the Daily Mirror's circulation dropped below the 2 million mark, which meant the lowest sales since the 1930s (Horrie, 2003: 248). Together with its Scottish version, the Daily Record, however, it still has the second largest circulation of the national dailies12, at the time of writing hovering around 2 million, and with a readership of over five million. The Mirror's struggle is often seen as a result of the competition with Sun. One Guardian media commentator for instance explains its biggest difficulty as maintaining ‘its position as the standards bearer of the working class left as well as keeping up with the Sun’s influential, aggressive approach’ (Tryhorn, 2003a). It should be noted too that a growth in the readership of the mid-market Daily Mail, and the recent upsurge of celebrity gossip magazines and men’s magazines such as FHM and loaded, which can provide the entertainment and titillation that was once the tabloids’ preserve, mean even greater pressure on the popular tabloids.

The Sun, on the other hand, has kept a steadier profile in the market. It continues to be the best-read British daily newspaper, with an average net circulation of over 3 million copies, a readership of over 8 million and a present reach of 17 per cent of the adult population. A competitor for both the Sun and the Mirror is the Daily Star, the most downmarket of the redtops. With a steady diet of sport, sex and ‘fun’, this had an average circulation of closer to 800,000 in the beginning of 2006. However, it has a less prominent history than its two main competitors, and, being less interested in public affairs than any other tabloid, it cannot be said to have been as influential in terms of Britain’s social and political life. The Daily Star also still lags far behind the Sun and the Mirror in terms of circulation. Thus, in spite of increased competition and general circulation declines among newspapers, the popular tabloids continue to dominate the British newspaper market.

To some extent, the different market performances of the Sun and the Mirror could be explained by differences in management and ownership. News International, which owns the Sun, the Times, News of the World and Sunday Times, continues to be controlled by a single proprietor, Rupert Murdoch. With parent company News Corporation the second largest media group in the world13, the Sun has had vast assets to draw on in times of hardship. The effectiveness of its

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12 The Daily Mirror on its own has been overtaken by the Daily Mail as the single newspaper with the second largest circulation.
13 News Corporation owns, among other media interests, HarperCollins Books, Sky TV, Fox TV and a part of leading satellite broadcaster BSkyB.
management in terms of treating every aspects of the business with care, including editorial and marketing, is also generally seen as contributing to the Sun’s stable position in the market (Tryhorn, 2003a).

By contrast, Trinity Mirror, which owns the Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror and the People, plus the Daily Record and Sunday Mail in Scotland, is not controlled by a single proprietor. The company is a result of a 1999 takeover of the Mirror Group by Trinity, then the UK’s biggest regional newspaper publisher, after the death of previous Mirror Group owner Robert Maxwell in 1991. It has been under heavy pressure from its stakeholders to perform; and there have at times been conflicts between groups of shareholders and the management regarding the editorial policies of the paper. It has for instance been reported that a former chief executive, Philip Graf, resigned following a row with the U.S. shareholders over the Daily Mirror’s criticism of President Bush’s administration (Byrne, 2002). In December 2002 Sly Bailey was appointed as chief executive, and although there have been speculations about major investors pushing for Trinity Mirror to leave the national newspaper market, she made a commitment to keep the Mirror and the company’s other national titles (Tryhorn, 2003a).

Further developments

Amidst a climate of rigorous competition, then, both the Sun and the Mirror are fighting hard to keep their positions in the market. At the beginning of this research they had chosen different tactics in this battle. The Mirror went through a major re-branding in April 2002, as part of efforts by its then editor, Piers Morgan, to turn the paper into a more ‘serious’ tabloid.14 The re-branding campaign included the removal of the flashy red masthead, the restoration of the word ‘Daily’ in the masthead15 and the decision to replace frivolous celebrity interviews with news of politics and public affairs. Morgan, an unusually outspoken and public figure for a tabloid editor16, said at the time the changes ‘were about becoming a serious paper’, reverting the Mirror to its ‘historical role as a the people’s champion’ (in Cozens, 2002). Part of the revamp meant high-profile coverage of Britain’s involvement in the war against Iraq. The Mirror covered war news in detail, and it was one of the first newspapers to criticise the government’s decision to take military action against the regime of Saddam Hussein. But although the paper kept a stern focus on such a grim subject, it stuck with the proven tabloid methods of engaging readers, providing cut-out

14 Much of the development towards a serious focus took place in 2001, with Morgan for example strengthening his team of political writers (see, Horrie, 2003: 217-225).
15 This had been omitted from the masthead in 1997.
16 Morgan for instance presented Tabloid Tales on BBC1 in 2003, interviewing celebrity ‘victims’ of the tabloid press. Greenslade, former editor of the Mirror, wrote that Morgan’s ‘taste for the limelight has made him one of the highest profile editors of all time’ (2003).
anti-war posters and running a regular feature on celebrities signing up with the campaign.

However, while the anti-war coverage raised the Mirror’s profile in other media and could be seen as a successful PR coup – the Mirror’s ‘No war’-posters were for instance carried by thousands of marchers in London and Glasgow and were consequently pictured in other media (see Day, 2003) – the serious approach failed to attract a steady flow of new readers. In July 2003 Bailey presented a strategic review for the Trinity Mirror Group which said the policy of pursuing a serious news agenda had failed. Instead, she supported a return to a more populist mix (Tryhorn, 2003b). Since this report, the paper has gone back to a mix of celebrity coverage, entertainment and some ‘serious’ news, more similar to its editorial policy before the re-branding. However, it continues to be controversial. In May 2004 the Mirror published contentious pictures of Iraqi prisoner abuse, which were later found to be false, with the ‘Iraqi photo scandal’ leading to the sacking of Morgan as editor.

The Sun, under Stuart Higgins and then David Yelland’s editorship in the nineties had somewhat softened the harsh edge it had had in the eighties. Yelland, albeit going strong on features such as ‘national cleavage week’, produced slightly more restrained news and a more liberal view on issues such as homosexuality, stating he tried to shape a ‘good, positive paper’ rather than a ‘nasty and vindictive’ one (in Burt, 2002, see also Woodward, 1998). However, the Sun, too, changed at the beginning of the new century. The appointment of Rebekah Wade as new editor in January 2003 was seen as an attempt by the management to revitalise the paper; steering it back to more controversial attitudes of surprise and humour (see Greenslade, 2003). Wade, the first woman to edit Britain’s biggest daily, became known to media critics for her ‘naming-and-shaming’ of paedophiles campaign as the editor of Sunday paper News of the World, which resulted in widespread vigilante action, much of it aimed at innocent people. Her appointment was subsequently followed by predictions that her Sun would provide further controversy, scandal and a ‘beefed-up’ showbiz coverage, all in an attempt to follow her mantra of ‘giving the readers what they want’ (see Byrne, 2003, Greenslade, 2003).

In terms of political positions, both papers supported New Labour during the general election campaign in 1997 and more or less backed this party in the following two elections. Nevertheless, their political stances are not clear-cut. The Sun has for instance arguably kept a right-wing stance on most issues, noticeably immigration and crime, with its political editor Trevor Kavanagh regarded as disillusioned with Labour (Greenslade, 2003), and its high-profile columnist Richard Littlejohn keeping to his trademark populist, conservative viewpoints. Both papers also became increasingly critical of the Labour government and Tony Blair’s leadership during the course of the research, the Mirror using the war against Iraq as a basis for staunch criticism of Blair.
Thus, a look at the current *Sun* and *Mirror* highlight their organic nature, which, although contained within a certain tabloid form, is not easily pinned down in a brief overview. Beneath the ongoing changes of both papers, however, is the pressure to keep their readers; the nature of which, while in some ways well known, in others is curiously elusive.

*The readers*

The readers of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* have been scrutinized by advertisers, market research companies and the newspaper groups themselves, to find out how to most effectively advertise goods and services and what kind of content to push in the newspapers in order to ensure sales.

The core readers of both papers, as noted, are found in what market research texts refer to as social grade C2-E – the skilled and unskilled manual labourers, and those economically inactive, representing a fairly constant figure of about two-thirds of both papers’ readerships. Following the *National Readership Survey* (NRS) of 2003 – the time of the planning of the readership research – the *Sun* had 65 per cent of their readers in this category, and the *Mirror* 61 per cent. Yet, both papers also have large percentages of their readers in social grade C1, those in routine clerical and junior professional work, with about a quarter of readers of both papers in this group during the same time. Readers in social grades C1-E constituted as much as 90 per cent of the *Sun*’s readership, and almost as much, 87 per cent of *Mirror*-readers. The readerships are furthermore joined by a low terminal education age, with 68 per cent of *Sun*-readers and 70 per cent of *Mirror*-readers having terminated their education at the age of 16 or under. The majority of readers, 57 per cent of the *Sun*’s readers and 53 per cent of the *Mirror*’s readers, likewise, are male. 18

The papers have slightly different age profiles, with the *Mirror*’s readership being somewhat older. The *Mirror* had for instance 23 per cent of its readership above the age of 65, compared to only about 14 per cent of *Sun*-readers above this age. Nevertheless, readers under 35 represent a large section of both papers’ readers: in 2003 42 per cent of *Sun*-readers and 29 per cent per cent of *Mirror*-readers belonged to this age group. Furthermore, this age group, as pointed out by Rooney, has always been the crucial area of competition between the two papers. In terms of geographical strongholds, the *Mirror* is according to Rooney’s analysis of the tabloid market strongest in the northwest, northeast, north, southeast, London and Greater London, whereas the *Sun* is

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17 The readership statistics in this section are compiled by the author from the *National Readership Survey* of 2003. The figures for the percentages have been rounded upwards.
18 The higher percentage of male readers should be viewed in the light of women in general reading less daily newspapers than men. The one national daily with the highest female readership, the *Daily Mail*, had 49 per cent female readers.
strongest in Greater London, London, the southeast and the Midlands. He also states that readers living in London, the southeast and the Midlands are traditional point of competition (2000: 94-94).

Out of these statistics the readership profiles of the papers appear to be clear. The core readers remain within the lower social echelons, among these a high proportion of manual labourers, with a low terminal education age. A fairly large group also consists of young readers, and, in spite of the majority of readers being male, a significant amount of readers, between 43-47 per cent, are female. Such information is useful when carrying out a readership study. Yet, it must be noted that demographics are limited in terms of information as to how the Sun and the Mirror, or indeed any media genre, work within the fabric of their audiences’ lives.

Regarding the use of other media, market research on some of the habits of tabloid readers as opposed to broadsheet readers, has showed tabloid readers as heavy TV-viewers, who tend to watch more television than readers of the broadsheets, whereas they tend to make less use of the internet (see White, 2001). The NRS figures regarding the readers of the Sun and the Mirror show a similar picture, with almost half of Sun- and Mirror-readers classified as heavy or medium heavy viewers of commercial channels, and with less than one per cent classified as light viewers. This can be compared with the commercial TV viewing of readers of the most upmarket paper, the Financial Times, of which only about a fifth are heavy or medium heavy viewers and about the same share are light viewers. Likewise, studies of tabloid readers’ leisure interests appear to show that sport, the home and socialising at the pub are priorities for readers of the popular tabloids. Market research by Claritas UK in 2001 for example summarises a Sun-reader as someone whose favourite past-times are going to the pub, listening to music and watching football, but who shows less interest in current affairs than for instance readers of the Guardian and the Financial Times (in O’Connor, 2001).

Notably, the idea of red-top readers as apolitical, uninterested in society beyond their immediate reach, is persistent in descriptions of the readers. And while market research such as the example mentioned above is based on research with readers, similar predispositions among tabloid critics, as will be discussed in the next chapter, are often based on views of the content alone, where all tabloid newspapers are treated as having the same kind of appeal to readers.

As shown by Mathieu M. Roufari in his interviews with tabloid journalists, similar caricatures of the readers, conceptualising these as uninterested in issues beyond their personal sphere, have been used by tabloid editors when setting editorial agendas (2000: 169) – hence pointing to a curious agreement between
some critics and tabloid editors as to the reasons for reading these papers. However, the relationship between the readers and their papers is still elusive. ‘The critics attack popular papers because they can’t understand that what we do touches the nerve of the nation’, MacKenzie, a former editor of the Sun, once said in an interview with broadsheet journalists (in Chippendale and Horrie, 1999: 421). His statement could be contested, but it is clear that there is a difficulty in identifying what makes the popular tabloids so well read.

Summary

This chapter has looked into the history and current development of British tabloids, in order to provide a context for a discussion of the academic debate about tabloid journalism, as well as for an understanding of their roles among readers today. I have underlined how the roots of tabloid journalism can be found in popular news forms that communicated with ordinary people rather than the elites, through drawing on elements of an oral folk culture. I have linked the British popular tabloid of the 20th century to developments both related to the radical press of the 19th century, and, perhaps more evidently, to the commercial mass circulation press that followed. Both forms can be seen as part of a journalistic ‘other’, turning to a different kind of audience than the elites, and existing parallel to more reputable news forms.

Looking at the contemporary British tabloid, the Mirror and later the Sun have contributed to a brash, strident and sensationalist type of newspaper; highly controversial and politically involved. With the Mirror once a radical paper, the two have developed cut-throat competition in a harsh media climate, where the Sun’s introduction to the tabloid market appears to have followed a change in the direction of British tabloid journalism towards a more aggressive and leisure-based kind. This, in turn, has been seen as driving the popular tabloids away from a positive affirmation of social change. The next chapter will take a look at precisely how tabloid journalism is considered to impact on public life, and how the British popular tabloids are placed at the heart of an international debate about media developments.
CHAPTER 3

The Debate about Tabloid Journalism

Introduction

Popular journalism has always stirred emotions, but the widespread usage of the tabloid form has more recently given rise to an intensified dispute about its impact on society. Such contemporary debate about media standards will be pin-pointed in this chapter, which examines the key theoretical positions and concepts used in the academic literature on the topic of tabloid news.

I start by considering the concept of ‘tabloidization’ as a main framework for the debate about tabloid newspapers, where tabloid newspapers have been thought to spearhead a wider shift in media priorities. Secondly, assumptions about the role of tabloid journalism to public life are examined in relation to Jürgen Habermas’ (1989) notion of the public sphere, which underpins much of the concern raised in debates about tabloidization. The last section of the chapter looks instead at textual analyses that attempt to highlight functions that tabloid media might have for audiences, which are taken to provide useful starting-points for a study with tabloid readers.

Tabloids and tabloidization

A shift in media priorities

Tabloidization entails a variety of claims about a shift in the production and content within the media, generally located to last three decennia of the 20th century. According to Steven Barnett, in the UK concerns about such a shift reached an increased attention by academics, journalists and media commentators in the 1990s (1998: 75). Broadly, these concerns involve the perception of a development whereby the (news) media increasingly turn to entertainment, sensationalism and the realms of private affairs. The proliferation of Reality TV formats within television schedules, or the expansion of celebrity magazines
have for instance recently been taken as examples of this. The tabloid features defined in the introductory chapter, such as a sensationalist style, a focus on the private lives of individuals, a fluid move between news and entertainment and a predominant use of visual imagery and dramatization over textual and analytical elements, would have become more and more important within the media as a whole.

Interpretations of the exact nature of tabloidization follow a number of different lines. In outlining the international discussion about tabloidization, Sparks regards the thoughts around such a shift as understood in three main ways: either as a general process whereby content marked by tabloid features is becoming more common within news journalism; as involving a change in priorities within a given medium, or as shifting boundaries of taste within different media forms. The first sense would include the view that what is often considered ‘serious’ news media are moving towards the standards of tabloids, for example in a broadsheet newspaper focus on the private lives of official figures. The second sense, which Sparks sees as mainly concerning broadcasting, would involve priorities regarding scheduling and could for instance include the move of investigative documentary or main news programmes to less popular slots. The third way of understanding this development involves the judgement of changes within certain kinds of media content, for example when political radio talk is deemed tabloid. Here, while political talk has a distinct place in broadcasting, it could for example be a populist tone and the ‘packaging’ of the talk that are taken to be evidence of tabloidization (2000: 10-11).

**Suggested causes for tabloidization**

There are a number of concrete issues related to transformations of the media which provide a background to ideas of such shifts. Technological changes, for instance, apart from affecting the presentation of news, have changed the nature of journalists’ work in ways that could be incorporated in tabloidization theories. Barnett argues that new technologies, in enabling instantaneous access to events and providing a proliferation of news outlets - such as the large number of cable and satellite channels, and internet sources - puts journalists under more pressure to produce more news in shorter time, leading to a compromised approach to publication before checking facts, as well as to a greater reliance on PR generated content, which may often be more entertainment-oriented (1998: 86).

Another way to explain tabloidization is by highlighting economic trends, in relation to internationalisation and deregulation of media ownership and content. Particularly in the U.S., tabloidization has been seen as a result of a free market and profit-orientated owners (Sparks, 2000: 9). Michael Shudson notes for example that a reason behind the short soundbites allowed for politicians
on American television networks is the frequent breaks for commercials; in
turn a consequence of a privately owned television system funded by advertis-
ing (1995: 186). On a broader level, a well-documented international process of
conglomeration is placing media organisations within larger corporate struc-
tures controlled by non-media interest, which, while not necessarily leading to
changes in media content, create greater potential for proprietors and commer-
cial interests to influence editorial policy on a large scale (see e.g. Curran and
Seaton, 1997), which has also been seen as leading to an emphasis on ‘lighter’,
entertainment-based material. Shudson stresses that corporate structures of the
media tend to subordinate what he sees as news values to commercial values
(1995: 6), while Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch give the oft-cited exam-
ple of Rupert Murdoch, owner of News Corporation and of the British best-
selling tabloid the Sun, who ‘has exercised control with a vengeance over the
editorial policies of certain newspapers he has acquired’ (1995: 101). Likewise,
they emphasise how mergers and take-overs in the late 1980s brought new
financial players - such as General Electrics - to American television, ‘thus giv-
ing even greater weight to financial “bottom line” considerations’ (ibid: 101).

The British tabloids can be seen as a product of these technological and
economic trends, and have consequently been placed at the vanguard of tab-
loidization. As discussed in the previous chapter, Sparks (1988, 1992, 1995,
1999) has argued that the market-led British press has polarised into a down-
market press directed at a large, working-class readership, and a ‘quality’ press
directed at the elites, providing different kinds of information to different audi-
cences. He notes that the wealthy and educated readership of the latter makes it
attractive to advertisers, who are willing to pay high prices for advertising reve-
nue, and these papers can thus concentrate on issues that appeal to a relatively
small but well-informed group of readers. The popular tabloids, on the other
hand, have to prioritise material that will capture the greatest audience, which,
by Spark’s account, forces them to turn to sensationalism and material that
would appeal to the lowest common denominator.

Hence, it should be noted that tabloid newspapers are both considered a
product and a cause of tabloidization. As I have shown in the previous chapter,
they have a history of controversy, and the competitive marketplace appears to
have contributed to a shift in their priorities. Their perceived role as the latter is
demonstrated in Jean Seaton’s outline of changes to the media’s reporting of
politics, an aspect of the contemporary political system in the UK that she finds
‘qualitatively different from the past’ (2003: 174) in that there is an increased
focused on politicians’ private lives. Mentioning a number of reasons for this,
such as an increasingly competitive media marketplace, she concludes:
Then there are the tabloids. They may reflect a coarser – or a more robust – view of life, but their effect – because it is so powerful is often treated as inevitable.

(ibid: 183)

This is an example, then, of how tabloid newspapers in the UK have been regarded as a powerful influence in changing the way that the press, and indeed the whole media, operate.

**Limitations to tabloidization as an analytical concept**

The concept of tabloidization is a useful starting-point for understanding concerns about tabloid newspapers, but it has a number of difficulties on an analytical level. Firstly, as observed by Frank Esser (1999: 292-293) and Rodrigo Uribe and Barrie Gunter (2004: 387-389) ‘defining’ tabloidization is related to obvious methodological problems, such as which media to investigate, what parameters to use for a definition of tabloidization and how to produce evidence for a shift over a diverse and multiple range of media and audiences. There are a number of definitions in operation for tabloid journalism itself, which consequently makes it difficult to apply clear definitions to a widespread cultural shift involving a range of media.

Moreover, attempts to measure tabloidization show different results within different media and different national contexts. Examples from the U.S. may be seen as indicating a change in television news priorities, whereas a different picture emerges in terms of British broadcasting. Shudson notes for instance how the news sound bite in American television shortened from a minute to ten seconds in the space of twenty years, leaving less room for uninterrupted explanation of a story (1995: 186), and Barnett gives another example from the U.S., where a forum held at Columbia University’s School of Journalism showed a 42 per cent reduction in foreign news coverage on the three major networks between 1988 and 1996 (1998: 76). In the UK, on the other hand, a study of British television news over a five-year period between 1993-1998 came to the conclusion that ‘broadcast news values are not only converging over the five year period under examination, but converging at a more serious level rather than in the middle’ (in Sparks, 2000: 22). Likewise, a content analysis of BBC’s Radio 4 showed its foreign news priorities had not changed between 1960 and 1997 (Simms, 1998).
Turning to the press, the British ‘quality’\textsuperscript{20} press have long been under scrutiny for changing priorities to include more entertainment and lifestyle material, which has been used to support a view that traditional public affairs news, for example news about politics and social institutions, is given less priority (see e.g. McLachlan and Golding, 2000: 75). An example of how such a view has been used to study the tabloids themselves is Rooney’s (2000) content analysis of the \textit{Sun} and the \textit{Mirror}, noted in the previous chapter. Investigating the proportional amount of entertainment and lifestyle, Rooney shows that the amount of public affairs material had significantly shrunk in both papers from 1968 to 1998. He therefore takes a disapproving view of the editorial state at the end of the analysed period:

Both newspapers had the tendency to place the private sphere before the public, in such a way that the personal lives of people became an increasing point of editorial competition. Both newspapers traded in controversial topics, but not as a means of rational discourse. So, such public issues as racial discrimination, AIDS, and the growth of an economic underclass were treated in a sensational manner with huge headlines and short stories. Nowhere was there a sustained attempt to explain the complexities of issues; everything was reduced to a simple slogan.

(2000: 106-107)

While studies such as Rooney’s indicate a changing tabloid climate in the UK\textsuperscript{21}, there are then, different signals within studies attempting to measure tabloidization overall. It is easy to see the point made by Graeme Turner, who regards ‘the category of tabloidization as too baggy, imprecise and value-laden’ to be useful when examining journalistic standards (1999: 70). For, as evident in this last quote from Rooney, more than observing a historical shift in journalism, commentators on tabloidization are generally driven by value-judgements of this process. It has, as pointed out by Barnett, often been placed in the context of ‘a pervasive sense of declining cultural, educational and political standards’ (1998: 75); a ‘dumbing down’ of the cultural environment. While tabloidization on the one hand is a matter of a historical shift, on the other it is a concept that entails assumptions about what constitutes ‘good’ and socially responsible journalism. For the purpose of this book, which focuses on the

\textsuperscript{20} The British broadsheets changed their format from broadsheet to tabloid/Berliner during the course of the research, a development which was sometimes described as further evidence of tabloidization of the press. The term ‘quality’ to describe this sector of the newspaper market is commonly used in academic literature and by the Audit Bureau of Circulation as well as the National Readership Survey.

\textsuperscript{21} A more recent study of the \textit{Sun} and the \textit{Mirror} between 1991 to 2001 found evidence for a process of increased tabloidization in terms of form and style attributes, but not so significantly in terms of the range of content components (Uribe and Gunter, 2004).
relationship between tabloid newspapers and readers at a specific moment in
time, it is precisely these value-judgements rather than the historicity of tab-
loidization that must be pin-pointed in order to move forward with an under-
standing of how tabloid journalism is seen to function in relation to audiences.
The next part of the chapter discusses theories about the influence of tabloid
journalism on society and public life.

Tabloid journalism and society

Tabloid journalism and the public sphere

It is emblematic of much of the debate about tabloidization that tabloid priori-
ties are seen to have an undesired influence on political communication, simpli-
fying and sensationalising important issues, and at worst, provoking a crisis in
public communication (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). Explicitly or implicitly
underlying this critique is often the notion of the public sphere, as developed by
Habermas in his 1962 thesis The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere
(1989). It is worthwhile to briefly characterise this influential concept and over-
view the academic discussion about it, before seeing how this discussion is
mirrored in value-judgements of tabloid journalism.

Habermas stresses the existence of a public sphere, ‘a realm of our social life
in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed’ (ibid: 49), as a
necessary requirement for a healthy democracy. The public sphere, neither
institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interests, is according to
Habermas reliant on rational-critical debate between private individuals on
public matters, to which access is guaranteed to all citizens. Based on a model
of the European bourgeois society of the 18th century, where coffeehouses and
the burgeoning press provided settings for political debate, Habermas acknowl-
edges that in contemporary society the media are the primary transmitters of
information that would make such communication possible. However, pessi-
mistic to the democratic potential of commercial mass media, he sees these as
providing a ‘public sphere in appearance only’ (ibid: 171), where rational-critical
debate is replaced with the individuated, apolitical, consumption of culture.

While Habermas’ historical claims of the bourgeois public sphere have been
called into question for a number of reasons, including its limited access (e.g.
Fraser, 1992) and its historical foundations (Curran, 1991, Shudson, 1992), it is,
as pointed out by Martin Eide and Graham Knight, as ‘a normative ideal essen-
tial to a well-functioning democracy’ (1999: 535) that it has had most currency
among media scholars. It is used as a way to understand the media from the
point of view of democracy and public life, and as a mean of thinking about
how politically relevant communicative spaces should be provided in the media.
When applied to tabloid newspapers, these have predominantly been judged to fail this ideal, paralleling Habermas’ own criticism of the commercial mass media. Strict habermasian readings of tabloid newspapers, therefore, have left limited options for exploring potentially progressive and democratic roles of these.

However, it is perhaps testimony to the legacy of Habermas’ normative concept that it has been subject to criticism, and some of this is relevant when thinking about the role of tabloid journalism to public life. From a feminist framework, Nancy Fraser (1992) has in a well-known critique pointed up elitist streaks to this conception, where she holds that members of subordinated groups require alternative arenas for public discourse in order to articulate and defend their interests. The emphasis on alternative public spheres, also demonstrated in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s (1972/1993) analysis of the proletarian public sphere, has, as suggested by Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, made it necessary to problematise the ‘idea of “the public”, as unitary, homogenous and able to speak disinterestedly’ (1994: 59). While this approach is not without complications, as noted by Craig Calhoun (1992: 38) and Nicholas Garnham (1992: 369) opening up the problem of how to reconcile pluralism with a common democratic polity, it creates room for examinations of existing diverse publics, enhancing the understanding of how these can also be reconciled under a normative dimension.

Equally relevant to the analysis of tabloids in public life is the re-evaluation of Habermas’ strict rational-critical basis. Much usage of the public sphere concept, as pointed out by Jim McGuigan, ‘tends to assume an excessively cognitive and rationalistic conception of the citizen and of public debate’ (2000: 4), where affect, often a structuring agent of tabloid discourse, is seen as damaging. However, as McGuigan argues, affect can fulfil a central role to popular engagement in the public sphere, in mobilising interest and providing emotional vehicles for debate. Similarly, Myra Macdonald, in examining the use of personalization in two current affairs programmes, points out that while rationality is important to maintain critical interrogation and foster a range of perspectives, ‘personal case studies and personal testimony can enable political insight and understanding through, rather than in spite of, their affecting qualities’ (2000: 264).

Related to the discussion of affect is the broadening notion of what constitutes the boundaries of the political. Curran (1991) and Garnham (1992) have argued for an understanding of entertainment as closely related to political engagement, since in Garnham’s words, it ‘is on the basis of understandings drawn from those communicative experiences and of identities formed around them that we arrive at more overtly rational and political opinions and actions’ (ibid: 374). This more discursive grasp of politics is noticeable in much of the literature that has emerged around the talk show (particularly in Livingstone
and Lunt, 1994), where talk on television has been related to forms of deliberation on issues important to large sections of the public. Lunt and Paul Stenner (2005) for example suggest that even a conflict-oriented talk show such as the Jerry Springer Show should be seen as an ‘emotional public sphere’, where emotional expression and discussion are combined under public reflection.

Thus, Habermas’s concept of the public sphere has been questioned and re-developed, with normative judgements of what constitutes a democratic public forum differing broadly (for further discussion, see the contributions in Butsch, 2007). While the re-thinking of the concept can lead to difficulties in pinpointing what we mean by democratic media, in that Habermas’s strict boundaries for this are stretched by those who propose alternative ways of thinking, it at the same time opens doors for new ways of analysing popular media. As mentioned, ideas of the influence of tabloid journalism on society are often propped up by notions of the public sphere, and, moving on to look at these, one can see that even when the public sphere concept is not directly invoked, here, too, conceptualisations of tabloid journalism range from one pole to another, with vastly differing understandings of its impact on society.

‘Dumbing down’ or reaching out?

Starting with those scholars who take a critical approach to tabloid journalism, many of their concerns come to the fore in relation to notions of tabloidization. As indicated in the previous part of the chapter, anxieties about tabloid journalism can be based on a view of tabloidization as narrowing the range of public affairs information available in the mainstream media; as the ‘vanishing’ of news needed for a democratic process. Here, the worry is about the range and quality of information accessible to the public in general. However, criticisms may also be based on the perceived effects of the tabloid style itself, and the way that traditional public affairs news, such as information about political and social issues, is treated in tabloid media. Taking the latter approach, Sparks has for instance argued that the public affairs coverage in the British tabloids, ‘tends to simplify, personalize, and dramatize material in ways that seriously obscure its public information content’ (1992: 44). The implications here are that the tabloid newspaper, in replacing reason with emotion and analysis with sensation, reduces citizens’ ability to understand the world and thus to control it. Combining this criticism with Sparks’ analysis of the polarisation of the British press, the outcome is that only an elite would have access to printed news which can encourage rational thinking, whereas the great masses have to rely on the less valuable tabloid journalism.

Another, related, way of thinking critically about tabloid journalism is to see the tabloid focus on areas such as celebrity, scandal and sex as a diversion, which draws audiences’ attention away from potentially more ‘important’ social
issues. Even if the latter are present as part of the news, the prevalent emphasis on other areas, for example the tabloid newspapers’ focus on sport and sex, are here perceived as damaging to news discourse. Such an approach is well illustrated by Bob Franklin’s *Newsak and the News Media* (1997), where Franklin emerges as one of the most outspoken critics of tabloid journalism and of what he sees as its negative influence on society as a whole:

> Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relations of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more “newsworthy” than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence.

(1997: 4)

Here, we see a whole-hearted rejection of tabloid news priorities, which, in a set of commonly used binary oppositions such as ‘human interest’ versus ‘public interest’, ‘sensation’ versus ‘rational thinking’ and ‘trivial’ versus ‘weighty’ are considered directly harmful to public life. By such an account, then, tabloid journalism and the news forms it may inspire pose a straightforward threat to democracy.

Yet, although a negative interpretation of tabloid journalism is prevalent among those concerned with the media’s role in maintaining public sphere discourse, there are some counter-arguments that provide more nuanced interpretations in this respect. Henrik Örnebring and Anna Maria Jönsson (2004), in recognising that tabloid journalism is criticised as populist, emotionalist and simplifying, argue that there are several points in history when the tabloid press has become an important part of the mainstream mediated public sphere, for instance through criticising privileged political elites and campaigning against social injustice. They also regard the tabloid press as having served as an alternative public sphere, for example campaigning for the abolishment of poverty when other news outlets ignored such a social problem. Peter Dahlgren (1995) has in an analysis of television and the public sphere equally cautioned against unconsidered rejections of popular forms of journalism, on the basis that they, as he puts it in a later work, can serve as ‘discursive gateways where other kinds of topics can become formulated and enter into public life’ (2000: 314). Similarly, in his polemically titled essay ‘Dumbing Down or Reaching Out’ Barnett takes into account that ‘journalism – and particularly tabloid journalism – has a long and honourable history of making difficult concepts or stories “come alive” for people who lack either the ability or inclination to read long-winded articles on complex subjects’ (1998: 78). According to this interpretation, tabloid news may be potentially democratising in conveying important issues in a manner that is understandable and attractive to large audiences.
Tabloid journalism has thus been seen as liberating in some contexts, through making news accessible to a larger number of people – an argument also brought up in analysis of developing countries (see Bird, 2001). Yet, following the two poles in the discussion of the public sphere, a more illustrious and clearly articulated ‘defence’ for tabloid journalism states that the perception of this as a negative social force simply rests on unhelpful assumptions, such as the idea that personalization and a stress on emotion and experience would necessarily be inferior to abstract analysis and rational thinking for providing an understanding of the world. Here, the debate becomes a battle between competing value-system, for example over the culturally gendered preserves of ‘hard’, masculine, news and a feminised realm of emotion and intimate life (see e.g. Lumby, 1999 and Shattuc, 1998, for discussion of this in relation to popular talk shows), with traditional value-systems challenged. Such critiques switch the emphasis of a traditional definition of democratic media, resting on Habermas’ ideal of a journalism whose main aim would be to encourage rational debate about political issues in a stricter sense, to what John Hartley has called the ‘postmodernist public sphere’ (1996: 155), where entertainment, consumerism, personalization and the private would be seen as equally valid parts, and where what constitutes ‘political’ may be rethought.

This kind of criticism poses that the tabloid critics are elitist, in lamenting such popular media forms based on a misguided view of their own taste as superior. Hartley’s Popular Reality is an illustrative example of an influential challenge to taste-based value-judgements in the debate about tabloid journalism, which he sees as grounded in a conventional hostility to popular culture itself. He regards the pessimism of social theorists lamenting the rise of popular entertainment media as ‘an impediment to understanding the role that popular media do play in producing and distributing knowledge’ (ibid: 156) and suggests that in his version of the public sphere, public knowledge must be redefined to include:

\[(\ldots)\] not so much knowledge of public affairs as traditionally defined, but new modes of knowledge which bespeak new ways of forming the public, in communities whose major public functions – the classical functions of teaching, dramatizing and participating in the public sphere – are increasingly functions of popular media, and whose members are political animals not in the urban forum but on the suburban couch; citizen readers, citizens of media.\[\text{(ibid: 155)}\]

Hartley grounds his more optimistic version of the rise of popular media on the idea that this has provided the ‘citizens of media’ with a tool for expressing personal freedom, where media consumers can actively choose from the increasing numbers of media outlets, find what suits them, and competently use these for their own purposes. Similarly, Brian McNair has asked why citizens of
a modern democracy shouldn’t ‘all get the media they want, when there is room enough in the public sphere for every taste and preference?’ (1999: 49).

Such questioning of the criticism against popular media bears a resemblance to, and may in part be influenced by, the thoughts of John Fiske (1989, 1992), probably the most vocal of those who regard tabloid journalism as a democratizing influence on society. Fiske has advocated the view that tabloid journalism is a site of resistance to authoritarian structures in society, where excess, parody, scepticism and contradiction are used to interrogate disciplinary norms. This is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1965/1984) analysis of medieval and renaissance folk culture, where the ritual spectacles of the carnival and a popular emphasis on the grotesque and the obscene are contextualised as a system of opposition to repressive and rigid social hierarchies.

Fiske sees subversive qualities in the reading of U.S. supermarket tabloids. He argues that the consumption of popular journalism is empowering audiences, who in interacting with media that turn topsy-turvy the preferred order of an alliance of forces of domination, are engaged as social agents rather than social subjects. To Fiske, popular information ‘is partisan, not objective: it is information that serves the people’s interests, not information as the servant of an objective truth acting as a mask for domination’ (1992: 47). Furthermore, Fiske proposes that tabloid journalism, as opposed to official news, encourages critical awareness in audiences:

The last thing that tabloid journalism produces is a believing subject. One of its most characteristic tones of voice is that of a sceptical laughter which offers the pleasures of disbelief, the pleasures of not being taken in.

( ibid: 49)

The thrust of this argument, similar to that of Hartley’s, is that popular readerships can and do skilfully use popular media for their own purposes. As also exemplified by Kevin Glynn, the critique of tabloid formats is dismissed for seeking ‘to control public life by delegitimating popular tastes and marginalizing those who possess them’ (2000: 105, see also Glynn, 1990).

Such re-evaluations, then, attempt to provide a greater acceptance for a variety of tastes and interests across the media spectrum, as well as to eschew an elitist view of audiences for popular media as passive, uncritical or ‘dumb’. They can be placed within a wider shift in media studies towards an emphasis on audience activity and interpretative capabilities, which will be discussed in the next chapter, and parallel alternative ways of thinking about the public sphere. Yet, it could be argued that, in doing so, matters of what Dahlgren calls ‘systematic mechanisms of exclusion’ (2000: 321): meaning an unequal access to reliable information and analysis about society, are sometimes overlooked. For example, the question of why every taste and preference should not deserve a place in the public sphere might be valid, just as the thought that popular read-
erships critically use their media for their own purposes. But it is worth combining this optimism with a reminder that the proposed free choice and use of media is dependent on factors such as education and the social and cultural environment of media consumers, as well as on access and scheduling. For, say, an academic interested in popular culture the access to a range of media formats and kinds of social information may be much wider than for the majority of the popular readerships – a basic but perhaps overlooked inequality that deserves to be addressed in validations of different taste-preferences. Nevertheless, the re-evaluation of tabloid journalism can highlight an element of elitism in the debate, and draws attention to alternative understandings of tabloid media.

**A polarized debate**

What becomes notable when reviewing the academic dispute concerning tabloid journalism’s relation to society and public life is that it stretches from one polar end, where it is seen as the demise of an enlightened, free and democratic society, to another, where tabloid media are hailed as both liberating and inclusive, as encouraging scepticism and rebellion against authoritarian systems. A significant aspect to this debate, highlighted by Graeme Turner (1999), is the rather rigid division of arguments according to two intellectual traditions within the broader field of media studies. While the most outspoken critics, such as Franklin, tend to apply a critical framework of political economy and social theory, those more optimistic, such as Fiske and Hartley, tend to be involved with cultural studies, which have a history of acknowledging the complexity of popular culture and popular media texts and their consumption through influences from the humanities. The critics have, as I have showed, at times worked with what could be considered a rather crude view of all tabloid journalism as the demise of society, which have given cultural studies scholars reason to focus on challenging such critiques.

Turner, himself writing from within cultural studies, observes that while both camps grapple with media that can largely be defined as ‘tabloid’, the critical social theorists have focused on the performance of tabloid news journalism, whereas the defences stemming from cultural studies generally look at the less political and more playful formats, such as in the feminist defence of talk shows or, as in Fiske’s case, the U.S. supermarket tabloids. In a call for a more balanced dialogue between these two positions, Turner writes:

It is understandable, but also convenient, that so much textual analysis within cultural studies over the last decade or so has concentrated on those media texts or genres in which the analyst has some political or affective investment. (...) Consequently, perhaps, at least one aspect of tabloidization – the specific per-
formance of that which describes itself as ‘journalism’ – demands more scrutiny than it currently gets from cultural studies.

(ibid: 60)

Turner’s argument is that in focusing on a polemical challenge of critiques of popular journalism, the insights that cultural studies could bring to a fuller understanding of the role of this kind of journalism within the wider perspective of democracy and the public sphere are not fully realised. Likewise, he asks whether there might be some aspects of the ‘sort of concern’ expressed in critiques of tabloidization ‘which cultural studies should consider’ (ibid: 61). Here, there is an opening for an approach that can take onboard some of the critical concerns made in the discussion about tabloidization, while at the same time acknowledging the complexities of popular media texts. Equally, there is an argument here for using an approach that is more sensitive to different kinds of tabloid media. A tabloid newspaper such as the *Sun*, for instance, which is directly involved in British political life, may require a different kind of analysis than the U.S. supermarket tabloids or the popular talk shows.

It emerges that a main weakness in much of the debate about tabloid journalism is precisely the predominant polarization between ‘dumbing down’ and ‘reaching out’; the black-and-white definitions of a complex subject. To gain a more nuanced understanding of tabloid journalism, therefore, there appears to be a need to synthesise these two positions. Such a project would mean acknowledging that the critics of tabloid journalism have some valid points, for example in their concern about the influence of increasing media conglomerisation and the need for equal access to information about social issues, while also realizing that some of the binary oppositions brought forward in this critique, such as the categorical devaluation of emotion and private life as opposed to rationality and public affairs, impair a fuller understanding of tabloid media. This overview of the debate points to the view that social theorists and cultural studies scholars stand to gain from a more perceptive exchange of ideas of the role of popular media.

To do so, I suggest it is necessary to pay more attention to the complexity of media consumption; to how real audiences understand and use different media forms. The absence of this focus in the debate about tabloid journalism and tabloidization is apparent. It is noteworthy that, given the prominence of this debate to media scholars in various fields, limited attention has been turned to actual audiences. Instead, assertions about the relationship between tabloid journalism and audiences are generally educated guesses - a criticism that can be applied to both ends of the spectrum. It is just as valid for when Rooney, based on his content analysis of the tabloids as described previously, infers that tabloid readers ‘probably do not have any interest in the workings of the estab-

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22 Bird (1998, 2000) is an exception here, and her work will be discussed in the next chapter.
lishment or establishment organizations and do not wish to monitor them’ (2000: 107), as it is for Fiske’s conceptualisation of an at all times hyper-critical and politically aware tabloid consumer (see Gripsrud, 2000: 285-287, for a critique of Fiske).

Furthermore, while a discussion about the relationship between tabloid journalism and public life is important to theories about the role of the media in a democracy, the focus on the informational ‘value’ of tabloid journalism has not brought us closer to an understanding of its appeal, and does little to explain its popularity and uses. To begin to answer questions about the functions tabloid journalism may have to audiences it therefore seems fruitful to consider that journalism will serve purposes for audiences that go beyond simply conveying information about public affairs. The concluding section of this chapter will take a look at attempts to address this lack in the debate, through focusing on three detailed analyses of how tabloid texts relate to the construction of meaning.

The ‘cultural discourse’ approach

_Cultural functions of ‘trivia’_

Even if one takes a critical approach to tabloid news, with the aim of trying to establish parameters for socially ‘responsible’ journalism, such a critical project, as noted by John Langer, needs to be based on a more sophisticated understanding of what news does than is possible by simply assuming that journalism is ‘primarily about the transmission of information which can be used by the citizenry to accumulate knowledge and engage in responsible judgements’ (1998: 5). Addressing this lack in the criticism of what Langer calls ‘the lament’, some scholars have instead looked more closely at what tabloid critics have portrayed as the altogether unimportant, trashy side of news. In switching the focus from regarding news solely as a way to convey information, working from an assessment of its informational value, this approach could be seen as viewing tabloid journalism as a ‘cultural discourse’. Drawing on Dahlgren (1988), Langer outlines such an approach by stating that:

viewer linkages to the news (...) may be more ritualistic, symbolic and possibly mythic than informational, and (...) news might better be conceptualised as a ‘form of cultural discourse’

(1998: 5)

This means highlighting the social uses and attractions available to audiences; possible ritual and mythic functions, and the alignment with other genres and
modes of narrative discourses. It means acknowledging that tabloid journalism is part of cultural discourses that are shaped by and contribute to shape society, and that it can be analysed as a component of our culture, rather than as an isolated social or journalistic phenomenon.23

One such acknowledgment can be found in Ian Connell’s analyses of stories about stars and celebrities in British tabloid newspapers (1991, 1992). Rather than understanding these as trivia in relation to the more socially ‘weighty’ news stories, he suggests that this material performs a kind of cultural police work, where privilege is presented as questionable and the privileged scrutinised according to an imposed morality. With some similarity to Fiske, he argues that criticism assuming tabloid journalism not only stands apart from political processes but also cultivates an alienated passivity in audiences, fails to take into account the genre-specific nature of tabloid content, where political concerns will be expressed differently from official discourses. Instead, he proposes:

We have forgotten that politics is about all and any manifestation of power, whether or not that manifestation assumes the dominant forms available within parliamentary democracies. There is a very real sense in which the stories in the tabloid press are political. In their peculiar, brash and bawling ways they bring to visibility that which the variously powerful would prefer to ignore, would choose to consider ‘by the way’ or would dismiss as regrettable, loutish traits. (1991: 242)

Connell’s line of reasoning suggests a belief in the readers’ ability to use tabloid content for purposes which could be considered political, if only in the sense of enabling a critical stance towards the aura of respectability and authority of those in power. But he also acknowledges that many of the stories are conservative, with a mission to redistribute inequalities rather than putting an end to them, and in a later analysis argues against Fiske’s view that popular journalism is in the people’s interest, on the grounds of the improbability of ‘a prior calculation and knowledge of interests’ as part of ‘mundane cultural activity’ (1992: 65). Nevertheless, his focus on celebrity stories and their involvement with tensions arising from social differences, leading him to conclude that these stories on one level could be seen as ‘the expression of outrage on the behalf of the have-nots’ (1992: 82), highlights how less ‘serious’ aspects of news may fulfil significant cultural functions. It is noteworthy for its attempt at providing a more insightful explanation into the prominence of celebrity as part of news and for taking seriously what tabloid critics have deemed ‘trivia’.

23 In some ways this approach may be seen as indebted to both the ‘critical lament’, as it recognises a flaw in its criticism of tabloid news, as well as to Fiske’s position in bringing attention to what this form of news has to offer audiences.
Tabloid journalism and melodrama

A similar perspective on the appeal of tabloid newspapers has been presented by Jostein Gripsrud, who similarly to Connell aspires to ‘transcend the futile moralism’ (Gripsrud, 1992: 84) of critiques of the popular press, by analysing this as interlinked with important aspects of culture and society. Building on literary critic Peter Brooks’ work on melodrama (1984), Gripsrud compares the techniques of the popular press with those of the stage melodrama of the nineteenth century, regarded as a ‘sense-making system’ in the modern society that came about after the French revolution. Gripsrud describes its origins as thus:

Melodrama was a textual machine designed to cope with the threatening black hole God left after him when He returned to his heaven: it was constructed to demonstrate the existence of an underlying universe of absolute forces and values, moral forces and values.

(1992: 84)

The classic melodramatic text, Gripsrud notes, ‘presents individuals representing certain moral values or forces’ (ibid: 87); maintaining a polarized, highly clear-cut representation of the world. This can also be seen in melodrama’s ‘traditional use of the spectacular, the sensational, its taste for violent effects’ (ibid), which ultimately were designed to teach audiences moral lessons. The same, Gripsrud proposes, can be said for the popular press:

Today’s popular press also teaches the audience a lesson, everyday. It says that what the world (the news) is really about, is emotions, fundamental and strong: love, hate, grief, joy, lust and disgust. [...] Sex and death are the two aspects of life that create the most intense emotions, so naturally they are the most heavily focused themes.

(ibid: 84)

In trying to explain the popularity of his subject, Gripsrud finds it could be tied in with a system for making sense of an increasingly abstract world; as indicative of a popular protest against a theoretical, abstract way of understanding society and history. The roots to this could be found in increasingly complex social relations, as well as in the limitations of a stable, representative democracy, where a majority of people may feel they do not need, or are not encouraged to feel they need, politically relevant information. Ultimately, however, he sees the melodramatic understanding as ill-equipped to deal with the ‘abstract phenomenon’ that is modern society. This becomes even more significant in terms of the press, which as opposed to melodrama in film, television, theatre and literature ‘claims to be the Truth’ and in the long run ‘represents systematic disinformation, reducing its readers’ chances of rational political choices and actions’ (1992: 91).
While Gripsrud’s approach is astute in its linkage of the popular press to melodrama, it raises some questions about readers’ understanding of this. Firstly, it presupposes that reading tabloid newspapers necessarily produces a melodramatic understanding of the world and history, not as a temporary flight from an abstract reality, but as a more or less permanent outlook on life. Secondly, Gripsrud assumes these papers are understood as portraying objective truths, which, when it comes to the British tabloids to some extent could be questioned on the basis of the playful elements of their content (see the textual analysis in Chapter 6). Nevertheless, both Connell and Gripsrud demonstrate that tabloid newspapers cannot be analysed as isolated social or journalistic phenomena, and both pose interesting hypotheses about the role of tabloids among their audiences.

‘The other news’ as myth

A third scholar concerned with the dramatic and formulaic qualities of news often thought of as ‘unworthy’ of in-depth analytical attention is Langer (1998), who recognises that ‘a different and perhaps more broadly based explanation still needs to be found for why such news remains “popular”’(ibid: 5). Identifying a lack of critical research on what he terms ‘the other news’ on television – the types of stories generally thought of as ‘human interest’ stories, Langer asserts that ‘a comprehensive understanding of television news will occur only when broadcast journalism’s trivialities’ are given the same level of attention and theorization as news about “more important issues”’ (ibid: 9).

Langer, drawing on structuralist thinking, isolates structural categories within this news type; in news about ‘the especially remarkable’, ‘victims’, ‘communities at risk’ and ‘ritual, tradition and the past’, and finds that these can be linked to two underlying paradigmatic systems, which generate a particular, metaphysical, structure of meaning:

What is being suggested here the is that the ‘totality’ of these [‘other news’] stories might be mapped as a metaphysical sub-system (or structure) of news with linkages and symmetries not readily apparent from the multiplicity of events which make up their regular inclusion in the news bulletin.

(ibid: 143)

Within this totality, story-types focusing on the especially remarkable, victims and communities at risk are seen as produced on the basis of a volatile, unstable causality (‘you never know what might happen next’), whereas stories dealing with ritual, tradition and the past work to reverse this tendency, through offering continuity and certainty (‘the world goes on after all’). Langer also sees the latter stories as engaged in discourses about temporality, through the preoccupation with time and the past, whereas stories concerned with destruction and
breakdown offer an account of spatiality, in dealing specifically with territory and its boundaries. Finally, he juxtaposes the categories of especially remarkable people and victims to produce an account of the social space given in ‘the other news’, with the former category at the top and the latter at the bottom.

In making available this model, Langer wishes to come closer to answering the question of why news stories like these have such a perennial appeal. Working with a structure that, through its everyday repetition, may be seen as mythic, he finds the answer in anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’ theory of the purpose of myth: to provide a model capable of mediating contradiction. Hence, in ‘the other news’, the incongruity of conducting a life both permanent and subject to total randomness is dealt with:

The contradiction is resolved by allowing for impermanence and change but within a ‘bracketing’ framework of broader cycles where “real” permanence resides. […] One the one hand there are the fluid variations, the continually changing parade of events, characters and occurrences; on the other hand there is the relatively permanent structure of ‘other news’ narratives and rhetorical procedures (…) , and beyond this, the stability of the news bulletin itself (…) seemingly resolute, perpetual, fixed.

(1998: 144)

The ‘other news’, consequently, can on one level be seen as battling with deeper questions of life itself, and may function in ways similar to the myth. However, similarly to Gripsrud, Langer finds that an undercurrent of fatalism appears as a guiding principle in the analysed stories, where ‘individuals [ordinary people] become objects upon by unpredictable, unaccountable occurrences which threaten everyday life and the security and trust invested in it’ (ibid: 149). The ‘other news’ suggests that the world is organised around forces primarily outside of real control. It therefore:

(…) substitutes any expressed potential to act in the world, or to act on that world in order to change it, with a fatalistic vision which holds that, however miserable or unrewarding one’s life or circumstances might be, people should be satisfied and not complain, because ‘things could get worse’.

(ibid: 153)

Langer’s analysis shows that news often considered unworthy of academic attention requires explanations for its staying power, and that it is connected to wider social and cultural contexts. As with Connell and Gripsud, he stresses that it has to be situated within a cultural context, where its sole importance may not lie in its ability to convey ‘information’, but also in its structures, ways of creating meaning, and in its links to social and cultural developments. These three scholars are important to the present work in that they begin to provide insights into the connections between tabloid journalism and audiences, and
show the value of close textual analysis for doing so. And, while looking at the ‘cultural functions’ of popular journalism might be seen as moving away from journalism’s role in the public sphere, it can be perceived of as providing a better understanding for how some of this material relates to public sphere discourse. As Gripsrud has pointed out in a later comment on what he terms the ‘ritual’ perspective: ‘Through these rituals journalism provides both information related to the more directly political dimensions of democracy and material for ritual or ceremonial “processing” of sociopsychological and existential concerns’ (2000: 297). Yet, while Connell, Langer and Gripsrud ultimately use their observations to establish the ideological territory of tabloid news, an obvious aperture in their work is that the area of reception; the site where meaning is produced by audiences, is left untouched, in spite of Langer’s recognition that recent ‘work on the process of decoding has shown that to rely exclusively on a text-based analysis is to offer a truncated version of how meaning is culturally produced and received’ (ibid: 42). It is clear, therefore, that here too a turn to audiences could help in providing a more extensive explanation of the reception of tabloid journalism.

Summary

Tabloid journalism is central to debates about media standards, and has been criticised for spearheading a development towards a ‘tabloidized’ media climate. A prevalent notion is that tabloid journalism operates against democratic communication, by severing its audiences from the social and political structures governing their lives. However, it has also been seen as an inclusive and democratic form of communication, as well as an outlet for a subversive form of ‘resistance’ against dominating power structures. Such evaluations follow a similar line as the discussion about the public sphere, and relate to different normative perceptions of what constitutes democratic journalism. As I have tried to show, however, the debate about tabloid journalism is often polarised in ways which impede a dialogue between what could broadly be distinguished as the intellectual traditions of social theory and cultural studies within the field of media studies. Within the former, there is a concern about the influence of tabloid media with regards to democracy and the public sphere, and within the latter a preoccupation with challenging elitist and taste bias in such critiques.

Critical to such polemics, this overview has attempted to reject simplistic dismissals of tabloid journalism. But it has also found that its re-appropriation has tended to overlook valid concerns, such as issues of social inequality and access in relation to a proposed free choice of media formats and of competencies required for participation in the public sphere. The absence of attention to
actual audiences for tabloid journalism, furthermore, means that assumptions
about the influence of tabloid media to public life at best are based on an in-
formed view of tabloid content. The position outlined here is therefore one
that attempts to synthesise the two positions sketched above. Taking an interest
in the relationship between tabloid journalism and public life, acknowledging
that there might be problems as well as possibilities with this from the perspec-
tive of democracy and social theory, I purport to show sensitivity to the com-
plexity of media texts and to their reception contexts.

To approach journalism as a ‘cultural discourse’ likewise has potential as a
guiding principle for the following study, as this acknowledges that the sole
importance of news may not lie in its ability to convey information, but also in
its structures, ways of creating meaning, and in its links to social and cultural
contexts. Connell, Gripsrud and Langer, through carrying out detailed textual
analyses of material often regarded as unworthy of close academic attention,
show that to understand tabloid news it is important to situate this in relation
to other areas of culture, where its appeal must be understood not as a lament-
table symptom of an insatiable appetite for ‘entertainment’, but as connected to
deeper social and cultural meanings.

However, textual analyses can only go so far in explaining how meaning is
produced and received, and they raise as many questions as they answer. Areas
to investigate are possible social and cultural functions of the newspapers, and
how tabloid reading ties in with matters of politics and understandings of soci-
ety. Do tabloids contribute to a melodramatic, irrational understanding of the
world; as a diversion from matters of public importance? Do readers take these
papers as representing the truth? And what might stories about stars and per-
sonalities be taken to mean? The next chapter will show how previous audience
research in the fields of news and popular culture is relevant for further dem-
onstrating how a qualitative, audience-centred study of tabloid readers will add
a perspective largely missing from the debate.
CHAPTER 4

Turning to Audiences

Introduction

While text-based studies can provide a framework from which to critically analyse the media, they cannot offer an extensive understanding of how these are viewed and used by audiences. This chapter provides a discussion of the field of audience studies in media research. It aims to give an overview of paradigms and developments within this expanding body of research; to identify relevant research and to locate the present research on tabloids within a framework of studies of media audiences.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of the history of studying audiences in media research, which is followed by an examination of current trends in this field. The second and third parts of the chapter examine in more detail relevant qualitative studies, starting with research in the area of fiction and popular culture and then moving on to studies of news. While much work on reception has been carried out within the field of popular fiction and drama, I show here that fewer efforts have been aimed at finding out how audiences view and use news, and that qualitative academic research on newspaper reading is particularly lacking.

Audience research: paradigms and trends

*Effects research*

In an essay tracing the history of the concept of ‘influence’ in media research, John Corner notes that the idea of the media as agencies of influence is at the core of the study of media audiences, and indeed the study of media as a whole. Due the sheer scale of mediation in modern societies, ‘the routine permeation of everyday life by the products and systems of major sectors of international as well as national [media] industry’ (2000: 377), the question of how the media is
received on an audience level has retained pertinence. However, ways of researching this question have varied greatly, and ‘influence’, as Corner puts it, is a highly contested core of media research.

An early strand of research into media influence is what is often called ‘effects research’ (see ibid: 381). Taken to constitute research that first developed in the 1930s and up to date is most prominent in the United States, a common denominator within this strand is the attempted measurement of direct effects on audience members, based on a model of mass communication as a process whereby certain messages are sent through the media and then received with certain effects. An underlying idea is that effects are measurable, with methods of doing so generally characterised by systematically counting and categorising audience members and the studied media effects, for example of media violence. Pioneering research within this field is often exemplified by Paul Lazarsfield’s study of voting behaviour in the 1940s, which led him to conclude that the media have limited effects on audiences when it comes to voting behaviour, in comparison to factors such as belonging to social group membership. Another influential study is George Gerbner’s cultivation analysis from the 1950s, which looked at longer-term cultural effects, related to how the media function as part of the social order to maintain and reinforce power relations in society (see Gerbner et. al., 1994).

While effects research was an early dominating paradigm and still is a strong strand in U.S. mass communication research, it is often contrasted with a later ‘uses-and-gratifications’ model, which, in its classic description coined by Eliaz Katz in 1957, began to turn the question of ‘what media do to people’ to ‘what people do with the media’ (in McQuail, 1998: 152). As with effects research, ‘uses-and-gratifications’ is a term used to describe a wide range of research, and it is interested in how individuals use the media to gratify their needs and desires. Yet, as Corner points out, it can be seen as related to the intellectual perspectives of effects research (2000: 382), and what has come to be viewed as typical of this research is a functionalist research conception, individualist method and data collection and the use of data for statistical analysis (see McQuail, 1998, for a summary of the tradition).

Both of these research strands have been subjected to a number of criticisms from more recent efforts to study the relationship between the media and media audiences. A main line of disapproval has concerned the attempts to provide a value-free and mathematical treatment of matters not easily amendable to sociological categorization. However, as discussed by Curran, it can be noted that while such criticism tends to emphasise discontinuities in research traditions, it may also under-value continuities and parallels (2002: 115-125, see also Morley, 1999: 197). Nevertheless, it is possible to discern several developments which have led to an at least in some sense ‘new’ approach to audiences.
Encoding/Decoding

An important work for pointing to more recent approaches is Stuart Hall’s (1974) *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. In the introduction to *Rethinking the Media Audience*, Pertti Alasuutari goes as far as saying that this ‘laid the foundation for and articulated the problems to be addressed in the “reception paradigm” of what became known as “media studies”’ (1999: 2). Like older effects models, Hall conceived of mass communication as a process of sending and receiving messages, but as Alasuutari notes, Hall’s model ‘did involve a shift from a technical to a semiotic approach to messages’ (ibid: 3). Hall perceived messages as encoded by the media producer but decoded, and made sense of, by the audience member. In essence, this meant a move away from a behaviouristic approach, where media use is conceived of a stimulus-response basis, to a more interpretive framework, where any effect is dependent upon people’s interpretations and thought-processes. As Hall put it:

> Before this [media] message can have an ‘effect’ (however defined), or satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to a ‘use’, it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully decoded. It is this set of de-coded meanings which ‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences.  

(1974: 3)

Hall suggests different ‘ideal-type’ positions from which such a decoding can be made: among them the dominant code, where audiences decode the medium according to the preferred meaning of the producer, and the oppositional code, which is a position where the audience member determines to decode the message in an entirely contrary way.

Although Hall’s encoding-decoding broke new ground in pointing to the importance of interpretation and social discourses around the media, it has later been regarded too schematic and focused on the determinate moments of ‘decoding’ of messages, with less consideration of the functions of the medium itself, including for example the uses of media technologies, as well as the contexts of reception, for example the role of the family to TV viewing (ibid: 4-5). Nevertheless, it became a departure point for a new breed of studies that explored the interpretative side of reception.

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24 While Hall’s model is considered ground-breaking for including a interpretative approach to the understanding of media messages, it bears similarities and influences by other traditions: notably the ‘uses-and-gratifications’ approach as well as German reception theory developed in late 1960s literary criticism (see Alasuutari, 1999: 2).
As pointed out by John Thompson, to gain a view of how media ‘messages’ operate, one must consider how these are ‘incorporated into the lives of recipients, how they become part of their projects of self-formation and how they are used by them in the practical contexts of their day-to-day lives’ (1995: 214). A concern with everyday life and the social contexts of media consumption has characterised much recent work on reception, where qualitative research methods have been used to explore the relationships between media texts and audiences. Sometimes referred to as ‘new’ audience research, there has here been an opposition to effects research; criticised for taking a simplistic view of the media as ‘injecting’ messages into media consumers, and for testing hypotheses in artificial laboratory settings (see Gauntlett, 1998, for an extensive critique). Likewise, while sharing some features with the ‘uses-and-gratifications’ model, this type of research has rejected this as a model that considers media use to be little else than seeking and being rewarded the gratification of psychological needs, thereby ignoring for example the way in which the media may become part of self-formation and change, or the possibility of needs being created by the media themselves. As Martin Barker and Kate Brooks note in their critique of this model, ‘audience responses are constructed by much more than putative “needs” seeking gratification’ (1998: 91, see also McQuail, 1998: 155).

This type of research, then, has stressed the complexity of the relationship between media audiences and texts, and, following the outline of Hall’s work on encoding-decoding, taking the view of audiences as highly active in the sense-making process. In suggesting a tentative ‘story-line’ to such work on reception, Alasuutari suggests a division into three generations of ‘reception studies’, whereby David Morley’s Nationwide (1980) and other encoding-decoding studies, which took as a starting-point the messages of specific texts and then looked at how audiences understood these, would fall into the first one. The second one he sees as drawing on ethnography to investigate the meanings which media audiences generate and how they do so, while at the same time moving away from conventional politics to identity politics, putting more emphasis on the functions of the medium itself and, even when dealing with a particular programme or serial, looking at reception from the audiences’ end of the chain. According to Alasuutari, ‘one studies the role of the media in everyday life, not the impact (or meaning) of everyday life on the reception of a programme’ (1999: 5).

But the turn to ethnography and the everyday, which places the central object of study ‘outside the media, in the cultures and communities of which media and audiences are constituents’ (Jensen, in Alasuutari, 1999: 7), can be seen to exclude the media as a research focus. Likewise, a heavy emphasis on ethnographic methods, which require an abundance of time spent with audience members to fully grasp the wider context of media use, as well as the demand
to take into account all the different contexts of this, can be seen as producing what Ien Ang has considered a paralysis of research, putting improbable demands on the researcher’s ability to contextualise (1996: 68, see also Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 9-10). Both Morley (1999) and Alasuutari (1999) conceive of a third generation of audience studies, which brings the media back into the centre but understands ‘the media and media messages in a broader sense than just as an encoded text to be then decoded by a particular “interpretive community”’ (ibid: 6). Likewise, on the new agenda they put a more reflexive approach to audience research, for example questioning concepts such as ‘the audience’ as necessarily a construct by the researcher, as well as the researchers’ own position and role within the research.

What can be noted when summarising this first part of the chapter is that, coming back to the basic idea of ‘influence’, ways of conceptualising audiences are pointing to a development away from perceiving influence as a relatively straightforward part of communication, to a more complex idea of interpretation. Yet, the stress on audiences’ interpretative abilities has led to criticism for loosing sight of social power-structures that permeates these abilities. ‘Does anyone who has produced a text or a symbolic form believe that interpretation is entirely random or that pleasure cannot be used to manipulative ends?’ asks Garnham, pointing to how a focus on consumption and interpretation could exaggerate the freedoms of daily life, in relation to the macro-structures of media and society (1997: 60-61). Likewise, Arild Fetveit (2001) has argued that the stress on reception and interpretation in media research has led to a downplaying of the connections between stylistic and textual properties and interpretation, leading to ignorance about how meaning is made out of media content. Contemporary research on audiences, therefore, could be seen as performing a balancing act between treating audiences as active and not as ‘cultural dupes’ on one hand, while looking at the impact of social structures and of the properties of texts on the other.

Fiction, drama and leisure formats

Reading the romance and watching Dallas: interpretation of popular fiction

As stated previously, much of the work within ‘new’ audience studies has been carried out in the area of popular fiction and drama. Janice Radway’s influential study of romance readers (1984) was among the first to bring attention to the conditions of reception and interpretation within this tradition. In doing so Radway paid much attention to the notion of an ‘interpretive community’; showing how the group of female romance readers interviewed ‘join forces symbolically and in a mediated way in the privacy of their individual homes and
in the culturally devalued sphere of leisure activity’ (1984: 212). Furthermore, while Radway’s textual analysis of the romance novels unveils a narrative structure that may be said to support patriarchy, her interviews showed how readers felt they gained useful knowledge from the reading, as well as how the reading itself provided an opportunity to ‘carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self-interest is usually identified with the interests of others’ (ibid: 211). To an extent, the novels were used to ‘resist’ the patriarchal system they could be seen as supporting.

Similar tendencies by individuals to interpret in their own way the ‘preferred’ meaning of a text are brought to attention in Ang’s study of the reception of Dallas (1982/1985), for example in the case of a marxist viewer who finds in the programme’s excesses a critique of the capitalist system. Ang’s work, based on letters written to her about the show, is subtitled ‘The Melodramatic Imagination’, which Ang conceptualises as a strategy among her respondents to overcome seemingly meaningless routines of the everyday existence. Such a concept bears some relevance to a study of how tabloids fit into the lives of readers, as tabloids draw on the melodramatic style. Equally interesting here is her analysis of the pleasure respondents appeared to take in the ‘realism’ of Dallas. The realism, she claims, has little to do with an actual recognition of the show’s extravagant storylines and characters, but of the emotions, contained within the sense that happiness is perceived as uncertain, constantly threatened (ibid: 45). Ang’s argument points to how the ‘true-to-life’ character of a media text as it is understood on a reception level is not necessarily contingent upon a recognition of narratives and events, but can be related to an appreciation of the treatment of emotions within the text, which again is worthwhile considering in terms of how tabloid readers understand their newspapers.

The meaningfulness of routines: Hobson and Hermes

Another study of soap opera audiences worth mentioning here is Dorothy Hobson’s (1982) research on viewers of Crossroads, a British soap about life in a motel. Hobson interviewed women in their homes and was consequently able to observe the domestic environment and routines. She concluded that these were integral to understanding the viewing experience, as the women were engaged in a series of activities while watching and also used the programme as a marker to structure the day. The study serves as a reminder of the importance of simple, everyday routines and domestic settings to the understanding of media use, which may be less about the actual content than these practices. It could be compared to James Lull’s (1980, 1982, 1990) account of the social uses of television, which arises from his studies of family viewing practises focusing on America and China and emphases different uses of the medium, such as ‘structural’ and ‘relational’ uses.
A related analysis within the field of popular culture is Hermes’ (1995) research on male and female magazine readers. This is noteworthy as it goes against the grain of most studies of popular texts, as Hermes cautions against a tendency to overemphasise the meaningfulness of texts. Expecting her respondents to have as much to say about their reading as Radway’s group of romance readers, she was surprised to note how little the readers had to say about the magazines. Indeed they often seemed to have difficulties remembering what they had read. The main appeal of the magazines seemed to be that they were easy to put down, and, as in Hobson’s research, could be fitted into the routines of everyday life. Hermes, therefore, in spite of arguing that ‘texts acquire meaning only in the interaction between readers and texts’ (ibid: 10), draws the conclusion that too much weight has been attached to knowledgeable readers and fans, presented as average readers and hence failing to note:

(...) the fallacy of meaningfulness, by which I mean the unwarranted assumption that all use of popular media is significant. Although readers may recognize the codes of a given text and accord it limited associative meaning, they do not always accord it generalized significance, that is, a distinct and nameable place in their world views and fantasies.

(ibid: 14-15)

As Hermes draws attention to a tendency to over-emphasize the understandings of texts by ‘fans’, her claim that media texts are meaningless has provoked some counter-reactions. Seija Ridell (1996) has for instance argued that Hermes, in taking her respondents descriptions at face value, omits any possibility to investigate the power of the media to uphold ideas exactly through the routines surrounding media consumption.

Rather than taking Hermes’ study as evidence of media content as meaningless, it is perhaps most valuable for pointing to the necessity of questioning concepts such as ‘meaningful’ and, again, for paying attention to the importance of routines and contexts in relation to media use (see also Frazer, 1992, for a discussion of female magazine reading). The idea of how the format of a media product shapes its understanding and use, with the ‘easily-put-downess’ of the magazines as main factor, is also valuable to keep in mind when carrying out research with tabloid newspaper readers.

Problematising popular factual formats: lad’s mags and Reality TV

As Hermes does not see a wider cultural significance of the magazine reading other than in the habit of the everyday, the last two studies I survey in this part of the chapter looks at precisely the relationship between the consumption of popular leisure formats and their relationship to society at large. Nick Stevenson, Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks (2001), firstly, carried out extensive focus
group research on men’s lifestyle magazine reading, with a main aim to seek out the cultural significance of the magazines in terms of gender constructions. Including in their selection of magazines controversial ‘laddish’ magazines such as *loaded* and *FHM*, which have been criticised similarly to tabloid newspapers for reinforcing stereotypical constructs of gender, they argue that although the media continue to have the power to define topics for conversation and hence parts of our reality, its ideological power is part of a ‘circuit’, involving producers, texts and consumers, rather than a one-dimensional tool for domination.

With respect to gender construction, their research findings accordingly lead them to stress contradiction and ambiguity among focus group participants:

> In sociological terms the magazines can be made sense of by identifying the social and cultural contradictions that they are trying to handle, caught between an awareness that old-style patriarchal relations are crumbling and the desire to re-inscribe power relations between different genders and sexualities. (ibid: 79)

Thus, for these authors, men’s magazines provide an ambivalent arena for men to ‘explore the contradictoriness of modern masculinities’ (ibid: 146). In spite of some elements of the magazines contributing to uphold patriarchal power relations, they are seen as playing out tensions stemming from changing gender relations, and as equally providing openings for new versions of masculinity.

Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks, in some sense similar to Radway, problematise the consumption of media which a text-based study might find more straightforwardly conservative. A study that in spite of its different focus has a similar aim is Annette Hill’s (2005a) research on viewers of different Reality TV formats. In likeness with Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks, Hill looks at a controversial genre, often thought to have a negative impact on its audiences in producing voyeuristic behaviour and in reinforcing social stereotypes. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative research with a large sample of viewers, Hill however concludes that viewers themselves are highly critical to Reality TV, showing concern both about the treatment of the participants in programmes and the way that producers construct social settings and emotional expressions within these. She argues that the programmes can be understood as educational both in terms of practical, social and emotional issues. Hill’s research can be placed within a larger framework of television studies of popular factual formats, which includes studies of the viewing of talk shows (see e.g. also Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, Shattuc, 1998, Lumby, 1999, Hill, 2002, Hill, 2005b), and which has dealt with the idea of popular factual programming as a vector for learning about social and emotional issues.25

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25 Recent research by Hill (2005b) on factual programmes in Sweden showed how the idea of learning could be applied to a range of programmes, where viewers experienced opportunities for
Since the subject matter of these last two studies bears similarities to tabloid journalism, both with regards to the criticism and concern they give rise to and with regards to matters of style and content, their findings may to some extent be applicable to tabloid reading. Some of the new ‘lads mags’, such as loaded, are drawing heavily on a tabloid style and agenda. Likewise, many Reality TV shows are prioritised as part of tabloid content, with a ‘symbiotic’ relationship between a show such as Big Brother and the popular tabloids. The researchers bring attention to questions about the understanding of conservative gender ‘messages’ on a reception level, as well as the idea of learning from more populist factual formats. These studies are also of note in that they provide a pointer away from the emphasis on studies of audiences for popular fiction and drama, moving towards the reception of factual and journalistic formats. The next part of the chapter will look more in detail at studies of news reception, which still is a relatively under-researched field.

Studies of news reception

*TV news in the spotlight*

In the area of news, there is still a scarcity of qualitative research which contextualizes news consumption in a social environment and takes into account what audiences ‘do’ with news. There is research which looks at how news viewing impact on the understanding of a particular issue or event, one example being Greg Philo and Mike Berry’s (2004) study into how televised news of the Israel-Palestinian conflict appeared to have distorted people’s perception of the conflict, bringing the attention to the role of news in providing information for opinion-forming on social issues. But, as noted by Bird: ‘Limited empirical work has been done on how audiences actually view news, how they define it, and what they do with it’ (2000: 214).

An exception here is Morley (1980), whose analysis of the reception of Nationwide in the late 1970s, a lightweight current affairs programme, has become a major text in the study of television news reception. The Nationwide study combined a text study, involving the notion of the preferred readings of media texts, with a study of the ways that age, race, class and gender may determine a person’s access to possible readings of the texts. Looking at the way that the ‘messages’ of the news programme were decoded according to Hall’s encoding-decoding model, Morley argued that ideas of a strong ideological integration of the news media into reception is questionable, which, as noted, is also an argu-
ment used for a range of subsequent studies on the reception of popular fiction and drama.

However, another point emerging from this study, of relevance to thinking about the reception of tabloid newspapers, is Morley’s demonstration of how an audience cannot be regarded as an ‘atomised mass of individuals, but as a number of sub-cultural formations or groupings of “members” who will, as members of those groups, share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in a particular way’ (ibid: 15). Interpretations of news, Morley finds, are always shaped within social structures and sub-groupings, which means that its reception must be conceptualised as part of wider social discourses. While this research was carried out over two decades ago, it could be taken as a reminder of the relevance of the social groupings of the everyday, as well as wider structures such as class, when carrying out a reception study on tabloid newspapers. This consideration has a bearing when selecting the methods for doing so, where, it could be argued, work with pre-existing social groups, such as friends or colleagues, are preferable in that they provide a better option for studying those social networks where meaning-making takes place.

A question this brings into focus is the way that news may be related to the construction of individual and cultural identities. This is one focal point of Klaus Bruhn Jensen, who in an interview study with television viewers in the US showed how the social and political data with which viewers subscribe to news tie in with feelings of belonging to a community. ‘One important prerequisite for being part of a social or political community is having an awareness of a particular range of issues’, he writes, arguing that news-viewing offers a generalised sense of community, by enabling viewers to ask and be concerned about the same questions (1990/1992: 230). This is also one of the findings of David Gauntlett and Hill (1999), who in looking at the way 427 British television viewers commented on their viewing over a period spanning from 1991 to 1996, found that television news programmes were used as sources of social identity, offering the viewers a sense of contact with others and with events going on in the world (ibid: 55-57). Such findings correlate to the ‘cultural discourse’ approach as identified in the previous chapter, in pointing to a role of news outside of information about public affairs, and are equally relevant to a study of tabloid reading.

In relation to tabloidization of televised news, Bird (1997, 1998, 2000) carried out a qualitative study with 22 U.S. viewers, which she used to show how a story-telling news style makes news memorable to audiences, and that personalisation and vivid images, too, contribute to active viewing. She thus points to the possibility of a televised tabloid news style for promoting learning about current affairs, but however sees this as reliant on the ability to make connections to wider analysis, and argues that tabloidization poses a risk of personalisation as the only way to tell a story (1998: 45). Such a suggestion, too, appears
relevant to research with tabloid readers, drawing attention to possibilities as well as limitations with tabloid news reception from the perspective of public life.

Printed news?

While there is still then, room for investigations into the subject of television news and everyday life, there is a foundation of work to build on. In the field of print news, the pickings are slimmed down. As with television news ratings, there is plenty of assessments of circulation figures, as well as market research measuring attitudes of readers of different newspapers, some of which was reviewed in Chapter 2. There are also a number of quantitative studies on newspaper reading which investigates for example the relationship between newspaper reading and voting behaviour (e.g. Entman, 1989, for a view of the situation in the US) and the correlation between newspaper reading and kinds of political knowledge (e.g. Chaffe and Yang, 1990). However, although this type of quantitative, often survey-based research create snapshot images of readers and adds to knowledge about connections between newspaper reading and specific activities such as voting or knowledge of particular issues, it tells us little about the contexts for newspaper reading, or more generally how newspaper readers relate to the medium.

Somewhat closer to answering these questions is the work of the Glasgow University Media Group26, which has conducted several qualitative studies concerning the relationship between printed news and readers. This research has however primarily been aimed at finding out about possible ideological influences newspapers have on readers, rather than looking at readers’ views on and uses of these. Philo’s research on the media representation of mental illness and its possible influence on audiences (1999), for example, involved giving participants a disparaging headline from the Daily Mirror and then asking them to write the story. As with similar research from the Glasgow University Media Group (see the previous reference to Philo and Berry), the results showed the participants reproduced the language and ideological approach of the original news report, which in this case indicated that the mentally ill often are demonised in the media, and that this appeared to stay with the audience.

Bringing attention to how newspapers and other media outlets has a profound role in providing the sources for information about current affairs, as well as to how this information can be used to define views on social issues, the work from the Glasgow University Media Group is an exception from much of the ‘new’ audience research reviewed here, as it emphasises the power of the media to determine people’s ideas of reality, and how this power can distort the

26 Formerly Glasgow Media Group.
understanding of events. It has been criticised by Gauntlett and Hill for ignoring the way participants may consciously mimic or parody the material (1999: 11), yet the findings demonstrate how newspapers can provide the repertoires available for describing public issues, which is worthwhile bearing in mind for research with tabloid readers. However, with regards to questions about how and why newspapers are read, and in which ways they are used by readers, the work of the Glasgow University Media Group leaves a space open in focusing on the role of newspapers in everyday life.

**Reading tabloids**

When it comes to tabloids, there are two previous qualitative English-language studies published that aim to investigate this area.27 Perhaps the more well-known is Bird’s (1992) study of readers of U.S. supermarket tabloids, which sets out to investigate how the tabloids fit into the lives of some of their readers. Bird, combining this with a textual analysis as well as interviews with journalists, takes as her starting point the view that although ‘a complete understanding of the media role in social life is forever elusive (…) The important point is that the role of the media must be seen ethnographically, as one element in a complex interconnected mesh that constitutes culture and the individual’s experience of culture’ (ibid: 111). Partly inspired by Ang, Bird bases her research on letters from readers, of which some are followed up by telephone interviews, and uses her findings to refute the stereotypical view of tabloid readers as ‘trash’. Instead, she records a wide range of reasons for reading, often related to a curiosity and desire to enquire about the outside world. Ang’s concept of the ‘melodramatic imagination’, as a way out of the seemingly meaningless routines of the everyday existence, is employed to explain the appeal of tabloids. Bird also finds a common thread in experiences surrounding the reading, related to feelings of alienation from dominant perspectives:

> I believe the tabloids are to some extent an alternative way of looking at the world that may be valuable to people who feel alienated from dominant narrative forms and frames of reference.

(ibid: 160)

Another crucial element to Bird’s analysis is the difference she assigns to the reading of women and men. Her female respondents tended to use tabloid stories in a personal, family-orientated fashion, for example by cutting out parts that might interest friends or family members, whereas the male readers appeared to focus on aspects that in some way furthered their knowledge about the outside world. This difference became particularly significant when it came

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27 For an example of German-language research on tabloid reading, see Brichta (2002).
to celebrity stories, which while cherished by the women were dismissed by the men, many of whom said they ‘couldn’t care less about the doings of the rich and famous’ (ibid: 151). These findings are interesting, as they tell us about the way these male and female tabloid readers were inclined to describe their reading. However, Bird draws from these observations a general outline, which positions men and women’s interest in the reading material as polar opposites:

While women use the tabloids to negotiate their personal world, a central male reading strategy seems to be a positioning of the tabloids as ‘news’ or ‘information’ that helps them find out about the world outside them.

(ibid: 144)

This part of Bird’s analysis could be questioned for drawing a far-reaching conclusion about the readers’ actual tastes, based on indications that may say more about how the readers would like to be seen than what they actually like. Yet, as in-depth, contextual research which broke new ground in this area of journalism studies Bird’s work is important to build on when carrying out similar research on the other side of the Atlantic. It is however imperative to remember that while there are similarities between U.S. and British tabloids, there are, as noted in Chapter 2, important differences between these papers and their cultural contexts and care should be taken not to simply transfer findings from one study to another. As the U.S. tabloids do not carry news about political issues, Bird for instance does not provide an extensive analysis of tabloid reading from the point of view of democracy and public life.

Closer to home, there is Mark Pursehouse’s interview study (1992) on the relationship between 13 young British Sun-readers and the political climate of the late 1980s, conducted as part of a Master’s thesis around the same time as Bird’s research. Pursehouse notes that this paper has connotations to ‘racism, nationalism, sexism, homophobia, consumerism and Conservatism’ (1992: 88), and that assumptions about readers and their reading often are based on prejudice or judgements drawn solely from the Sun’s content. He stresses that such characterisations ignore the shifting subject positions and genre conventions available within the ‘bundle’ of content that is the Sun, and instead suggests that it is these gaps and uncertainties which create the pleasure between the genre and the reader, as enjoyment can be taken in building up one’s own opinions in relation to these (ibid: 99, 108). In his interview study, he also found enjoyments derived from the Sun to be the sociable relation between the paper and its readers, its humorous style and the opportunity to talk about scandals and gossip, as well as that the Sun featured as a structuring element in the everyday lives of the readers.

Although Pursehouse acknowledges individual differences in the reading, he emphasises the male, white, heterosexual perspective of the paper, and finds it mirrored in the readers; out of whom the women and the one black reader
interviewed were only able to enjoy the Sun through negotiating their identity positions to fit into this perspective, or through ignoring aspects of the paper. The issue of the Page Three feature becomes an area where Pursehouse sees ‘ample evidence of a continuing feeling of powerlessness’ (ibid: 114) among the female readers. His observation brings to attention the way the British tabloids and particularly the Sun are considered to pose difficulties for women readers due to their highly ‘masculine’ image. Such thoughts have however also been criticised, for instance by Patricia Holland, who argues that Page Three could be seen as addressed directly to women, as ‘part of the Sun’s discourse on female sexuality which invites sexual enjoyment, sexual freedom and active participation in heterosexual activity’ (1983: 93). A similar precaution could be applied as a criticism to Pursehouse’s argument that ‘revelations about private lives and gossip around sex are part of The Sun feeding the virtually insatiable appetite of traditional, male, heterosexual culture’ (1992: 107), which does not acknowledge the appeal this might have to other ‘cultures’.

While Pursehouse’s research draws attention to the reading habits and enjoyment surrounding the Sun, it does not place these in a wider cultural context, other than linking the readers’ individualistic attitudes and lack of wider social engagement to the conservative political climate of the 1980s, as expressed in the Sun. Pursehouse concludes that the chief sector of Sun-readers, leading ‘largely apolitical and often conflicting lives’, enjoy the Sun ‘because it is convenient, relaxing and might offer an enlightening moment, the chance for something to do, a conversational item or a touch of humour’ (ibid: 124). This generalises the wider section of readers in a way that comes close to prevalent stereotypes of Sun-readers as ‘apolitical’. In comparison to Bird, who criticises assumptions that tabloids are read ‘for entertainment’ as a ‘predictable conclusion that says nothing about what “entertainment” actually is or how that “entertainment” fits into readers lives’ (1992: 109), such a conclusion does not take into consideration the question of how the ‘enlightening moment’ as offered by the Sun would link in with readers’ social and cultural context. Lastly, both Pursehouse and Bird chose individual-centred research methods, which leave open questions about the way tabloids function in a social context. These are questions to build on when extending the knowledge about the reception of British tabloids, involving group- as well as individual-centred methods and the opportunity to compare responses to two different papers.

Summary

A central concept within the study of audiences continues to be the issue of influence. As I have discussed, ideas of media influence have been seen to have
moved away from concepts of influence as part of direct ‘effects’, to a more sophisticated notion of the interaction between media audiences and texts, where the active participation and interpretative abilities of audience members are stressed. Contemporary research developments, sometimes referred to as ‘new’ audience research, have also drawn attention to the importance of routines and contexts for understanding media consumption, and to the contingency of interpretation on wider cultural frameworks, such as inter-relations with other media.

Here, a more qualitative research approach has been in operation to capture an in-depth context for the media use. When it comes to popular, controversial and criticised formats, a general theme that emerges is that while, in theory or within textual analysis, a critical perspective of a straightforward ideological operation of the text in terms of for example contributing to social stereotypes appears easier to uphold then in studies with actual audiences, which reveal a more multi-faceted picture of media reception. However, some of these approaches have been questioned for losing sight of wider social structures that restrict interpretative abilities, and, in the stress on everyday life, lacking attention to the properties of the specific texts and the way that these feed into reception. It is worth asking, not simply how audiences engage with different texts, but also how this engagement is contingent upon their social world, and how it feeds back into this.

Looking at the field of news, there is little qualitative academic knowledge about responses to and uses of newspapers, especially surprising given the longevity of this medium and its prominent role in social and political theories of the media. Why do we read newspapers? What role do they play in our lives? When it comes to tabloids only two similar previous English-language studies have been carried out. These provide some material to build on, but leave many issues to be explored when investigating the way that the Sun and the Mirror are read. The following chapters will concentrate on the study of how these communicate with and are understood by readers.
CHAPTER 5
Researching Tabloid Texts and Readers

Introduction

Having examined tabloids in relation to historical and theoretical contexts, the following chapters concentrate on primary research into their roles among readers today. This chapter will explain and discuss the methods that have been used to do so. The aim is to reflect on the design of the study and the process of qualitative research; highlighting the choices made during collection of the fieldwork. Both the textual analysis of the newspapers and the readership research are considered, although it is worth pointing out that the main emphasis is on the readership research, as this constitutes the key aspect of the study.

In the first part of the chapter I provide a justification of the qualitative approach adopted, as well as an analysis of some methodological concerns relevant to qualitative researchers. I draw on Clive Seale’s The Quality of Qualitative Research (1999) to discuss the tension between positivism and more interpretivist tendencies in qualitative social research and how this can be utilised constructively in research practice. Next, the set-up of the study is detailed. The final part provides more personal reflections on the research process, as well as consideration of the limitations of the study.

A qualitative approach

Using qualitative methods

As was made clear in Chapter 1, I have overall adopted qualitative research methods in order to provide answers to my research questions. Quantitative methods, such as survey research, are useful for providing snapshots of audience behaviour and attitudes through the use of statistical data, but, as pointed out by Anders Hansen et. al., they are ‘less situated for telling us about the why or how’ of the relationships audience members form with different media (1998:
For capturing the way in which audiences engage with, talk about and construct meaning out of media content, qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, textual analysis and focus group interviews, are more likely to facilitate constructive insights.

Qualitative methods, moreover, are often chosen because they allow for a more in-depth study of social phenomena reliant on interpretation and contextualisation. In my case, a questionnaire aiming to find out how readers view tabloids is for example likely to have given a broad picture of opinions and value-judgements of readers, but the necessarily pre-set responses and numerical analysis of the data would have revealed little about the context of discussions, experiences of the newspapers and the language used to express these.

**Philosophical perspectives in qualitative research**

The choice of methods relate to wider philosophical aspects of methodology. Here, qualitative research methods are often interlinked with an opposition to the positivist vision in social research, and some consideration of what this means to the qualitative research is necessary before moving on to the research design.

Positivism in social research is defined by Seale as ‘an optimistic, moral commitment to a realm of ideas felt to have universal validity, located in a world that is independent of local human concerns’ (1999: 21). With ideas of a social world knowable through observation and testing, positivist social scientists are generally perceived of as committed to approaches characteristic of natural science, with an inclination for measurement and quantification, and a quest for statistical regularities that can be seen as ‘laws’ of human behaviour. Research is envisioned as true, objective knowledge, revealed through scientific enquiry (see also May, 2001: 9-11). In qualitative research, the positivist perspective has been heavily opposed to. Scale accounts for how the ousting of positivist science is part of qualitative researchers’ ‘creation myth’, whereby the positivist philosophy has been criticised for, among other things, lacking attention to the differences between the objects of social science and those of natural science, and for mistakenly ignoring the interaction between the observer and the observed. Against positivism has been held an idealist perspective, which emphasises the importance of ideas, so that the meanings attached to the world are dependent on a person’s or culture’s subjective experience. From an idealist perspective, researchers cannot proclaim disengagement from the subject matter, and should instead of aiming to uncover truths about an independent reality focus on understanding social life through people’s selections and

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28 Tim May notes that as positivism refers to varied traditions of social and philosophical thought, and is often used in a negative sense without regard to its history, the term runs the risk of being devoid of meaning (2001: 10).
interpretations of events and actions (Seale, 1999: 21-29, see also May, 2001: 14-15).

However, despite the connotations between particular methods and philosophical schools of thinking, Seale makes the point that in research practice the boundaries are far from clear, with idealist tendencies in some versions of positivism and positivist elements evident in versions of qualitative research. He also emphasises the pitfalls of extreme idealism for qualitative researchers, with its close proximity to a relativist outlook that, if taken to its ultimate conclusion, makes social research worthless in that all is relative to the perspective of the beholder. Instead of letting such philosophical accounts over-determine methodological practice, he argues that ‘philosophical positions can be understood by social researchers as resources for thinking, rather than taken as problems to be solved before research can proceed’. Social researchers, according to Seale’s view, benefit more from an awareness of the different positions, which can be used as frames of mind for particular research situations, than an over-deterministic subscription to any of these. For qualitative researchers, this suggests a ‘middle road’, which is ‘aware of the constructed nature of research, but avoids the wholesale application of constructivism to his or her own practice’ (1999: 23-29, quotes 25, 26).29

This proposed ‘middle road’ creates the potential for qualitative research taken to be referential to a social world outside of subjective experience30, and yet allows for sensitivity to the mediated nature of knowledge. I treat the question of how readers relate to tabloid newspapers as answerable through empirical enquiry, while trying to remain alert to the idea of knowledge as a construct. My analysis of the newspapers and of readers’ accounts of these is taken to make available aspects of this relationship, but I am also attempting to take into account how the research process provides the framework for these insights. Equally, when analysing the data from the readership research such an approach has meant that readers’ accounts have been treated both as referential to their relationship with the newspapers, revealing of how they experience and use these, but also as cultural constructs in themselves, where language and expression are part of an individual’s interpretation process.

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29 This kind of approach to social science can be found in a number of philosophical perspectives. Seale mentions subtle realism, analytic realism, Kantian soft or ‘transcendental’ idealism and critical realism (1999: 26).
30 Incidentally, such a perspective is a prerequisite for judgements about the plausibility of research accounts, as they inevitably involve a temporary subscription to the view that language is referential to a reality outside the text (see ibid: 27).
The ‘quality of qualitative research’

The twin concepts of validity and reliability have key status as criteria in the natural science and in positivist social research, but have a less self-evident position in much qualitative research. Validity – concerning questions of how well the research gives an accurate picture of reality – can be seen as problematic from an idealist viewpoint. Reliability (or replicability) – the attempt to ensure that a study yields the exact same results for different observers – may likewise cause difficulties in research where much depends on the interpretative skills of the researcher/s.

Nevertheless, to use no ideals for qualitative research makes it difficult to judge the research standard. Continuing to follow Seale’s line of thinking, he suggests that a discussion of schemes of validity and reliability is a helpful starting point for developing a methodological awareness for qualitative researchers, but that more flexible re-interpretations of such schemes are of practical use. The trustworthiness of the research, according to this perspective, can be enhanced by attention to its plausibility, giving existing knowledge about the research, and to its credibility, based on supporting findings with adequate evidence. Contextualisation of both the research subject and the research setting becomes important, as well as a continual effort to back up conclusions with evidence. Equally, the quality of a study can be seen in terms of its relevance to particular groups or research communities (1999: 12-13, 32-50).

Following such broad guiding ideals, I have looked to three more detailed measures open to qualitative researchers in the attempt to follow these. Of some importance here is, firstly, the concept of grounded theory, which stresses the continual moving back and forth between theory construction and examination of data. As this was outlined by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967) it allowed researchers to better incorporate more exploratory research into theory formulations, rather than simply gathering data in order to test hypotheses. However, the grounded theory approach in its original formulation contained an elaborate and often mechanistic scheme for inductive theory generation, to which, as pointed out by Seale, strict adherence is uncommon today. Instead, it is often adopted as a modified version which stresses the openness of the researcher for new perspectives as a result of data generation (1999: 91-105). As a study working from a set of exploratory research questions, it is this underlying principle that was considered important here. While the research questions were informed by the review of literature and previous work with readers, a more inductive approach was for instance adopted during the fieldwork, where my analysis of the newspapers and the talks with readers both in pilot research and during the readership study led to more detailed fields of enquiry within the main research questions.

A second measure that has bearing on the study design is triangulation, which involves the use of more than one method or the use of more than one
data set. A common idea regarding triangulation is that employing several methods at once will cancel out the biases of any one method, so that for example combining participant observation may ‘correct’ misrepresentations of an interview situation. However, a case can also be made for triangulation as a help to enhance understandings of different aspects of an issue, in for example learning about how different research settings influence the accounts given or how two different kinds of data sources may give different perspectives on a studied phenomenon (ibid: 52-61). It is this adaptation of triangulation that I considered useful to deepen the understanding of the role of tabloid newspapers to readers, which entailed attention to both the texts themselves and to the social as well as individual frameworks for reading experiences.

A final measure to mention before moving on to the research design is reflexivity of writing. As touched upon in Chapter 4, this is widely considered an essential aspect of contemporary qualitative research, whereby methodological accounting is used to guide readers through the research process. Reflexive research, as put by Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg in their summary of new directions for qualitative research, draws ‘attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer’ (2000: 5). The researcher must attempt to make as clear as possible the theoretical and methodological choices that informed the research, as well as to consider his or her own role in this process. As a step in this direction, the next part of the chapter outlines the research design and the rationale behind it.

**Research design**

*Selection of research methods*

The main methods chosen to investigate the research questions were a combination of focus groups and individual interviews with readers of the *Sun* and the *Mirror*. However, as I was interested in the way that the sense-making process of reading is shaped through the communicative strategies of these newspapers – a process which the discussion of audience studies (Chapter 4) has made clear is of relevance for contemporary reception research – I carried out a visual and textual analysis, which explores aspects of the style and content of the two papers in order to provide a backdrop for the reception research. The study is

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31 Triangulation can also be used in terms of the application of different theoretical propositions. Related measures that can be mentioned in this context include the search for negative instances or deviant cases as a way to check the trustworthiness of the conclusions, and analytic induction, where theories are formulated and re-formulated as empirical data is gathered (Seale, 1999: 52-61).
thus a two-part project, of which the readership research is the main part and a smaller part entails attention to the newspapers themselves. In the following discussion, the key emphasis is on the readership research, although the relationship between the two parts of the study is also considered.

The use of focus groups was considered productive as the method provides the opportunity to observe how readers make sense of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* through conversation and interaction with each other, and could thus give insights into the roles of the newspapers in everyday life sociability and into shared ways of understanding these. In comparison to individual interviews, focus groups also allow a wider range of people to be interviewed within the same limitations of time and resources.

The individual interviews, which were carried out with readers who did not participate in the focus groups, were on the other hand set up to counterbalance the strive for consensus that has been repeatedly noted in focus group research, which could push out marginal and contradictory opinions. Individual interviews have also been shown to have the capability to reveal personal feelings and experiences which remain untold in focus groups (see Michell, 1999). Originally, the interviews were planned to provide ‘life histories’, based on repeated meetings with participants, but due to difficulties in getting access to the amount of time required (discussed later on), the interviews were arranged similarly to the focus groups, but have provided more personal data. Here, participants were for example more likely to refer to personal experiences and feelings, and could talk more openly about their views on controversial aspects of tabloid content.

**Analysing tabloids as texts**

The textual and visual analysis was thus intended as a pre-text to the readership study, and it was carried out before the recruitment of readers started. One purpose of this analysis was to aid the plausibility of a valid interpretation of readers’ responses. As seen in the review of how to ensure quality in qualitative research, contextualisation plays a part here, and the higher awareness of the researcher as well as the readers of the research of its subject, the better likelihood of the accuracy of the interpretations of findings. This analysis was crucial for extending my own knowledge of the texts, which was of value both in the discussions with readers and in the formulation of interview questions.

However, the attention paid to tabloids as texts also works to heighten the awareness of the inter-play between readers and their newspapers. I discussed in Chapter 3 how audience studies can be carried out with a sole focus on the site of reception, but how recent analysis has pointed to the need for an awareness of how meaning is created through communicative strategies of specific texts. Since there was little work to build on in my field, such awareness is cru-
cial. Likewise, although previous textual analyses of tabloids are of some use here, these have mainly focused on a particular feature of these, such as celebrity stories (Connell, 1992), news reporting (Connell, 1998), melodrama (Gripsrud, 1992), sports coverage (Clayton and Harris, 2002), pin-up images (Holland, 1983, 1998) and discourses of nation (Conboy, 2005, see also Conboy, 2002), and do not give a broad overview of how the two specific newspapers under analysis communicated with readers at the time of the research. Thus, the textual analysis which will be presented in the next chapter was considered crucial to deepen the understanding of how the reception of tabloid journalism is shaped through a specific mode of address to readers.

Rather than providing a strict typology of inherent ‘messages’ in the text and then looking at how these are ‘decoded’ by audience members, which was the method of an encoding-decoding study such as Morley’s Nationwide study (1980, see Chapter 4), I choose a more discursive approach in analysing tabloids as texts, looking at the strategies and styles these use to communicate with readers and, in particular, at the identity positions they offer the reader to take up as part of tabloid reading. I was interested in how these stylistic and narrative features work to produce the basis for reading experiences, where format and style are as important as the content itself.

The analysis is based on my close reading of the two papers over a period of twelve months, between November 2002 and November 2003. During this time, I regularly bought the Sun and the Mirror. However, to make for a more focused analysis, I chose a representative week, in November 2003, from which the majority of examples are selected. As the analysis is meant to contribute to the understanding of the reading experience, I made the decision to incorporate all of the editorial content, including pictures, cartoons and specialist sections such as weekly sports magazines and agony aunt’s columns into this, as it is the product as a whole that will form the basis for the reading rather than, say, the news content on its own. As a consequence, the analysis provides a broad overview of the texts; looking at the particularities of the tabloid style and format, as well as drawing on a range of elements of literary and cultural theory to identify discursive themes vital to shaping the reading experience.

Recruitment of readers and the framing of the sample

Having carried out this analysis and looking for people who would take part in the study, I was keen to include both male and female regular readers from social groups representative of the main readerships. I was reluctant to advertise, given the criticism of qualitative researchers’ frequent emphasis on fans or

32 Such a selection is also used by Bird (1992), who in her readership study provides an overview of the U.S. tabloids.
self-selected samples (see Chapter 4), and the difficulties that advertising might pose in terms of screening the participants. Instead, to facilitate access and the acceptance of me as a researcher, I recruited the readers through the use of my own contacts and ‘snowball’ sampling (see May, 2001: 132). Acting as what Jenny Kitzinger and Rosaline Barber terms ‘gate-keepers’ (1999: 9) these contacts were vital for gaining access to readers, for example a foreman at a building site, who became the point of access for some of the people at the site, and a café worker at a café where the Sun and the Mirror were commonly read.

This recruitment method made it easier to get access to pre-existing groups, such as groups of friends or work colleagues, and this was favoured instead of the common use of groups not already acquainted, which is sometimes thought advantageous in that members are not inhibited by existing social hierarchies. I also felt that pre-existing groups were more suited to a study investigating the everyday life context of the reading, since these groups, as pointed out by Kitzinger and Barber ‘are, after all, the networks in which people might normally discuss or evade the sort of issues likely to be raised in the research sessions’ (1999: 8, see also Chapter 4). The strengths and weaknesses of this approach to recruitment will be discussed later, but it is worth noting here that while it meant I was able to observe the natural setting for the reading, for example at workplaces, it also created a greater dependence on participants’ own choice of time and location, for instance in fitting the discussions into a lunch-break.

Rather than attempting to compare a wide range of heterogeneous groups, the readers were sought for in social segments representative of a majority of readers. The focus is therefore not on the affluent, well-educated sections of the readers but on those drawn from the social segments constituting the majority of the readerships. The readers who participated were regular male and female readers of social categories C1-E33, and included secretaries and others in administrative positions, shop assistants as well as skilled and unskilled manual labourers. As seen in Chapter 2, these social segments represent over three-quarters of both papers’ readerships. The participating readers were from London and Greater London, two of the strongholds for both the Sun and the Mirror. They were aged 18-35 at the time of the interviews, as readers in this age group represent a large section of both papers’ readers (about 40 per cent of Sun-readers and 30 per cent of Mirror-readers34), and it is a crucial age group for the competition between the two papers (Rooney, 2000: 94).

33 In the study I conducted with readers of the Sun as part of my BA dissertation, there was some distinction between the way the Sun was perceived by white-collar (C1) and manual workers (C2-E). However, as similarities were over-arching, I did not consider there was a need to keep them separate.
34 These figures are based on the National Readership Survey age categories of 15-24 and 25-34. Interviewing those under 18 would involve the need for getting parental consent. In spite of the fairly broad spectrum of readers aged 18-34, this composition can be seen as reflecting a common life-stage, involving experiences of early career development and family-building. This frame
Thus, the sample was framed to be suggestive of important reader groups. However, as I have noted previously (Chapter 1) and discuss in more detail later, this study does not purport to generalise the findings to all readers but to utilise the potential of the qualitative case study. It intends to expand the understanding of the reading rather than to overview statistical variations of the readerships, and no further effort was taken to ensure a match of the readership profile. The sample allows for a repetition of themes across groups and interviews and it is suited for in-depth study where a smaller sample is beneficial as the researcher can gain a comprehensive overview of participants and research scenes. It also reflects the resources at hand for a single-authored PhD. All in all, 55 readers participated; 35 male and 20 female. These readers were interviewed either individually or in small focus groups between May and January 2004/05. More detailed information about the readers as a group will be given in the next chapter (see also appendix D for a list of readers).

**Interview set-up**

The *Sun* and the *Mirror* have plenty in common in terms of style, news values and readerships, and ‘tabloids’ are often treated as a singular phenomenon in media analysis, yet I considered them sufficiently different to justify composing separate focus groups of *Sun*- and *Mirror*-readers. This was also because the ongoing competition between the two has lead to a self-assertive dialogue between them, and preliminary talks with readers showed that this had been picked up on by them. Likewise, as the review of literature makes apparent, gender-related differences (or similarities) in the experiences of reading the tabloids were within my interest to investigate, which necessitated some separate groups of male and female readers.

In total, 11 focus groups of 3-6 readers were carried out, with at least two groups of male/female and one group each of mixed gender for each paper. This relates to the view that a minimum of two focus groups in each segment is generally required to ensure some consensus across variables (see e.g. Morgan, in Hansen et. al, 1998: 269). The small group sizes are linked to the concern with finding naturally occurring groups, which are often not as large as the focus groups commonly used in market research and in social research where group members are not previously acquainted. Alongside these groups, two individual interviews with female readers and 12 with male readers took place. As stated previously, these were carried out in a similar way to the groups, using

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35 Bird (1992) for example, treats all tabloid readers as one category in her reception study of U.S. supermarket tabloids.
the same interview guide, but required more interaction with me and yielded more personal data.

The discussions lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the time available for the interview and the number of participants. They were semi-structured and taped and taking place where participants were thought to feel comfortable, such as quiet pubs and cafés, and in several cases at workplaces. Although no payment was offered, participants were when appropriate bought something to drink or snack on, and if travelling a distance, had their travel paid for. In each discussion, a recent copy of the paper in question was used as stimuli. After the discussions the participants were also asked to fill in a short questionnaire regarding other news sources and personal data (appendix A).

Asking questions

The questions around which all interviews centred emerged partly from literature on the subject, for instance calling for the exploration of the perception of tabloid newspapers and their treatment of public affairs news, and partly from the textual analysis, in which I had identified stylistic and thematic focuses of the newspapers. The latter included understandings of tabloid style, celebrity stories and gendered news. Finally, some of the questions, for example the issue of trust, were included as a result of previous talks with readers and matters that had been raised in two pilot groups with student readers of the respective papers, which were carried out in April 2004. The pilot groups also led to some changes concerning the phrasing of questions both for the interviews and in the questionnaire, simplifying the language used, and led me to be alert to discussions of certain kinds of popular content, for example the tabloid advice columns and horoscopes.

In the interviews, the participants were encouraged to discuss these questions based on a simple interview guide (appendix B), moving from overall perceptions, likes and dislikes of the papers to views of specific parts of the content. The intention with the guide was to go from the general to the more particular, with open-ended questions that would stimulate discussion. Likewise, care was taken here to avoid leading questions, and to be sensitive to the controversial aspects of tabloid reading. For example, although I was interested in possible differences in the newspapers’ appeal to women and men, I attempted to first let this unveil in questions about features such as the Page 3 and sports pages, rather than forcing responses about this in a direct question, unless these issues were brought up by the participants.

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36 There was no attempt to videotape the interviews, as this method can sometimes be considered intrusive and I was keen to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible.
Hansen et. al. recommend that the interview guide should state the expected time spent on each question (1998: 276), but a more permissive approach was chosen, as the attention the participants are willing to give to certain issues could indicate which areas of the reading experience are important to them, which was part of the objective of the study. The semi-structured nature of the moderation meant that I was free to expand on topics brought up by the participants, and to some extent let them lead the discussions into their areas of interest.

**Analysis of data**

To ensure as high quality transcripts of the interviews as possible, all tapes were transcribed shortly after the interviews, in most cases within the next couple of days. The transcripts are in full, including the use of slang, pauses in speech and laughter, as I considered such nuances in speech revealing of common ways of talking about the newspapers, as well as of the participants’ frames of reference (see appendix C for a guide for transcription conventions). For example, frequent pauses or broken up sentences around certain interview topics, such as tabloid politics and pin-ups, pointed to important conflicts in participants’ experiences of these. Likewise, particular expressions concerning the newspapers, such as ‘comic’ or ‘easy read’, were in themselves revealing both of common perceptions of these and of how the readers positioned themselves in relation to this material.

The transcripts were aided by some field notes with general observations about the groups or readers, which I had taken after the interviews; working to refresh my memory of what had been said. The notes were also a help when interpreting the transcripts, as they added information about details such as the overall atmosphere or individual character traits, which for example could determine the difference between a laughter used to conceal an underlying nervousness and a laughter which indicated a relaxed atmosphere. Here, likewise, my presence at all of the interviews was an advantage – again a benefit of the small-scale case study.

The transcripts were coded and prepared for analysis in the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo. The codes were partly based on the questions raised by the interview guide, detailing pre-set topics raised, such as ‘politics’, ‘celebrity’ and ‘gender’, and, more in line with the grounded theory approach, a result of going through the data, where specific themes or commonly used phrases, such as ‘easy read’, were coded for analysis. As pointed out by Graham R. Gibbs, the use of NVivo for qualitative data analysis is not a replacement for creative thinking and analytic skill, however the software is certainly supportive in the ‘task of coding data, searching text and undertaking analysis through the comparison of nodes’ (2002: 220). Even a small-
scale qualitative project usually generates vast amounts of material to analyse, and in this case the software was useful in helping to organise the transcripts and in enabling the comparison between different parts of discussions across the data set.

The questionnaire filled in alongside the interviews was analysed by a basic count, as it was a very simple data set and did not require the use of a statistical software package.

Reflections on the research process

Flexibility in research practice

The outline of the research design gives one important account of the research, but this is only part of the methodological story of this project. The other is to do with the research as a process, where practical concerns were sometimes in stark discrepancy with the textbooks on methods. A discussion of some of the main stumbling blocks that I encountered along the way is in line with the reflexive approach outlined above, and helps with the overall understanding of this project.

As opposed to the relatively easy gathering of material for the textual analysis, an obstacle when carrying out the readership research was the difficulty to recruit readers. I was reluctant to advertise, given the criticism of qualitative researchers’ frequent emphasis on fans or self-selected samples (see Chapter 4). I lacked funds to pay participants, and also believed that payment would entail the risk of recruiting people who participated only to gain a fee. Yet, access was a bigger problem than foreseen, and it was difficult to get people to give up their time as well as gathering readers at a given place and time. Partly, this was a problem related to a reluctance to admit to reading a tabloid newspaper, which indicates a kind of social ‘stigma’ that will be discussed in coming chapters. On numerous occasions I was told by people I had sometimes myself observed reading either paper on a regular basis that they ‘wouldn’t normally read it’. In some cases, people took offence to my even asking whether they read a tabloid. This is well illustrated by the following e-mail response, which I received from an acquaintance having sent out a group e-mail asking for contacts to tabloid readers:

Dear Sofia,

Thanks for your e-mail. Unfortunately I wouldn’t touch any of these papers, and I don’t know anyone who reads such tat!

Best,

XXX
During this period of recruitment, the contrasts between the neat directions of the methods texts and a messy reality, where concepts of ‘audiences’ and ‘readerships’ are far from clean-cut, became obvious. For example, while, in categorisations of audiences, the age range of 18-34 that I had selected seemed logical, a group of colleagues at an office might all read the same newspaper and experience this in similar ways despite age differences, and there were occasions when the age range became a hindrance for recruiting such pre-existing groups. On the question of age, I nevertheless kept to the set guidelines except in two cases where readers aged 35 took part. But in other ways I found a flexible research practice helpful. For instance, as I came to learn that one way to aid the contribution of pre-existing groups would be to shorten the interview time slightly to fit into the groups’ daily schedule, two of the initial ‘warm-up’ questions for the interviews, concerning reading habits, were adapted to go into the questionnaire instead. Likewise, while my original intention had been to run 8 larger focus groups, I ended up running 11 smaller groups to ensure enough participants and satisfactorily repetition of themes across the groups.

Thus, I believe that some flexibility in qualitative research practice is important, and should perhaps be discussed more openly in terms of texts on methodology. The recruitment eventually led to a sample which overall fits the research design, and which has yielded results that are trustworthy in that themes that are explainable against the background knowledge of tabloids have been repeated across the groups and interviews. Yet, a retrospective thought is that advertising for or paying readers would have been beneficial as it might have made the process of recruiting readers easier.

Researching a foreign culture

The difficulty of recruitment is endemic of another issue in need of elaboration: my role as a researcher of a foreign culture. As a Swedish academic, I was an outsider to the cultural setting of my research in more than one way – neither representative of the majority of tabloid readers in terms of educational background, nor in terms of nationality. Although I had lived and worked in England for almost ten years, I have a Swedish accent when speaking and could clearly not be accepted as one of ‘us’ in this context. It is possible that this was an additional hinder for the recruitment process.

In other ways, too, being an ‘outsider’ could be problematic. This was in some ways noticeable in terms of my gender difference from the male participants – especially in the discussions of sensitive issues such as the Page Three

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37 One participant had turned 35 prior to my knowledge and another took part in a group due to a misunderstanding of the age range.
feature in the *Sun*. In most cases, this was evident through the embarrassment and difficulty in talking about this feature, which shall be discussed in more detail in the analysis of the data. On two occasions readers handled this embarrassment through rather aggressively checking with me if I as a young woman were disturbed by the feature, and even asking if I would consider taking part in it. This can be seen as attempts at gaining control over a situation which was made uncomfortable by my presence, and is well illustrated by the following example from my first focus group with male *Sun*-readers. This was a difficult group, which in general seemed unused to a structured discussion38, and in this instance one reader ‘took over’ my role as an interviewer:

Ronnie: I suppose for all men, when they pick up this paper, the first thing they do is go like that [holds up Page Three]. And that’s about it. I mean, that’s what I do, let’s face it.
Tom: Yeah cause women, they just skip past that. Isn’t that’s what they do [turns to me]?
Interviewer: Well, maybe not all women?
[…] Ronny: What do you think about Page Three, from a woman’s perspective?
Interviewer: Well, you know, it can be fun to look at…
Steve: Do you think it’s degrading?
Interviewer: Well, they’ve chosen to do it, so…
Ronnie: That’s right.
Steve: If I’m looking at Page Three and I’m on the bus I’ll flick through the pages. I don’t want people to think I’m some sort of…
Ronnie: [continues turned to me] How would you feel about, like, you went home and your boyfriend was looking at Page Three? Would that bother you?
Interviewer: Well, it depends, I don’t think so, but…
Ronnie: Would you like to do it? What about a camera?
[laughter]
Interviewer: Ah, I’m sorry, I don’t think so!
[laughter]

My strategy here was to appear as non-threatening as possible in order to take the edge off some of the tension, but this example clearly shows the difficulty that my difference to the participants created in this moment of the discussion.

The example also raises questions about the style of moderation. The traditional interview format, where the moderator refuses to reveal his or her own ideas to avoid bias, has been criticised by feminist researchers as exploitative and unbalanced (Seale, 1998: 205), and yet I had to be careful to not come across as too critical or threatening regarding aspects of the reading material. In

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38 Before the discussion, one group member joked that ‘it’s like being back at school’, and the participants of this group seemed to find it difficult to concentrate on the questions and kept talking over each other.
many cases, it was simply a question of trying to be responsive to the needs of the particular situation, with the overall aim of putting participants at ease and creating as trusting of an atmosphere as possible. The role of the moderator in focus group research will obviously vary depending on the type of response sought and the nature of the participants, but, as noted by Hansen et. al., successful moderation will generally be dependent on ‘difficult-to-define attributes as the ability to establish rapport with group participants, the ability to put participants at ease, the ability stimulate discussion among participants rather than with the moderator himself of herself, and the ability to keep the discussion gently on course without imposing an overly restrictive agenda or format on the participants’ (1998: 273).

The above example aside, I felt that in most cases my difference from the participants helped in terms of creating a relaxed atmosphere where they seemed to feel relatively free to express their experiences. Being neither representative of the British class system, nor of the readers themselves it seemed I was perceived as a kind of ‘tourist’; a non-intimidating moderator which, once difficult moments were overcome, required a great deal of elaboration. Examples of this were how readers would sometimes use expressions such as ‘In Britain…’ or ‘Well, I think you will find that here, we...’ to frame more detailed explanations of perceptions of the newspapers. Another example can be given from an interview where a reader, explaining how the Mirror’s crossword helped with his advancement of his language skills, suggested to me it would be a good help when ‘learning English’. In this situation, the fact that I was a foreigner and therefore in some sense ‘inferior’ or non-threatening to a native-speaker, contributed to a situation where this reader felt comfortable speaking about his own insecurities.

Overall, I enjoyed the discussions, and I believe that this enjoyment was generally shared by the participants. Indications of this can be seen in the relatively high interaction overall in the focus groups discussions, in the free use of everyday language and slang, and in the jokes and frequent laughter, which I in many cases understood as signs of enjoyment in being able to discuss a subject that played a regular part in the participants’ everyday lives. This relatively relaxed discussion climate can also be seen as an advantage of using pre-existing groups, where participants are comfortable in each other’s presence. Thus, researching a ‘foreign culture’ brings with it both difficulties and research po-

39 Such ‘sensitive moments’ are in themselves noteworthy as part of the research findings (see Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999, for a discussion of the analytic potential of sensitive moments in focus group discussions).
40 I am aware that laughter is not necessarily a sign of comfort but can equally be used to conceal insecurities and nervousness. However, my overall impression of the discussions is one of enjoyment in being stimulated to talk about something that mattered to the participants.
tential, but sensitivity to these issues and the dynamics of the specific research project are paramount.

A question of ethics

The previous example also highlights ethical questions raised by this study. The two newspapers, as noted, are often looked down on as ‘trash’ or seen as directly harmful to its readers. As an academic it could be tempting to get caught up in the often derogatory way critics and other academics have looked at the *Sun* and implicitly its readers, defying the purpose of exploring what the readers get out of this paper. Equally, as I will discuss in coming chapters, there is evidence that negative images of the papers are well-known by its readers, which is part of this problem, as feelings of cultural inferiority may have led to unwillingness to participate and are likely to have given rise to some self-censorship or defence strategies in the discussions. Clearly, dealing with a controversial topic calls for a heightened ethical awareness by the researcher. As discussed above, flexibility in research practice, the choice of research settings and moderation techniques designed to create trust and openness were all ways to tackle the practicalities of this aspect of the study.

A related ethical issue concerns the relationship between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’ in terms of social groups. Qualitative media reception researchers surprisingly often choose to research social classes or groups other than to that which they themselves belong, for example in the attention aimed at the media habits of housewives, or, as noted in Chapter 4, at media fans. This can be taken as reluctance to problematise one’s own context or setting this up as the norm. Such a concern has a bearing on this study, as the popular tabloids are read by a largely working-class readership, with participants with comparatively low educational levels. However, again an awareness of these issues could foster a sensitive understanding and analysis, and seen from different perspective, attempting to ‘give a voice’ to members of a group that in spite of its size often is marginalized in cultural debates, could be seen as one of the strengths of the study.

Limitations

The study has in common with other qualitative research a difficulty in generalising the findings to larger populations, which, as pointed out by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, often is seen ‘as a weakness in the approach’ (1999: 193). Such a concern is relevant both for the analysis of the newspapers and of the readership research. What, one might ask, is the point of the research if the findings are limited to the specific groups involved, or to the researchers’ capacity to analyse material? There are different ways of thinking...
about generalising in qualitative research. Marshall and Rossman emphasise that while qualitative research is not designed to be replicable in the same way as quantitative studies, readers of the research must always make their own judgements about the relevance of findings for their situations. Those working within the same theoretical parameters will then determine ‘whether or not the case studies described can be generalized for new research policy or transferred to other settings’ (ibid). Another perspective is offered by Seale, who comes to the conclusion that in spite of the obstacles generalisation is a desirable goal for qualitative researchers, which can be aided by: ‘Thick, detailed case study description’, to ‘give readers a vicarious experience of ‘being there’ with the researcher, so that they can use their human judgement to assess the likelihood of the same processes applying to other setting which they know’ (1999: 118). One can add that in spite of difficulties in generalising the findings in audience research, carefully designed focus group interviews, in the words of May, ‘can provide a valuable insight into [my italics] both social relations in general and the examination of processes and social dynamics in particular’ (2001:126). While designed to facilitate insights representative of the readership, this small-scale study, again, is not meant to overview the likes and dislikes of all readers but to give insights into experiences of reading these two newspapers.

Likewise, the research, attempting to interpret discussions, is open to criticism about objectivity. Using myself as the research instrument, how can I know that my interpretations of readers’ responses are accurate? And do I know whether they have been truthful? Here, Marshall and Rossman emphasise the strength of qualitative research in attempting to gain in-depth knowledge about the social or cultural situation of the research participants, increasing the likelihood that the researcher can describe the social systems being studied (1999: 194) – which relates to the previous discussion about measures taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the research, where the textual analysis played a part. To work with a small-scale case study and pre-existing groups also proved beneficial here, in that I for example was able to, in carrying out all interviews myself, gain impressions about the participants and the way that the newspapers played a role in their social context.

In terms of the readers’ ‘truthfulness’, their reports, as in most research based on participant accounts, are what I have to work with, and it seems fruitful to assume that most of these are what the participants consider to be the truth. However, as illustrated by this quote from Morley, participants’ accounts are interesting in themselves, as indexical of their frames of reference:

Seale contrastingly criticises what has been termed ‘theoretical generalization’, which depends on the logics of the theoretical reasoning, rather than on the typicality of the case, as he sees the success of this, in the last stance, nevertheless dependent on empirical confirmation (ibid: 109-113).
... I am left only with the stories the respondents chose to tell me. These stories are, however, themselves both limited by, and indexical of, the cultural and linguistic frames of reference which respondents have available to them, through which to articulate their responses.

(in Hermes, 1995: 178)

Problematising objectivity, then, is necessary for this type of research. However, doing so can lead to a more considered approach.

A specific limitation of this study is the limited period of time afforded with the participants. While some ethnographic research involves months spent with a particular culture, and more well-financed audience research may entail revisitations, several hours long interviews or a combination of interviews with other forms of audience data such as diaries, my methods relied on limited access, and cannot give as rich a picture of the particularities of the group who took part. The difficulties in recruiting led to a great dependence on participants’ own requirements in terms of time, and, as noted previously, discussions sometimes had to be fitted into a lunch break in order for the interviews to take part. Given the resources available, it has to be acknowledged that the findings are based on this necessary limitation, which means that aspects of participant’s experiences and viewpoints, which may have required more wide-ranging data sources or lengthier interviews, will be unaccounted for.

Summary

As I have outlined in this chapter, a qualitative approach was overall deemed the most useful for the requirements of the research. Such an approach can be discussed in terms of philosophical perspectives on research, where tensions between positivistic science and approaches to research based on an idealist perspective are played out. I have followed the suggestion by Seale to not let a wholesale subscription to either position over-determine the research, but in practice be aware of the constructed nature of research while avoiding extreme constructivism or relativism. Equally, while I did not find rigid positivist criteria relevant for this type of qualitative social research, measures taken to aid research quality include adherence to some basic principles behind the grounded theory approach, a triangulation of methods and reflexivity in writing and analysis.

The research design reflects these concerns. An effort has been made to ensure a combination of methods that allows for learning about the style and content of the newspapers as well as for readers’ experiences of these, including observations of the social context constitutive of the reading and the more personal data obtained in individual interviews. The sample is framed to offer
insights potentially representative of important readership groups, and care was taken to provide a research setting where participants would feel as comfortable as possible. However, my reflections on the research process point to the need for some flexibility required in the research practice, as well as raising questions about advantages and disadvantages with the recruitment procedure, with researching a ‘foreign’ culture and about the ethics of the project.

As discussed, it is important to acknowledge that the purpose of the research is to contribute to understandings of the reading of tabloid newspapers, rather than to generalise the findings to statistical variations of a whole population of readers. A more particular limitation, however, is the constraint on time afforded with the research participants. The data that is the basis for the readership analysis represents a necessary selection of participants’ experiences. The analysis of how the papers communicate with readers, the subject of the next chapter, aims to give a fuller understanding of these experiences, in order to aid the subsequent examination of readers’ own views and stories.
CHAPTER 6

Tabloids as Texts

Introduction

This chapter examines stylistic and generic properties of the *Sun* and the *Mirror*. Drawing on cultural and literary theory, it aims to support an informed view of how these papers communicated with readers at the time of the research, as well as to, through a broad analysis, make clear the textual and visual elements that characterise popular tabloids.

The following analysis is based on my close reading of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* over a period of twelve months, between November 2002 and November 2003. I have chosen a representative week, in November 2003, from which the majority of examples are selected. The analysis starts with a discussion of the tabloid format, news style and news values, looking at how these contribute to shape the reading experience. Following this, I introduce an in-depth discursive analysis, looking at three textual themes – community, gender and celebrity – which are important for contributing to identity formations within the reading.

Tabloid style and content

*Format*

The popular tabloid is instantly recognisable among the papers piling up at the news agent’s. Colourful and compact, it stands out from the mass of black-and-white print through its bold, screaming headlines, its picture-dominated front page and the generous use of colour. The following part of the chapter will go beyond that front page, to look at the format, news style and news values that contribute to form the basis for the reading experience of the *Sun* and the *Mirror*.

Looking at the format, firstly, a point should be made about readers’ ability to be discriminatory in their selection of content. As underlined by Connell:
They [the readers] can go straight to the sports pages and then read nothing else or merely glance at what is presented on the other pages. Stories can be read in snatches, and it’s worth noting that they are presented in a way which presupposes they will be.

(1992: 67)

Such potential for reading in snippets apply to all newspapers, but is especially encouraged in the popular tabloids. Short, clearly demarcated stories and the common highlighting of particular words or sentences in the text mean that readers can take in the content in easily digestible snippets, aided by the prominence of images and graphical ‘hooks’. These aspects of the format encourage selective browsing. In combination with the use of short sentences and a plain language, they contribute to the accessibility of the popular tabloids.

The organisation of content in the two newspapers is practically interchangeable, enabling a Sun-reader to navigate through the pages of the Mirror and vice versa. If the reader’s journey is began from the front, the first stop will be the political and public affairs news on page two. However, the eye-catching and picture-dominated colour features on page three is a more likely first dwelling. In the Sun, the reader will be greeted by a smiling, bare-breasted Page Three girl. The Mirror instead features celebrity material or a light, humorous news story on page three. But the Mirror also often uses lightly clad women as a hook here – in the sample week readers are for instance invited to admire ex-Spice Girl Geri Halliwell’s new ‘CURVY LOOK’. The star, in revealing beach snaps, is depicted as a ‘WATER BABE’, who ‘struggles to stay in bikini’ (Nov 5).

If page three is important as the initial attention-seeker inside both papers, the mixture of news and features that follows is punctuated by regular features, such as a the leaders and columns. These provide reference points, ‘markers’ from which to overview the content. In both papers, prominent markers are the two-page showbusiness columns, the Sun’s ‘Bizarre’ and the Mirror’s ‘3 AM’, which in their collage-like display and full use of colour signal a departure from the black-and-white world outside of the premiers and celebrity bashes. The TV listing, ending the news and feature sections and being followed by a wealth of other items, such as agony aunts, letter’s pages, cartoons, puzzles, crosswords, horoscopes and classified ads, is another significant marker.
As is common newspapers practice, the sport section is placed at the very end. But it makes up roughly 30 per cent of the papers’ total volume, and, with the last page catching the reader’s eye with breaking sports news, both papers stress the possibility of this being the most eagerly read part. Hence, the readers are treated to a mix of news and regulars in a format that encourages browsing and the intake of content in snatches. The frequent punctuation of current affairs news with ‘light’, colourful items, such as the gossip columns, guarantees a lively reading journey; making sure the attention of the readers, betrothed on the front page, is kept up. This format works in tandem with a news style whose key quality is an untrammelled ability to stir the emotions.

**News style – melodrama, humour, self-reflexivity**

A noticeable feature of the tabloids is their melodramatic handling of news. Melodrama as a literary genre has been defined by Brooks as ‘strong emotionalism; moral polarisation and schematisation; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue’ (1984: 11-12, see also Chapter 2). Stylistically, the melodramatic is evident in a range of tabloid devices, such as large, dramatic headlines and the close-ups of faces and playing up emotions of individual news actors. It is also shown in the emphasis on ‘earthquake news’, where a single news story is blown up to the extreme. In the sample week, a story of a man on trial for murdering two school girls in Soham was allocated such magnitude in both papers to one day
fill the entire first eleven pages (Nov 6). ‘THEY DIED IN HIS HOUSE’ was the one grim front page headline of the Sun that day, with the Mirror announcing the ‘SOHAM TRIAL SENSATION’ with a similar explosive: THEY WERE MURDERED IN HIS HOUSE’. The story was framed in emotive and moralising language, dramatised through pictures of the murder site, maps of the girls’ last walk, cut-out images of their belongings and pictures of grieving parents. The girls, shown playing in football shirts, were sentimentally depicted as ‘Two little Beckhams’ (the Sun, p. 4-5, the Mirror p. 8-9).

A theatrical textual and visual display, then, facilitates an appeal to emotion and the recognition of human experience. Sensations, ranging from the tragic to those conveyed in feel-good stories, are delivered daily. However, while tabloids as melodrama has received scholarly attention, one aspect of the popular tabloid sensation – the laughter it is inviting – deserves particular consideration. Embedded in texts, pictures and headlines, the joke is a constant connector of the popular tabloid news discourse. As I explained in the historical overview in chapter 2, the joke has developed as a key conduit for the tabloid headline, with puns, witticisms and word-games signature parts.

Although both papers put on an unusually grave tone in the sample week due to the Soham trial, the pages were rife with headline jokes. ‘LOSING WAS HANDY… I’M READY FOR MANDY’ exclaimed the Sun of a Pop Idol reject.

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42 There is a striking similarity here between men’s lifestyle magazines, a recent and successful genre of the magazine market. The use of humour is a well-noted feature of these (see e.g. Benwell, 2001, Stevenson and Brooks, 2003, Gauntlett, 2002), although the influence of popular tabloids in shaping the magazines has been given less attention.
missing his fiancée (Nov 3, p. 19), while the *Mirror* used ‘ROYAL FLUSH’ as a headline for a story about Indian villagers arranging a special flush-toilet for Prince Charles (Nov 3, p. 10). As shown in the *Mirror*-headline ‘THE GREAT RATE ROBBERY’ for a story about raised mortgage rates (Nov 7, p. 19), many humorous headlines allude to events supposedly well-known to readers, in this case the Great Train Robbery of 1963 – incurring problem-solving and allowing the reader into the ‘sociolect’ of the newspapers (see Benwell, 2001: 29).

The joke is furthermore employed in graphics, which, creating comic scenarios of otherwise neutral images, can add humorous touches, stress the impact of the accompanying texts, or serve to ridicule a person or group. The latter strategy was employed several times during the year I surveyed the two tabloids. The *Sun*, outraged at the president of France’s ‘spineless’ refusal to go to war against Iraq, branded him Jacques ‘Le Worm’ Chirac and subsequently featured what one article described as ‘wriggly wobbler Chirac’ (Feb 21, p. 12-13), with his head pasted onto the body of a worm. The *Mirror* employed similar techniques to portray Michael Howard, the Conservative Party leader, as a draconian character, pictured with graphical fangs and Dracula cape for effect.

![Image](image_url)

*The joke: An essential aspect of tabloid reporting. Politician Michael Howard depicted as Dracula, the *Mirror*, Nov 13, and the then French president Jacques Chirac as a ‘worm’, the *Sun*, Feb 21.*

Showing how humour is visually intermeshed with the news style, these examples reveal another aspect of this: its self-reflexivity. Self-referencing, expressed textually in for example the *Mirror* front page caption ‘Newspaper of the Year’ or a story caption such as ‘Ex-champ gives his first interview… to his No1 paper’ (the *Sun*, Nov 3, p. 4-5) works to imprint brand awareness, but may
also remind readers of the presence of the papers as active forces in the news production. Or, as expressed in this *Mirror*-leader, of an ability to *make* the news:

The past few months have not only seen us take a stand against the war in Iraq, but our publication of Paul Burrell’s [Princess Diana’s butler] revelations. Not for the first time *we were making* the news as well as reporting it.  
(Nov 3, p. 6, my italics)

The self-reflexivity singles out popular tabloids from the rest of the press and broadcast news media, where stylistic devices are employed precisely to put the journalistic process in the background. It raises questions about its reception. Liesbeth van Zoonen has suggested that because news is relied upon to tell the truth, a person’s critical awareness of underlying ideological messages in the media may be greater when consuming entertainment, which is seen as a realm of fantasy (1994: 35-36, 151-152). The news style of the *Sun* and the *Mirror*, in a more openly revealed relation to fictional narratives, could work in a similar way, encouraging a sceptical reading. It is worthwhile asking how far tabloid news is taken seriously by readers. As seen, its main aim is to stimulate sensations, yet, the constant presence of the joke provides relief from the tragedy and drama offered, enabling a distancing to the material at hand. Paradoxically, the joke can also add potency to persuasive political messages, as the invite to laugh along is an invite to agree with the newspaper. The role of humour is therefore ambiguous, and deserves attention when exploring the way that readers relate to tabloid newspapers.

**News values – showbiz, the popular and the ordinary**

Another aspect of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* of interest to this study is their news values, as these show what the papers believe are important to readers.43 A starting-point when analysing news values of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* is to look at their layout. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen have pointed out that this is an element of importance to the examination of news:

> When we write, our message is expressed not only linguistically, but also through a visual arrangement of marks on a page. Any form of analysis which ignores this will not be able to account for all the meanings expressed in texts.  
> (1998: 187)

43 Although, as pointed out by Bird and Robert Dardenne (1988), newsworthiness is often regarded by journalists as intrinsic to an event, news values are culturally specific codes and vary between individual news outlets. A well-known attempt at summarising what makes an item interesting to news organisations is Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge’s (1965) categorisation of news values.
Thus, news values can be traced in the visual modes of communication as much as in the textual. Here, newspaper front pages are of particular significance, as these ‘orient their readers to the world’ (ibid: 216).

A striking characteristic of the layout for these papers is the very scarcity of items on the front page. The *Sun* and *Mirror* generally carry only two (although sometimes three) distinctly framed items here, of which one could be a reader’s offer, a pointer to a feature inside the paper, or a showbiz image with a short text. As a result of the few news items on the front page, the significance of each is amplified. But the stories on the front page are also given an internal hierarchy of importance, through ‘visual clues’ provided by the layout. Readers, as Kress and van Leeuwen write, ‘are able to judge the “weight” of the various elements of the layout, and the greater the weight of an element, the greater the salience’ (ibid: 200). Kress and van Leeuwen mention for example tonal and colour contrast, perspective and placement in the visual field as contributing factors to the salience – with elements perceived as ‘heavier’ when moved towards the top.

As in the sample week, the items placed closer to the top, such as a Page Three contest, a pointer to a football supplement, a free cartoon DVD (the *Sun*), as well as an *Eastenders* wedding ‘Exclusive’, a ‘celebrity women as footballers’-feature and a free comedy DVD (the *Mirror*), often derive from the world of showbiz and leisure, whereas those placed towards the bottom, for instance a story about the NHS (the *Mirror*), are closer to traditional public affairs news. Following the general rule that items closer to the top are more salient44, the front pages indicate that, while public affairs news is important, stories stemming from showbiz and the consumption of leisure are assigned special prominence. It hardly needs stating that the category of celebrity plays a vital part on the front page and within the news in general. The celebrity columns are assigned a visually significant position in the papers, and the catchphrase ‘celeb’, or ‘celebrity’, as in the ‘celebrity women as footballers’-feature, is deployed to attract interest in a wide range of content.

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44 As Kress and van Leeuwen note, the salience is not objectively measurable but the result of a complex relationship between a number of factors (1998: 200).
It is also noteworthy that inter-textual cultural references are almost exclusively to do with mass-audience entertainment material. This is evident in all parts of the papers, from the kind of cultural icons considered newsworthy, to the great attention paid to football, the ‘people’s sport’. In particular, the papers’ TV magazines provide good examples of the kind of culture that is the breeding grounds for these. Popular British soaps such as *Eastenders* occupy a central part, with the *Sun*’s TV magazine during the research even boasting ‘BEST FOR SOAPS’ on its front page. Both also feature special soap columns, where the week’s events are commented on.

While the *Sun* and the *Mirror* strive to cover material likely be part of the media habits of a majority, they also pay attention to everyday concerns of ordinary people. Family life and relationships are central concepts, dealt with both in the news and in the agony aunt columns, and so are everyday issues such as money troubles and consumer quandaries. Cheaper, mass-market consumer products are reviewed and advertised, and news reports frequently link in with common habits, such as pub-going and betting.

In the sample week, the ‘ordinariness’ of the readers was addressed when both papers carried a humorous story of how the common habit of keeping garden gnomes could take value off a house, headlined ‘A GNOME WRECKER’ in the *Mirror* (Nov 3, p. 23) and ‘I’VE LOST A FORTUNE ON MY GNOME’ in the *Sun* (Nov 3, p. 24). The *Sun*, stressing how what upmarket buyers deemed ‘tacky’ was thought to be a beloved ‘little fellow’ by readers, the following day launched a campaign to ‘Save Our Gnomes’ (Nov 4, p. 12) It can
be argued that it is precisely the focus on such seemingly mundane news items that enable a tabloid image as ‘on the side of the little man and woman’ (Conboy, 2002: 170), as readers are reassured even their everyday concerns are taken seriously. This element to the tabloid reporting constitutes another area to expand on with readers.

A related trait is the interest devoted to the private lives of individuals. As seen in Chapter 4, the tabloids follow a long-standing tradition in the development of ‘human interest’; commonly using matters of people’s personal lives to catch readers’ attention. The interest in the personal, furthermore, is not confined to ordinary people or to the more limited category of celebrity, but also to others in the public eye. ‘HOPPY CHERIE’ reads a Mirror headline to a picture of Cherie Blair on crutches, while the accompanying article informs: ‘The PM’s wife sprained an ankle in a fall while searching her wardrobe for a hat last week’ (Nov 8, p.15).

The interest in what is close at hand is also shown in the great prioritising of national over international news.45 During the sample week, the Sun included only 2-5 international news items per day, whereas the Mirror featured 1-8 international news items per day.46 The majority of these were not given prominence in terms of placement or story length, and most were stories about U.S. interests, such as the killing of U.S. soldiers in the aftermath of the Iraq war. When nations excluding the U.S. were mentioned, the stories linked in with British interests, such as news about Spain closing its dock to a ship carrying British citizens, which featured in both papers. The papers’ news values, then, brings attention to how the popular tabloids set out specific parameters for what kinds of topic that lay the basis for the reading experience, and how these parameters are important for understanding the reception of the Sun and the Mirror. In the next parts of the chapter I will take a closer look at how the mode of reception is further produced through narrative strategies which invite particular identity positions within the reading.

**Imagined communities**

*A dialogic approach*

As with all news, a sense of shared interest among those who consume it is to some extent established through the editorial selection, as readers will have

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45 Connell notes that tabloids could be regarded as examples of an international, cosmopolitan press, given the extent to which they feature ‘topics from cosmopolitan culture’ (1998: 18), but this is to do with showbiz topics.

46 This count excluded news of stars and personalities from popular culture, sports news as well as science news, which often featured study results from international scientific teams.
knowledge of similar events and developments. In an oft-cited exploration of
nationhood, Benedict Anderson (1983/1996) has argued that nations are imag-
ined communities, developed through common traditions and cultural artefacts,
of which newspapers have been historically important. Today, as noted by Alex
Law, newspapers continue to play a role in developing such ‘communities’:

As a form of printed mass communication daily newspapers allow a national
mass of readers to form an imaginary relationship to millions of other members
of their nation that they would otherwise be incapable of having personal, face-
to-face contact with.

(2002: 5)

The idea of an ‘imaginary relationship’ is therefore helpful for envisioning one
of the roles of the papers in question. Indeed, this relationship – often but not
necessarily created around discourses on nation – is explicitly promoted as part
of the overall news discourse in the Sun and the Mirror47, and is the first of the
textual themes that I would like to draw attention to that traverses the terrain of
a reader-paper relationship.

A second work to take into account before looking at the precise textual
strategies which assist this relationship is that of Bakthin (1996, first published
1975), whose writing on the language of popular culture provides a framework
for understanding tabloid address to readers. Bakthin, who developed the idea
of ‘dialogism’, stresses that all language transactions are open-ended, negotiated
through the mutual relationship between addresser and addressee, and takes
place among what he terms a ‘heteroglossia’ of many conflicting interpretations.
Although there are attempts within authoritarian systems to close down het-
eroglossia into a unified, official, perspective, there will always be differing in-
terpretations at work. These are often drawn from the fabrics of popular cul-
ture, since Bakhtin argues that the energy of heteroglossia arise from ‘extra-
literary languages’ (ibid: 67).

The popular tabloids, through their emphasis on opinion and the ‘black-and-
white-ness’ of melodrama, could be seen as controlling heteroglossia through a
strong editorial voice. But their address to readers works within the principles
of dialogism. As offered by Conboy:

The popular newspaper is successful in its ability to pander to a realization that
the readers is positioned within an exchange of dialogue and this dialogue draws
upon the multiple and shifting textualities of contemporary popular culture.

(2002: 19)

47 See Conboy (2005) for an extensive analysis of the British tabloids’ way of promoting identifi-
cation with the nation, which Conboy, too, sees as reliant on the papers’ ability to draw on no-
tions of community.
A dialogic approach, accordingly, is a crucial element in the communication with readers.

This approach takes several forms. Firstly, readers are addressed directly in a number of ways, most palpably in the frequent encouragement to participate with content. ‘GOT A STORY? CALL US’ greets readers on page 2 in both the *Sun* and the *Mirror*. Attempts at involving readers in the production continue throughout both papers, with invitations to participate in competitions, polls and phone-ins. Likewise, reader contributions are at the heart of the papers’ campaigns, varying from topics such as the *Mirror*’s long-running anti-war campaign, to the *Sun*’s more light-hearted ‘Save Our Gnomes’. During the sample week, the *Sun* also engaged in ‘National Adoption Week’, which involved an appeal from children to ‘Please help us find a Mummy and Daddy’ (Nov 3, p. 27), as well as continuing with a Page Three Idol competition from the following week. ‘Here are the sensational six YOU have chosen in our search for a new Page 3 Idol’, read the article (Nov 3, p. 14-15). The interpersonal address and the treatment of readers as generators of content enable a sense of commonality, and the legitimisation of the newspapers to express this.

In overviewing the way popular men’s magazines speak to their readers, Jackson et. al. point out that ‘in general, the magazines address the readers as a “mate”’, being ‘careful to avoid talking down to their readers’ (2003: 120, see also Benwell, 2001). In the popular tabloids, too, readers are usually addressed in a tone that is inviting and friendly rather than formal, as shown in the straightforward ‘Got a story?’-line. The formality done away with, journalists and readers are presented as equal and familiar members of the same social status. The ever-present joke facilitates this mediated familiarity, in that readers and journalists are made out to share competencies for its appreciation.

While interactivity and informality contribute to a notion of readers and journalists as sharing the same values, the papers continuously demonstrate their capability of taking action on readers’ behalf. The provision of pull-out posters and cut-outs – ranging from Kylie Minogue’s ‘life sized bum’48 (the *Mirror*) to political protests – is one way to do so, whereas the creation of ‘stunt’ news to further an agenda is another. And, though a campaign to save garden gnomes may seem of little significance, it is an offer of companionship. Readers are reassured that the newspapers not only speak for and through them, but take tangible actions. Such textual devices, operating within a dialogic framework, encourage and enable the forming of imagined reader communities.

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48 As seen in chapter 2, the provision of cut-outs and poster material has a long history with the popular newspaper, and can be traced to earlier popular news forms, such as the almanac.
Defining reader communities

An important feature of these communities is their claim to be wide-spread. Rather than being defined as elite or exclusive, both papers are keen to point out their readers are linked with the majority. ‘THE PAGE WHERE YOU TELL BRITAIN WHAT YOU THINK’ is the caption to the Sun’s letter page, classifying the readers as constituting Britain as a whole. Outside of the papers themselves, advertising slogans such as ‘The Sun – we love it’ and the Mirror – be part of it’ play with the notion of the readerships as inclusive and wide-spread. The slogans call attention to the idea that buying these papers transcends a simple taste in news, but requires participation and emotional investment. The act of reading is conjured up as the involvement in a strong and sizeable collective.

The reader communities of both papers are also defined as anti-establishment. Being ‘part of it’ entails taking a stand against those deemed remote from the lived reality of the readers, in particular against individuals with social and political power. In this sense, the newspapers portray themselves as crusaders against social injustice. As illustrated in the quote from a Sun-leader below, the attacks on perceived wrong-doings of the establishment are however always carefully presented as defences for the interests of the readers – in this case the Reality gameshow Pop Idol.

The men who live on a different planet are at it again.
With all the problems of crime, education, health and transport, what are some MPs worked up about?

POP IDOL! Ten of them have signed a Commons motion attacking Simon Cowell for the way he is so brutally honest with contestants.
The MPs criticise the way he and other judges concentrate on image as well as singing ability.
Don’t these idiots realise that the acid comments from Cowell and Co are what make Pop Idol a must see? […]
Get a life, you MPs. And then get something to do.

(Nov 4, p. 8)

Ministers, living ‘on a different planet’ and unable to enjoy Pop Idol and Cowell’s frank opinions, are in this case those who are to be fought against. The anti-establishment position provides one aspect of the identity of the imaginary reader, as someone dissatisfied with, and indignant of, those in positions of authority.

Communities under threat

As discussed by Law (2002) and Conboy (2005), tabloid news discourse has been connected to strong nationalist tendencies, and nation can be seen as one
of the borders of the imagined reader communities (see also Brookes, 1999). Other scholars have pointed to race as a dividing line set up by some newspapers (e.g. Hall et. al, 1978). Yet issues here are not clear-cut. During my year of analysis, racism and intolerance to other religions were for instance on several occasions described as despicable in both papers. Nevertheless, underrepresentation in certain areas speaks for itself: it is, for instance, extremely rare for the Sun to feature a non-white Page Three girl.

The reader communities conjured up in the Sun and the Mirror could moreover be viewed as communities under threat. As seen in a Chapter 2, a stress on violent crime has always been a staple of tabloid news, and the Sun and the Mirror are no exceptions. The tabloids’ melodramatic handling of news means that dramatic, threatening features of negative news of for instance crime, war and international affairs are magnified, leading to a strong emphasis on danger.49

Danger is a particularly significant theme in the Sun, which during the research devoted a number of campaigns to stave off what was portrayed as jeopardising the happiness of its readers. The threat, in some cases, is emanating from within the society, in the shape of criminals and other deviants, paedophiles being a staple category. The Sun’s front page banner following a schoolboy murder, ‘ANOTHER VIOLENT DAY, ANOTHER INNOCENT LIFE’ (Nov 5, p.1), shows how violence is made out to be part of everyday life. ‘NOT EVEN YOUR SCHOOL IS SAFE (Nov 6, p. 8) followed the next day’s leader, again stressing how the threat of violence is all-encompassing.

From the outside, the perception of threat is channelled into many forms, such as international terrorists and the overtaking of British values by European standardisation. One category of special significance to the Sun is asylum seekers, who during the research was made out to threaten the British economy as well as the jobs and welfare of individuals. While the Mirror took a relatively open approach, with for example an article series claiming to expose prejudice faced by immigrants, the Sun had a series of campaigns rallying against illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, portrayed as wilfully deceiving the state and sponging off the honest, hard-working readers. It also weaved the conception of such an outside threat into the fabric of the overall joke. For example, the banning of an amateur theatre group from calling a show Snow White And The Seven Asylum Seekers, led the Sun to stage their own play in the newspaper, featuring the asylum seekers ‘Sneaky, Sleazy, Greedy, Lazy, Angry, Sponger and Cheat’. The tale, which featured a picture of seven dark, bearded men, ended:

49 Bird and Dardenne (1988) argue that a prime meaning of crime news is symbolic, informing readers about the norms of society and the shapes of social deviants, which is interesting in terms of the role of crime news in creating boundaries to the reader communities.
They sing: ‘Hi-ho, hi-ho, it’s off to work we go, with a false ID and benefits free, hi-ho, hi-ho.

(Nov, 6, p. 25)

The stress on outside threats to the reader communities can then be expressed not only through the news selection and style of reporting, but also in the employment of the joke as part of the narrative of danger.

The concept of imagined communities is useful for understanding the way in which both papers conspicuously promote a mediated relationship between readers, as well as creating a sense of union between readers and papers. Positioning the reader within a field of dialogue is crucial in doing so. Yet, the emphasis on threat, especially strong in the Sun, means that community boundaries have to be fiercely guarded, and the imagined communities are to some extent based on the rejection of the ‘other’: what is deemed abnormal and dangerous. The establishment of companionship through a variety of textual devices is therefore not only part of the newspapers’ offer to fulfil a role of community, but also an invitation to normalise oneself in relation to what is unknown.

Sex and gender

Dominant models of femininity

As readers are invited to participate in ‘communities’ through a number of narrative techniques, these, as seen, provide limitations on the kinds of reader positions possible; simultaneously highlighting openness and a strict control of the reader identity. A similar pattern can be traced in the papers’ approach to gender and sexuality. These are significant textual themes, as both papers on one level are preoccupied with how the cultural terrains of femininity and masculinity are to be negotiated.

Starting with the representation of women, the feminist critique of tabloids has included claims that sexualised images of women in such widespread news discourse make real women less secure in public arenas, from walking in public spaces to playing a role in public life (Tunks and Hutchinson, in Holland, 1998: 18-19). Yet, over-viewing the subject one must remember that the Sun and the Mirror, in spite of an overall ‘masculine’ appearance and a majority of male readers, have substantial female readerships (see Chapter 2).

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50 Following this thinking, Labour MP Clare Short made an attempt to introduce a Parliamentary Bill to ban the use of the Page Three pin-up in 1986, resulting in heated debate and much spite from the Sun. This attempt was debated in the media again in 2003, showing how tabloid portrayal of women is still contested.
Beyond the frequent images of lightly clad girls, both papers attempt to provide particular attractions for female readers, with women’s pages and reporting on women’s fashion and health issues. The showbiz gossip columns address a female readership, edited by high-profile female columnists. It is worth pointing out too, in line with Bird’s observation about U.S. tabloids (1992: 77), that the *Sun* and the *Mirror* allow a measure of visibility to ordinary women which may exceed that of more highbrow publications or mainstream TV news. Yet, this visibility is often confined to the realms of traditional ‘women’s interests’, such as family and the preservation of the home, and their women’s pages could be regarded as contributing to preserve a conservative model of femininity, with home-making, child-rearing, care-taking and beautifying defined as the main interests for readers of the ‘Sun Woman’ and the *Mirror’s M Magazine*.

However, while the women’s pages in both papers are constrained to a fairly strict set of boundaries as to what constitutes the interests of female readers, here too there are differences between the two papers. For instance, the *Mirror* during the research devoted a whole magazine with relatively high production values specifically to female readers. The range of subjects in the *M Magazine* was furthermore quite broad, with in-depth investigations of topics such as health, relationships and ageing, as well as more light-weight features on home-keeping, sex and beauty. The *Sun* devoted less pages aimed specifically at women, with ‘Sun Woman’ only consisting of a page or two. Through the apparent efforts made at targeting women, the *Mirror* comes across as more inviting to female readers.

The *Sun* leans heavier on a ‘masculine’ image overall. This is further demonstrated in the language used to introduce male and female news story actors, particularly those focusing on stars and personalities. As shown by Connell, tabloids typically employ a nominal and a categorical element in introducing such actors, the latter preceding the former (see Connell, 1998: 23-24). The categorical element rarely includes just an occupational description, but refers to a field of activity, as in ‘Quiz cheat Major Charles Ingram’ and ‘Luckless lock Danny Grewcock’ (the *Mirror*, Nov 4, p. 7, 46). Sometimes, it refers to a personal physical attribute, which in both papers is more likely to be used for female actors. However, the extent of such references to physical attributes of female news actors in the *Sun* singles this paper out. Consider the following examples of introductory sentences to stories, taken from a Saturday in the *Sun*:

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Sexy royal Zara Phillips yesterday insisted she is not a rebel – she just likes to have fun.
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51 Topics such as health and relationships are of course covered in the *Sun* too, and often with an invite to female readers, but they are not typically part of specific women’s pages.
BBC breakfast beauty Natasha Kaplinsky has tearfully confessed to cheating on her boyfriend.

Busty Anna Nicole Smith’s alleged stalker had a nude picture of her tattooed on his back, a court heard yesterday.

Atomic Kitten beauty Natasha Hamilton is suffering from post-natal depression 14 months after the birth of her son Josh.

(Nov, 8, p. 9, 11, 19, 33)

The repetitive use of the categorical element in referring to the look or sex appeal of the female personalities, such as ‘sexy’, ‘busty’ and ‘beauty’ is striking, and contributes to making these a focal point of their identity in the *Sun*.

This outlook is most clear in the *Sun*’s use of Page Three. This, ‘the most famous page in the newspaper’ according to the *Sun* (Nov 3, p. 15), is a vital site for constructing and (re)producing sexual difference in this paper. The feature is pertinent in its interpretation of difference between the sexes, and, related to a more general depiction of scantily clad, ‘sexy’ women filling the pages of both the *Sun* and the *Mirror*, it can be seen as a hub for tabloid representations of women in general, contributing to interpretation of femininity in the *Sun* and the *Mirror* alike.
What, then, are the characteristics of this ‘famous’ woman? Firstly, the Page Three girl is ordinary. She is pretty, but in a ‘girl-next-door’ way. Her looks are accessible, soft and curvaceous rather than threatening. Secondly, the Page Three girl is young – in her late teens or early twenties, her youthfulness enhanced by sparing make-up and the avoidance of excessive jewellery and accessories. The fact she is often blonde, a hair colour that in Western culture connotes both youth and innocence, contributes to the image of the Page Three girl as sweet and pliable, confining to conventional ideas of femininity. So, too, does her passivity, as she is always photographed standing or sitting still for the camera. Thirdly, the Page Three girl is happy, usually greeting the reader with an amicable look and a friendly smile on her lips. Holland sees this smile as part of a convention that expresses ‘a longing for happiness and togetherness’ (1998: 17, 26). Her smile, likewise, purveys a satisfaction in being looked at in a sexualised state, naturalising her position as the object of sexual desire. In short, then, the conventions of the Page Three girl contribute to an overall discourse of security and familiar warmth encapsulated within notions of sexual difference.

Using Laura Mulvey’s influential theory of the male gaze and voyeuristic pleasure (1975/1992), Page Three can be regarded in terms of control and dominance. Mulvey, drawing on psychoanalytic theory to explain traditions of mainstream cinema, finds that this enables a male audience to satisfy two conflicting workings of pleasure – erotic voyeurism and identification. Camera angles and conventions make sure the audience, despite the sex, looks through the eyes of the male protagonist, at the female object of desire, thus identifying with ‘him’, looking at ‘her.’ Hence for men, the conflict between what Sigmund Freud has termed libido (erotic drive) and ego (identification) is settled by the display of women as objects for the male gaze. Women on the other hand, are left with no option but to take on the ‘male gaze’ too, being denied their own pleasure in looking. Yet, male pleasure is also problematic. In Mulvey’s framework, ‘woman’ connotes sexual difference, and hence the infantile fear of castration to the patriarchal unconscious. ‘Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified’ (ibid: 753). Hollywood cinema, according to Mulvey, eradicate this threat by for instance ‘investigating’ the woman, controlling her body visually or through the narrative, or by turning her into a fetish herself, exaggerating and stylising female beauty into something reassuring rather than dangerous.

If Mulvey’s theory, which has been used to explain the exhibition of women’s bodies as spectacle in many areas of Western culture, is applied to Page Three, the attempt to take control can be seen not the least in the revealing, sharply lit photography, which does not leave any ambiguities regarding the female body in focus. The female sexuality presented is clean, controlled and non-threatening. With its daily repetitions of this one ideal, the feature fetishes
this particular kind of female sexuality and femininity, which, again within Mulvey’s framework, would signal the ultimate desire of men to control women. As such, this image can be viewed as one of the most conservative sites of tabloid discourse on gender, which would lead heterosexual male readers into an acceptance of these power structures and female readers to either ignore the feature or yield to the same order.

**Dominant models of masculinity**

As a stereotypical, and limiting, femininity can be seen as being championed on Page Three, the ideal tabloid masculinity is left for the sports pages. These pages are almost exclusively male, in reporting, photography and the sports actors featured. Female athletes overall are under-represented in print media sports coverage, but there is evidence that popular tabloids carry the most male-centred sports reporting of all newspapers. For instance, a three-month 1998 study of the *Sun* and the broadsheet the *Times* found that while the *Times* devoted 10.9 per cent of its sport articles to women’s sport, the *Sun* only devoted 0.5 per cent to this (Szabo, 2001).

The masculinity conjured up on these pages is the counterpart of the femininity endorsed on Page Three. The sports heroes are almost always photographed in action; strong, hard and full of ferocious energy. Their faces are caught grimacing, roaring, squirming and concentrating, banning all ideas of passivity or weakness. Photographic connotations to this highly stylised version of masculinity as active and tough are emphasised in the headlines, such as

*Picture from the sports pages, where men are shown as active, strong and full of energy.*
‘I’LL STAY STRONG’ (the Sun, Nov 8, p. 70) and ‘WE’RE READY FOR MASSIVE BATTLE’ (the Mirror, Nov 7, p. 73). Given that both practices and coverage of football have been noted to tend towards tribalism and militarism (Morris, 1981, Clayton and Harris, 2002) and this is the main sport in focus in both papers, it is hardly surprising to find a common usage of terms originating from the military and warfare. As remarked upon by Belinda Wheaton, football ‘promotes and celebrates a masculinity that is marked by combative competitions, aggression, courage and toughness’ (2003: 195). And while the game experience itself can be seen as ‘feminised’ over the last decade, with ‘family friendly’ efforts by clubs and controlled stadium settings (Gill, 2003: 52) the reporting vehemently stresses a traditional masculinity as aggressive, which, in conjunction with media sports coverage in general, has been seen as contributing to marginalize alternative masculinities (Sabo and Jensen, 1992: 179).

One of the notable features of the sporting masculinity in the Sun and the Mirror is the loyal camaraderie between men. Despite the aggression, the sports pages are full of examples of hailed team efforts and of men hugging and displaying affection for one another. As opposed to the single, isolated female of the Page Three, the sporting heroes belong in the company of each other. Sports photography must however also be recognised as an area in which some of the lines between masculinity and femininity are blurred. van Zoonen suggests it provides opportunities for the eroticisation of the male body as an object of visual desire, for both women and men (1994: 99). It is also here that tenderness between men can be displayed and accepted as the norm. Nevertheless, such ‘feminisation’ through the objectification of the male body, is problematic:

In a society which has defined masculinity as strong, active, in possession of the gaze, and femininity as weak, passive and to be looked at, it is of course utterly problematic if not impossible for the male body to submit itself to the control of the gaze – by definition masculine – and to go over to the other ‘feminine’ side, and surrender itself to masculinity power.

(ibid: 98)

van Zoonen notes that textual devices in sports photography are employed to deal with this tension, reducing the threat of complete subordination to the gaze. In tabloid sports coverage, such rejections of feminisation often depend on the interplay between image and text. Take for example a football story from the Sun, which follows the Chelsea team’s five-nil win over Italy’s Lazio, and is accompanied by a large picture of an ecstatic group hug between the Chelsea players. On its own, the picture could connote physical intimacy and tenderness between men, and possibly also homoerotic desire. However, this is rejected by the caption, which reads ‘Damien Duff is mobbed by his Chelsea
team-mates after netting the Blues’ third goal last night’ (Nov 5, p. 54-55). The word ‘mobbed’, a strong act, disallows the tenderness conveyed by the picture.

Thus, although there is room for some uncertainty regarding the masculinity conjured up on these pages, the emphasis is on sexual difference in a way that confines to traditional stereotypes of men as tough and in control. One can see why, in an analysis of tabloid sports coverage, Ben Clayton and John Harris write:

Both the Sun and the Mirror utilize their expansive national influence to direct the country’s men towards an aggregated unified force, protecting all that is masculine in the sport.

(2002: 402)

The sporting masculinity of these papers, together with the dominant models of femininity represented by Page Three in the Sun and similar, albeit less sexualised, images in the Mirror, must be seen as constituting a dominant, gendered framework from which readers can interpret the rest of the content. The emphasis on sexual difference, with men presented as active and strong, and women as pleasing and controllable, would therefore seem to impact on the overall understanding of the news.

**Ambiguity and counter-discourse**

However, there are a number of limitations with this analysis, which need to be addressed in order to gain a fuller picture of the way discourses around gender may function in relation to tabloid reading. Holland has suggested that Page Three not only speak to heterosexual men but also is part of a discourse on female sexuality which invites sexual enjoyment and freedom (1983: 93, 97). Holland views Page Three as a narrative, which occasionally touches on the model’s life, as well as showing her control the role-playing of Page Three:

It seems that despite the never forgotten presence of the men in the story, the tension, the essential drama, is for women. It has to do with the aspiration to the status of model (autonomous femininity) and the jockeying for position between that aspiration and other models of femininity (…).

( ibid: 97)

Holland’s observation underlines a problem in assuming that this feature, and similar tabloid images of women, cannot carry the potential for female pleasure.

Secondly, the above analysis does not sufficiently recognise that masculinity as ‘activity’ and femininity as ‘passivity’ are subject positions that co-exist within single subjects, rather than being equated with being male or female. This is a point made by van Zoonen, who argues that Mulvey’s ‘dark and suffocating analysis of patriarchal cinema has lost ground to a more confident and empow-
ering approach which foregrounds the possibilities of ‘subversive’, that is non-patriarchal mode, of female spectatorship’ (1992: 97). Similarly, David Rodowick has criticised Mulvey’s theory in pointing out that ‘pleasure in looking involves both active and passive components (...)’: ‘not only in the act of the look, but also in the return of the look from the imaginary other’ (in Saco, 1992: 29). When we look at Page Three, she is looking back at us, for a moment transforming the viewer into the object of her look. Mulvey, according to Rodowick, has failed to recognise that fetishism, rather than aiming to control the female object, is what should be seen ‘as passive submission to the object: in sum, masochism’ (in ibid: 30). Such a standpoint means that the viewing of Page Three can contain impulses to dominate and to be dominated by the image; to simultaneously be voyeur and masochist.

Ambiguities, then, can be found even in the tabloid sections that appear the most conservative in their construction of gender. Furthermore, while the Page Three/similar Mirror pin-ups and the sports to some extent define femininity and masculinity in the Sun and the Mirror, counter-tendencies are apparent in other sections. In the sample week, such tensions were noticeable in one of the main stories, following an estranged father who demonstrated in a Spiderman outfit for his right to see his daughter. The Mirror, not surprisingly given its less hard-edged take on masculinity, took the most sympathetic angle on the ‘desperate dad’, declaring its standpoint in a leader:

Dads have a right to see their kids and play a part in their upbringing.

Children have an equal right to see their fathers.

(Nov 6, p. 14)

The Mirror’s defence for men as caring and sensitive continued in a follow-up a few days later, with a headline stressing the emotional turmoil of the father:

I saw kids waving up at me as Spiderman ...I thought of MY girl and I cried. Men have feelings too.

(Nov 8, p. 21)

This is an example of how an individual story becomes the basis for a questioning of desirable masculinity as tough and in control. The Sun, following its more aggressive protection of traditional masculinity, approached the story by mocking ‘Spiderman’ for causing gridlock to traffic, and later disclosed him as ‘a pervert’ convicted for indecency in a public toilet (Nov 6, p. 28-29). Nevertheless, the Sun’s coverage included emotional quotes from the demonstrator

52 See Allen (1998) for a discussion of ambiguity in gendered news.
and led to a notice asking fathers in similar situations to write to the newspaper for support.

Hence, particular stories can serve as points of departure from the dominant conceptions of gender. In a similar vein, the prevailing conception of femininity is counter-acted by different voices in the papers, most notably in the gossip columns. These, the Mirror’s 3AM and the Sun’s Bizarre, are constructed as intimate, revelatory pages, based on the female columnists’ ability to disclose secrets about celebrities and to provide commentaries on their lifestyles, looks and love-lives. The columnists can be ruthless to errant behaviour, passing venomous judgement on the appearance of female celebrities in particular. But within these pages there is also a noticeable appreciation for female professional achievement and ‘ballsy’ behaviour, which falls outside of the femininity endorsed in other parts of the papers.

Take the following example of a Mirror snippet about rapper Missy Elliot, who in spite of poor health was reported to command the dance floor:

And, typically, she soon got back into the swings of things, taking the microphone from the DJ and MC-ed to the cheers of the crowd in the packed venue.

One insider tells us: ‘She absolutely rocked the club and had everyone up and dancing like idiots.’ (…) You go girl…

(Nov 7, p. 12)

The tone is admiring and encouraging, cheering on merits such as audacity and performance power. Similarly, the following day the Sun celebrated Sara Cox for being both a ‘party animal’ and a competent DJ:

The award for biggest party animal goes to Sara Cox. The Radio 1 DJ was boozing until 6am but was live on air an hour later – she even managed to get Travis’s Fran Healy to the studio on time too.

(Nov 8, p. 16)

The qualities championed, stamina (albeit in terms of partying) and professional ability, do not fit easily with conservative ideas of femininity. The gossip columns, then, provide an environment where behaviour more commonly associated with men can be can be re-defined around female role models, and are therefore of interest to research with female readers.

Since the gossip columns address female readers directly, it is also here that opportunities for what van Zoonen calls ‘female spectatorship’ arise, with desiring remarks about male celebrities and a ‘wink-wink, nudge-nudge’ tone in the reporting of these. This can be exemplified in a 3AM column that featured a picture of Arsenal player Freddie Ljungberg modelling Calvin Klein underwear, urging readers to: ‘Check out Freddie Ljungberg’s packet – and we’re not talking about his bank balance’ (the Mirror, Nov, 16, p. 16). In general, the Mirror
takes the centre-stage in providing such material for female spectatorship, and even experimented with a week of ‘Mirror Hunks’ pin-ups in May 2003.53

A final genre to consider in terms of counter-tendencies to dominant conceptions of gender is the advice columns. Here, no traces are to be found of the sports heroes’ steely determination, neither of the smiling contentedness of the pin-up girls. Instead, the agony aunts of the Sun’s ‘Dear Deidre’ and the Mirror’s ‘Miriam’ allow space for unhappy, confused and agonising characters. Thematically, their worries centre on sexuality and identity, often in relation to partners of the opposite sex.

At a first glance, the columns appear subordinated to the dominant conception of gender, providing another voyeuristic invitation to heterosexual male readers. The accompanying ‘photo casebooks’, illustrating a particular problem, almost always contain pictures of a ‘sexy’ woman in various stages of undress. In the Sun, the problems addressed often appear as opportunities to provide sexual titillation for (heterosexual male) readers. As in the following example of a problem headlined ‘Married Sir gives me extra lessons in sex’, these typically consists of sexually detailed narratives involving a lustful woman. Here, a 17-year old student explains what extra tuition from her maths teacher involved:

Then one day he kissed me – and I knew I’d been waiting for it.

53 The majority of the ‘Mirror Hunks’, while naked or near-naked, were shown with an object connoting traditional masculinity, such as a motorcycle.
We made love and it was fantastic. Since then we do it all over his home – on his desk, on his marital bed, on the sofa and on his kitchen table.

(the Sun, Nov 3, p. 34)

Although such narratives could be seen opening up for female freedom in sexual participation, the interpretative framework provided by the exhibiting pictures suggests that this exists mainly to satisfy the heterosexual male gaze.

However, looking more closely at the type of problems brought up, a different pattern emerges. Consider for instance the following headlines:

I’ve had enough of husband I pity

(the Mirror, Nov 4, p. 29)

My gorgeous girl wears me out with her sex demands

(the Sun, Nov. 8, p. 46)

Husband refuses my amorous attention once again

(the Mirror, Nov 7, p. 33)

I laughed when he took out his willy

(the Sun, Nov 8, p. 47)

As in these examples, the female characters populating the advice columns are far from the timid creatures that might be expected, but often appear as dominant, demanding, dissatisfied, critical and controlling. Male potency is frequently dwarfed in the encounters with these over-powering women, ‘wearing out’ the male characters with their demands and calling into question their sexual ability. The latter, which could be seen as forming the core of conventional masculine power, is doubted by the male letter-writers, who worry about their capability in general, and about being able to satisfy women sexually and socially. It is noteworthy, too, that the consoling and omniscient Deirdre and Miriam are motherly, older women, serving as a reminder of maternal power.

The male anxiety underpinning these pages brings attention to a possible role of the Sun and the Mirror as an aid for male readers to deal with contradictions of modern life; recognising the problematic of changing gender roles while presenting an ‘ideal’, tough, masculinity to seek comfort from. A comparison can be drawn to popular men’s magazines such as Loaded and XHFM, whose ‘laddish’ approach in combination with an emphasis on advice and self-help has been interpreted as providing help to deal with insecurities regarding the status of masculinity (Gauntlett, 2003: 166, Attwood, 2005). Thus, underneath the ‘safe’ disguise of heterosexual titillation, the advice columns break open a crack in the construction of gender roles as given and appear to deal with tensions prevalent in a society where gender roles are in a state of flux.
Taken as a whole, the papers’ approach to gender simultaneously re-asserts and calls into question gender stereotypes, a finding that should raise the awareness of potential readings of gender on the reception side.

Celebrity

*Elevation of ‘the especially remarkable’*

A closer look at such a prominent discourse as gender and sexuality, then, reveals a potentially multi-layered reading, but points towards an experience of stability. This is also the case with the final ‘textual theme’ highlighted here – celebrity. The tabloid newspaper, as seen, is a vital site for the playing out of celebrity gossip. Connell has even gone so far as suggesting that celebrity stories explain ‘the apparent popularity of the tabloid press in the UK’ (1992: 66). Certainly, the importance attached to celebrity in the *Sun* and the *Mirror* justifies an examination of the way in which discourses are formed around this subject, especially as, in spite of a recent surge in analyses of ‘celebrity culture’ as a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. Gamson 1994, Marshall 1997, Giles 2000, Turner, Marshall and Bonner 2000, Rojek 2001, Turner 2004, see also Holmes, 2005a and Johansson, 2005 and 2006, for discussions of the field), there is still a limited focus on how celebrity media function in relation to audiences.

To find out how celebrity in the *Sun* and the *Mirror* link in with the identity positions offered to the reader, I would like to start with the way that celebrity signifies a distance from ordinary people, and consider what this might mean to the reading experience. To some extent, the use of ‘celebrity’ as a separate category and the newsworthiness of those considered part of this category means that readers are invited to admire and perhaps envy those who live in the limelight of the media as part of a world different from ordinary people. Langer, who takes as a basis Francesco Alberoni’s (1972: 75) definition of ‘stars’ as the ‘especially remarkable’ of our time, has linked celebrity coverage in TV news to news structures which maintain a mythical meaning, whereby the category of the ‘especially remarkable’ serves to stabilize a world reigned by those distinct from ordinary people (1998: 45-73, see also Chapter 2). Parallels can be drawn between his analysis and the way that the culture around celebrity today has been seen as having religious or mythic characteristics (see Frow, 1998, Giles, 2000: 134-138, Rojek, 2001: 51-99).

In many ways, stories about celebrities in the *Sun* and the *Mirror* do convey the notion that stars and personalities are part of a higher world, serving to build a contrast between the dull routines assumed to govern everyday life and the exciting existence of those in the limelight. The celebrities populating both papers, ranging from global stars to minor TV personalities or members of the
public famous for particular achievements\textsuperscript{54}, are presented with attributes signalling their difference from ordinary people.

This is illustrated in an article that appeared in the \textit{Sun}, covering tabloid darlings David and Victoria Beckham’s move to Madrid (Nov, 3, p. 21).\textsuperscript{55} The \textit{Sun} uses an opening paragraph to describe the couple’s ‘sprawling £4.5 million red-brick ranch-style property’ situated in ‘an exclusive walled estate’ in Madrid, immediately stressing the luxury possessions sustaining the difference between ‘them’, the glamorous celebrities, and ‘us’, the ordinary readers. The Beckhams, as Ellis Cashmore has observed, ‘present a vision of the good life to which others aspire’ (2002: 6), a vision that this \textit{Sun}-article brings out. It continues to inform us of the fantastical neighbourhood, ‘where residents are allowed to hunt the deer that roam freely’, and the neighbour is the Spanish King, Juan Carlos. Of the Beckham’s house, we are enlightened it ‘has an outdoor heated pool and state-of-the-art security, including motion sensors in the grounds.’ The differences between celebrities and ordinary people are also emphasised through the language used. The Beckhams, for instance, did not simply move in, but ‘\textit{took possession of their new pad}’ [my italics].

As Langer notes, in TV news coverage such a contrast is further constructed through the set of conditions referenced regarding the celebrities’ ways of life, which means they are portrayed as free from the pattern of work and effort that binds the rest of us. Their means of production are not depicted as labour, restricting and monotonous, but as enjoyable activities over which the celebrity enjoys an effortless degree of control:

\begin{quote}
It is just \textit{in} them, part of their very-being-as-they-are, and from the point of view of those of us who toil every day, only the especially remarkable can produce something without working at it.
\end{quote}

(ibid: 56)

Celebrities, in tabloids too, appear to occupy a world of leisure, with snapshots from parties, premiers, family life and holidays. They are rarely shown as merely ‘doing a job’. When their work is referred to, it is as a calling rather than a random profession, and one over which the celebrity has control. Victoria Beckham, we are informed, ‘will fly back to London later this week for talks

\textsuperscript{54} Langer (1998) distinguishes in his analysis of ‘especially remarkable’ between ‘elites’ who are famous for their very way of life, and ‘ordinary people’, who have to achieve or experience something extraordinary, to be taken up into the celebrity sphere. Turner et. al, on the other hand, regard as a key marker of celebrity the dissolve between public and private, so that ‘when someone who has been newsworthy due to, for instance, the part they play in the public domain – they may be contestants in a legal case, say, or victims of a natural disaster, also attracts interest to their private lives’ (2000: 12). My own definition of celebrity in tabloids follow this characterization, which means that while ‘celebrity’ or ‘personality’ are fairly flexible terms, they are not applied to anyone for simply appearing in the news.

\textsuperscript{55} The story was covered in a similar fashion in the \textit{Mirror}.
about her solo career.’ Rather than going back to London ‘to work’, the focus is on her self-agency and control, as part of a leisurely life.

**Tabloid celebrities as ‘us’**

Thus, the ways in which celebrity is presented in the tabloids, as in other areas of news, serve to single out their lives as part of a sphere separate in kind from the world of ordinary people, who can only enter into it only through experiencing something extraordinary. A good measure of how high up the ranks a celebrity is considered in the tabloids is how ordinary the actions considered newsworthy. This ordinariness can equally be seen as the key connector between celebrities and the reader. As noted by Langer, discourses around ordinary people and elites ‘shifts between humanizing the subject and at the same time exalting it’ (ibid: 49).

On the same day as the Beckham story, a simple hug between the Beckham children received a full-page picture spread in both the *Sun* and the *Mirror*. ‘He ain’t heavy, he’s my bruvva’, read the *Sun*’s headline, followed by a description of how ‘Brooklyn Beckham lifts baby Romeo and kisses his forehead, in a touching display of brotherly love’ (p.7). The colloquialism of the headline and the ordinariness of the act suggest the Beckham family, for all their wealth and fame, have recognisable and identifiable lives.

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56 Or, as in the case of the Page Three girl celebrity, through the action of the newspapers themselves.
It can be suggested that part of the appeal of these stories is the juxtaposition between the unobtainable and the ordinary, in which the latter serves as an identificatory wedge into a world of luxury and ease. While narrative practices maintain the difference between us and them, the very ordinariness of the celebrity experience allows us to identify. The tabloid reporting on the family life of the Beckhams, and their love troubles and personality traits, can be seen as an essential part of maintaining the interest in these stories. Here, a comparison can be drawn to superhero myths such as that of Superman, of whose relationship to readers Umberto Eco has remarked:

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\text{(\ldots) through an obvious process of self-identification, any accountant in any American city secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, there can spring forth a superman who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence. (1979: 108)}
\]

Just like the double function of Superman as an ordinary, imperfect, citizen and a miraculous superhero can be seen to nurture hopes of change in readers, so the tabloid celebrity story plays on the possibility of a life far from ordinary troubles.

**The ‘attack’ on celebrity**

A final aspect of the tabloid celebrity story that should be taken into account is its ‘attack’ on celebrity. Compared to the more affable treatment of celebrity in TV news and ‘quality’ newspapers, tabloids can be merciless in their fault-finding. The ‘attack journalism’ of the popular tabloids, outlined in Chapter 2, means that celebrities are hunted down and exposed (see Connell, 1992). Paparazzi images of celebrities caught ‘off-guard’, showing glamorous actresses without make-up, or a pop star ‘off his face’, are frequent, and signal the relationship between tabloids and more recent celebrity arenas such as *heat* magazine, where the attempt to reveal the flaws of celebrity life constitutes a main element (Holmes, 2005b). As discussed in Chapter 2, tabloid journalism has always had a strong moralising tone, and many of these stories are clearly concerned with the probing of and boundary-setting around ‘acceptable’ behaviour. Indicative of this function is the common use in the *Sun* and the *Mirror* of value-laden descriptors such as ‘shamed’ and ‘disgraced’; signalling the celebrity’s assumed departure from social approval. A cycle of celebration and punishment, as Garry Whannel has discussed in relation to media treatment of sports stars (2002: 145-158), leads to the celebrity as a focal point for discourses of morality.
But apart from providing a ground for moral decrees, the exposes of wrongdoings and misadventures of celebrities can be seen to have a political side, as a means to nourish dissent of social privilege. Consider the examples below:

**MY ROMPS IN THE CUPBOARD**

By Boris Becker

SHAMED tennis legend Boris Becker has spoken for the first time about his infamous bonk in a London hotel broom cupboard.  

*(the *Sun*, Nov 4, p. 13)*

**DES O’FLUTTER**

I’m gambling again but this time I won’t lose my house

TALKSHOW host Des O’Connor yesterday admitted he has returned to gambling – despite vowing never to bet again.  

*(the *Mirror*, Nov 8, p. 15)*

Lame Brame strip on night of shame

HERE’s Fame Academy dope PETER BRAME on a night out with girlfriend FEARNE COTTON for the first time – and doesn’t he look lovely. *(Following picture of Brame drunk, sweaty and shirt-less)*  

*(the *Sun*, Nov 6, p. 21)*

These are typical examples of the tabloid ‘celebrity-bashing’, with exposes of three personalities, drinking, gambling and cavorting. The humorous headlines indicate that, while the personalities may suffer acute problems, the readers are invited to laugh at their misfortunes.

Connell, as I discussed in Chapter 3, has suggested that the underlying significance of such stories is that privilege is *attackable*, as they ‘encourage and nourish scepticism about the legitimacy of the class of personalities to act as they do’ *(1992: 82)*. Further, according to Connell the desire to take part in such attacks would stem from social tensions between what is set out to be a ‘powerful elite’ and ordinary people. Connell’s suggestion is valuable not least because it provides a possible explanation for pleasure taken from one of the most striking characteristics of the tabloid celebrity story, and it provides a further area to explore in the research with readers. In addition, it can be argued that the tabloid celebrity story invites a momentarily experience of power and

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*It is interesting to note the similarity in the reporting of celebrities in Connell’s analysis and during the time of my research, suggesting that the mode of address to readers has remained relatively constant within this genre.*

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control to readers, as they, as spectators and newspaper buyers, are part of dragging the deviant personality down.

Summary

This venture into the style and content of the Sun and the Mirror exemplifies how a variety of narrative and stylistic devices contribute to form the basis for a certain reading experience. It has shown how specific journalistic genres pave the way for different identity positions offered, highlighting how the attraction of the tabloids can only be fully grasped if the papers are seen as constituting more than ‘just’ news. They are vectors of a varied range of genres, all with potential importance to readers. As also seen, there are significant differences, especially in their handling of news and other matters, between the Sun and the Mirror, even though they share the main criteria for the selection and presentation of content.

The analysis has laid bare some overlapping themes that give clues as to its attractions to readers. One key is accessibility, facilitated through the easy-to-handle format and an inclusive address. Readers are treated to a seemingly effortless experience which nevertheless provides an offer of companionship and kinship with others. Important here is the joke, which leads to a relief from the negativity of news and an impression of journalists and readers as sharing the same values. Furthermore, the inclusive and welcoming side of the papers is expressed in a dialogic vernacular that emphasises ideas of community.

However, underpinning the sense of collectivism is a fierce guarding of boundaries around this, noticeable in the moralising story treatment and the stress on threat and crime news. The newspapers invite readers to normalise themselves in relation to what is ‘other’. It is my view that this should be seen as part of the papers’ ability to uphold social certainties, which perhaps are all the more attractive in a society that has shifted from highly structured and collectivist, with identity assigned by gender and class, to one in which identity may be more uncertain. The stress on sexual difference, which has caused a regard of tabloids as reactionary and sexist, is best seen in a similar light.

Finally, significant to the understanding of these tabloids’ appeal to readers is their successful creation of a popular voice, appearing to speak on behalf and through ordinary people. There is a conceded effort throughout to create a bond to the everyday. It can therefore be argued that, traceable in aspects as diverse as the participation in newspaper campaigns to the tabloid attack on celebrity, the papers offer a sense of belonging and control. The following chapters will explore how this and other experiences offered by the newspapers are incorporated into everyday life.
CHAPTER 7
Readers and Their Papers

Introduction

As the textual analysis has produced an informed view of the content, the following parts of the book explore how readers understand the Sun and the Mirror, by giving a detailed account of the findings from the readership research. As a starting point, this chapter gives an introductory overview of reading habits, views and attitudes to the newspapers; looking at how they are read, how they are perceived and how the reading ties in with aspects of identity and everyday life. The aim of the chapter is to give a better idea of the study participants and their relationship to the newspapers.

I start by outlining the specifics of the interviewed readers as a group, based on responses to the questionnaire filled in alongside the interviews (see Chapter 5). Secondly, I examine the qualitative data to discuss tabloid reading habits, looking at the routines and practices that characterise the reading. The third section deals with perceptions of the Sun and the Mirror, analysing common ways of talking about these. Finally, I discuss how these papers are understood in relation to each other, in order to show some differences in readers’ interpretations of the two.

The readers

Participant characteristics

Intimate knowledge about readers can only be accessed through an in-depth ethnographic study, but the more detailed the account of who participated, the greater the accuracy of interpretation of the findings. Some of the information here can be gleaned from the reader questionnaire, where readers were asked to fill in details about themselves and their news consumption.

As explained in the methods chapter, 55 readers were recruited overall. Occupations ranged from administerial, white-collar positions, for example telephone salespersons, secretaries and shop assistants, to skilled and semi-skilled
manual occupations, primarily within a variety of building and decorating jobs. Two participants were unemployed at the time of the study and four were A-level students. Three had completed an undergraduate university degree. The questionnaire also included an optional question about income range, which was filled in by 32 of the participants. The salary ranges given here were relatively low, with the bulk of those who responded to this question earning in the £10-15,000 and £15-20,000 annual income brackets, and no one earning more than £25,000 per annum. This can be looked at in relation to median annual earnings of £22,060 (for the tax year of 2002-2003)\(^58\). The salary ranges given should be seen in relation to educational levels and to the age of the participants, which, again as explained previously, were between 18-35 and therefore likely to be at the early stages of their careers.

All in all, 32 male and 23 female readers participated. The spread between Sun- and Mirror-readers is fairly even, with 30 readers who primarily read the Sun and 25 readers who primarily read the Mirror. Most of these were white and British, with six participants of colour, two non-Western immigrant readers (from Jamaica and Nigeria) and four immigrant readers from countries in the West (Portugal, Greece, Poland, Australia).\(^59\)

**Sources of news**

As regular readers, the Sun or the Mirror must be seen as staples of the participants’ news consumption, with a three quarter reading the Sun or the Mirror every or every other day, and the remainder reading either paper 2-3 times per week. Yet, these papers were far from their only regular news source. Instead, they were part of a wider fabric of news media, including other newspapers, radio, and, in particular, TV. Everyone except three readers watched news on TV: about two thirds of these watching news on TV every, or every other, day. Listening to news on the radio, while less common, was a habit of almost half of the participants, out of which the majority listened to news every, or every other, day. In addition, a little over half of the participants (58 per cent) stated they read at least one other newspaper regularly. In fact, the only major news medium not commonly accessed was the internet. Only six readers looked up news online, although over half, 56 per cent, had access to the internet at home. Looking at the amount of news consumed, then, the participants as a group were avid news consumers, and, with the exception of the internet, using a range of news sources.

However, to get a better idea of their news consumption and the role of tabloids within it, it is worthwhile considering the kinds of news sources used.

\(^58\) This figure reflects a nationwide profile, with average earnings in London generally above the national profile. Figure from National Office for Statistics.

\(^59\) All names are pseudonymous to protect respondents’ privacy.
Starting with TV news, the most commonly listed news channels were BBC, ITV and Sky News.

In terms of radio news, this was with the exception of three participants solely listened to on commercial radio stations, with Virgin Radio and Capital FM the most popular choices. Therefore, although televised public service channels play a notable role, the broadcast news consumption among the readers as a group appears largely fitted into a commercial news context, whereby, notably, a popular TV news channel is owned by the same company that owns the Sun (see Chapter 3). These news sources may be seen as closer to tabloid newspapers in terms of news values, with the news programmes on Sky News and ITV for example generally placing a heavier emphasis on human interest, and the news on radio stations such as Virgin Radio focusing on brief news bulletins related to popular culture.

In terms of other newspapers read on a regular basis, the consumption habits follow a similar pattern. For the majority (56 per cent) of those who read another newspaper, the additional choice consisted of another tabloid – with the most commonly read additional papers being either the Sun or the Mirror. A quarter of those who read another paper read the local Evening Standard or the freesheet Metro, which share at least some of the tabloid characteristics in format and news selection. A smaller minority, 19 per cent, stated they regularly read a broadsheet. Thus, although the Sun and the Mirror sometimes appeared used as a complement to a different kind of news, for the group overall it might be more productive to see these as part of an interplay with related news sources across different media. In other words, rather than primarily functioning as an alternative news source, for these readers the Sun and the Mirror generally appeared to work in conjunction with related news outlets, particularly with other tabloid newspapers and televised news.

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60 Some caution should be applied in terms of the regular consumption of more than one newspaper, as there was some discrepancy between the questionnaire data and my observations from the interviews. Here, readers would instead often emphasise their loyalty to ‘their’ preferred paper, and there were several occasions when the questionnaire responses differed from what readers said in the interviews. As an example, one Sun-reader who had put in the questionnaire that he also read the Daily Mail and the Times later explained that due to a busy family life and long hours as a labourer, ‘I don’t get the chance to read other papers (…) it’s time more than anything else.’
Tabloid reading habits

A public practice

As opposed to televised news, both papers featured as a highly public element in the lives of the readers. ‘On the train’, ‘in a café’, ‘in the canteen at work’, ‘in the pub’ and ‘on the way to school’, were some of the places for reading mentioned in the questionnaires. Only one Mirror-reader preferred to read the paper in her home only, whereas the rest mentioned at least one public space as location for the reading. This finding in part echoes Pursehouse’s study of Sun-readers, where he found that the Sun featured as a public element of the working day of the male readers (1992: 104). However, Pursehouse found that women preferred to read the paper at home, but such a stark difference between women and men was not visible in this study. Yet, some of the female readers mentioned in the interviews that they read the paper because their partner or someone in their close surrounding bought it, a possible indicator of some difference in tabloid reading habits between women and men. From my observations during the fieldwork, the presence of both papers was also strongest in male-dominated spaces. Examples can be given from the interviews I carried out with labourers at building sites, where the visibility of the Sun and to a lesser extent the Mirror was remarkable, with these piled up in corners of the workspace and strewn over tables and chairs in break-areas. Similarly, at a canteen dominated by male bus-drivers, humorous articles and pictures from the Sun had been cut out and tacked on to a notice board, illustrating how this paper had become an integral part of the working day through a visual presence.

Related to the public nature of the reading is the way it appeared part of wider social activity. Contrary to perceptions of newspaper reading as an individual, solitary act, the Sun and the Mirror provided opportunities to read and discuss the content together, for example over a coffee-break at work or ‘down at the pub with the mates’, as one reader described his preferred way of reading the Sun. Below, a group of students in their late teens explain that reading the Mirror as a group was part of a regular, social, lunch-break routine:

John: Yeah, we usually come here [to a nearby café] for lunch and then bring a Mirror and just sit here and read it, kind of thing.
Interviewer: So do you read it together?
Ian: Yeah, kind of thing. You can read the headlines, and pass it around or whatever.
John: When you read an article in the paper and you see a good one, you’ll talk to your mates, and be like ‘yeah, yeah, look at this good article in the paper.’
Ian: So it can be quite social at times.
This kind of sociability will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, but it is worth noting here that it provides a constitutive framework for the interpretation of the content.

**Pick-up, flick-through**

Another important characteristic of the reading was the selective browsing, which, seen in Chapter 6, is encouraged by the tabloid format. ‘It’s not a paper you really read, it’s a paper you flick through’, as one female reader described the *Mirror*. ‘Flicking through’ was a commonly used term to describe the reading, with readers keen to point out they may only read a small amount of the content, browsing back and forth between headlines and favourite sections. Many of the male sports fans explained that their first destination would be the back pages. The convenience with which the papers could be picked up and put down, further, meant they could seamlessly be fitted into daily routines such as commuting or short breaks from work. The reading was part of the continuous flow of the day rather than a one-off activity. This finding can be placed in the light of quantitative research by RDSI and BMRB for the Newspaper Marketing Agency, which showed that young adults between 15-24 pick up a newspaper, of which the main reading choices were tabloids, on average three times a day (Duffy, 2004). Similarly, it mirrors Hermes (1995) research on women’s magazine readers, which stressed the ‘easily-put downess’ as a main appeal – accentuating the relatedness in reading practices between some magazines and tabloids.

Nevertheless, while on the whole the style of reading appeared part of an everyday ‘flow’ and readers applied considerable discretionary powers in selecting parts the content, particularly newsworthy events would change the papers’ status from a ‘flick-through’ companion to an enthralling resource of information. During the research, the war on Iraq was considered an event where the *Sun* or the *Mirror* had been used to ‘read all about it’ as one reader expressed it. It should be recognised that while the reading habits of these newspapers overall were characterised by the blending in with routine activities, the reading can on occasion change into a much more attentive and precedence-taking experience.

**Familiarity and routine**

Reading modes are subject to change, but it was nevertheless familiarity and habit that were emphasised when readers explained their involvement with the *Sun* or the *Mirror*. When asked about reasons for reading a particular paper, responses commonly stressed knowledge of a particular paper, as well as the day-to-day routine of reading. ‘I started buying the *Sun* when I was a kid, and
then just continued buying it’, or ‘you just get used to your paper’ are examples of how this was expressed. One Mirror-reader explained how he for a while had swapped to the Guardian for reading on his way to work, but had given up because ‘you don’t know your way around with other papers – where is the agony aunt?’.

Partly, peers and parents were seen to be influential in creating the initial awareness of a paper, as demonstrated in this talk with a group of bus-drivers (aged 26-35), stressing the role of ‘your old man’:

Ronnie: You’d find as well that a lot of people who buy the Sun, only buy it out of habit. Cause other people, you know, like your parents, cause they buy the paper. And when you’re younger, you pick it up and…
Interviewer: So, you continue…
Ronnie: Yeah, it’s force of habit.
Stuart: Well, that’s why people read it, force of habit.
Interviewer: I see…
Stuart: Just force of habit, you know what I mean?
Ronnie: That’s what I said as well…It’s like you… when you’s growing up, your old man pops open the paper, you think…
Stuart: Exactly.

Such statements bring attention to newspaper reading as learned behaviour. As acknowledged here, further, the day-to-day routine of reading, even described as a force of habit, appeared to contribute to a structure of familiarity as gripping as the newspaper itself.

Perceptions of tabloids

‘Rubbish papers’

Equally important as routines for creating a certain kind of reading experience, were ideas about how these papers related to the newspaper market as a whole. When discussing the Sun and the Mirror in relation to other newspapers, it became clear the readers were aware of their position in the national newspaper market, distinguished both from the ‘quality’ press and mid-market tabloids. Readers felt that the Sun and the Mirror differed greatly from the broadsheets, described by one Sun-reader as ‘for business-class people’. Mid-market tabloids like the Daily Mail, likewise, were seen as more ‘newsy’, more demanding to read and more rigid in their views, whereas the Daily Star and the Daily Sport were regarded the least serious in their reporting, described as ‘made up’ and ‘stupid’.
However, while there were some attempts to compare other popular tabloids negatively, the overall descriptions of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* in this context were devaluing. Within most of the discussions the *Sun* and the *Mirror* were portrayed as of poor journalistic standards, evident in overt put-downs of these as ‘crappy papers’ and ‘rubbish’, or, as also shown in the previous quote, in the use of defensive adverbs such as ‘just’ or ‘only’ to defend the reading. Frequent comparisons between the *Sun* or the *Mirror* to other disregarded areas of popular culture, such as gossip magazines and cartoons, further reflected notions of these as an inferior, or at least a less ‘serious’, form of journalism. Readers’ descriptions, then, corresponded with the tabloid critics in terms of these papers’ journalistic value. They can be seen as shaped by negative images of these newspapers in other media and social contexts, and may at least partly be representative of a lack of positive ideological basis for legitimising the reading (see Ang, 1985: 110 for a discussion of this phenomenon with relation to popular culture).\(^{61}\)

To some extent, age and social grade determined how far readers would make an effort to distance themselves from the newspaper. The youngest readers openly exclaimed affinity to their preferred tabloid, using words such as ‘exciting’ to describe it and making positive comparisons to other papers, for instance in depicting the *Sun* as ‘the best paper out of all of them’ or the *Mirror* as ‘much better than the other papers’. One reader explained how the *Sun* made him feel ‘warm’. Older readers were more guarded. Likewise, readers in white-collar positions were more likely to denounce tabloids for not being ‘proper’ newspapers, and, while admitting to reading one of these papers every day, and having extensive knowledge of the content, were especially vehement in disapproving their connection to ‘typical’ readers. The following quote, by a 32-year old secretary at an accountancy firm, shows how such denigrations were linked to perceptions of a ‘typical’ reader as lacking in intellectual ability:

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Interviewer: How would you describe the *Daily Mirror*?
Alexandra: Well, it’s very basic.
Interviewer: How do you mean?
Alexandra: It’s, like, erm, politics watered down for the average man who probably doesn’t really understand the more complicated details.

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As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, such ideas have propped up much of the critique of tabloid journalism, as well as being part of the way that tabloid journalists themselves characterise their readers.

However, similar views of the readers were common among blue-collar readers too. The bus drivers quoted previously, most of for whom the *Sun* was the only newspaper read on a regular basis, for instance started the discussion

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\(^{61}\) Such responses can also be an artefact of the research, as ‘socially desirable’ responses.
by sarcastically describing the *Sun* as ‘done in an *intelligent* way, for people like bus drivers’. Such use of irony can be understood as a way to deflect any potential criticism from me as a moderator, as well as showing awareness of the general criticisms of tabloids. It may also be taken to involve a type of self-criticism for reading a newspaper that was considered of low standards. In any case, a distanced, at times ironic approach to the newspapers was an element of the discussions overall.

*For ‘the average man’*

Despite negative attitudes to a ‘typical’ reader, however, perceptions of who the newspapers were aimed at showed a great deal of ambiguity, with simultaneous processes of identification and distancing in play. For, even if attitudes to the reader as ‘an average man’ could be distancing, the fact that both papers were considered to have a broad appeal, aiming for ordinary people, was also talked about in appreciating terms. Statements such as ‘it’s an everybody’s paper’, or ‘anyone can read it’, were used as an appropriation of both papers, across social stratifications. Contradictorily, these could occur in the same discussions as in those where negative ideas of readers had previously been highlighted.

For some of the blue-collar readers perceptions of the typical reader as the ‘average man’ seemed linked to an identification with that ‘average man’ as ‘me’. To continue with the example of the bus drivers, having established an ironic attitude to the *Sun* as an ‘unintelligent’ paper early in the conversation, later on going back to descriptions of who they felt the *Sun* was aimed at one reader in this group exclaimed that: ‘this is really for us, you know’. Such fluctuations are in line with the style of the papers, which encourages a distanced approach at the same time as emphasising a connection with ‘ordinary men and women’ (see Chapter 6). These contradictions moreover touch on ambiguous understandings of identity and social class in relation to the reading; on the one hand showing how the papers’ ‘working-class’ image is framed by devaluing notions of the ‘average man’, and on the other, how this could in some ways be seen as contributing to maintaining a class-based identity based around that same image.

As illustrated in the following extract from an interview with Matt, a 34-year old construction worker, this identification could even be referred to in the context of main reasons for reading the newspaper:

**Interviewer:** How would you… what would you say it is about the *Sun* that makes you want to read it?

**Matt:** [silence]

**Interviewer:** You haven’t thought about that?
Matt: No…No. Not the obvious question, is it? Erm…It’s easy reading. I…the sports is very good. Erm, so, the first thing I read is the sports, and a general flick-through of worldly events. And it’s easy reading. It’s more… it’s more easy read for… It’s more for the commoner, like myself, than… It’s an easy read [my italics].

The idea of the Sun as aimed at ordinary people is here described as an integral part of the appeal – notably with the identification between ‘commoner’ and ‘myself’. The blue-collar readers in this respect seemed to have a closer sense of connection to the newspapers, which were considered to aim specifically for them. Yet, the many hesitations and pauses in the extract indicate how speaking about one’s social class in relation to the reading was difficult, and how these readers were negotiating highly complex identity positions in the discussions.

‘An easy read’

Much less ambiguous was the widespread description of both newspapers as ‘an easy read’. References to ‘easy’ or sometimes ‘light’ occurred time and time again in descriptions of either paper. While negative comments on the journalistic quality, or on the typical reader, were frequent, this more positive characterisation of both papers, often brought up within the same part of the discussion, had to do with descriptions of the reading experience. On one level, as illustrated in the extract with Matt above, describing a paper as ‘an easy read’ was used to ‘defend’ the reading, as a way to emphasise that the Sun or the Mirror were read for convenience rather than for journalistic quality. Yet, it also shows how these were linked to perceptions of effortlessness and comfort. Partly, as outlined above, such perceptions appeared related to the ease with which readers were able to fit their newspaper reading into daily routines, in particular for its appropriateness for quick looks and ‘flick-through’ reading, such as coffee breaks, car waits and commuting. However, perceiving the reading as ‘easy’ may also have to do with the cognitive processes of understanding the content – dependent on experiences and expectations of a newspaper, on pre-existing knowledge of issues raised in the paper, and, crucially, on literacy levels.

As noted, the reading could be reinforced by habits of family members and friends, ensuring a certain familiarity with the tabloid style and content that would pave the way for experiencing the reading as effortless. Having knowledge of format and form leads to an ease of reading. Likewise, being familiar with content types gives a background knowledge that aids understanding of new content. The focus of the Sun and the Mirror on the personal, popular and everyday, as outlined in Chapter 6, can be seen as enabling this process, drawing on concrete reference points from which to explore the issues at hand. ‘They talk about things that I can understand’, as one reader explained, whereas
another described his partiality to the *Sun*'s focus on ‘day-to-day things’ as opposed to how he understood the broadsheets to emphasise news outside of direct experience, such as ‘stocks and shares’ or ‘Wall Street crises’. As part of the appreciation these London-based readers showed for news linked in with day-to-day experience, many also felt their preferred tabloid took a particular focus on local life in the capital, as exemplified in this comparison between the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*:

I think the *Daily Mail* is talking about everything that’s going on everywhere else really. And to be honest I prefer to read things that are happening in London rather than out of London or in other places. So, I rather read the *Sun* cause of that. And the other papers [the broadsheets] are too long for me to read. [Laughs]
(Maria, 20, laundrette assistant)

While the everyday coupled with an understood local focus contributed to the perception of ease, this quote, where other newspapers are described as ‘too long’, also draws attention to the important role of literacy. Maria was not alone in perceiving other newspapers as too long, using too complicated language, and, in some cases, as too difficult to understand – an obstacle that, in this study, seemed especially manifest for some of the blue-collar readers as well as some immigrant readers. Unprompted comments among these readers on own literacy, such as ‘I read ok, but…’, assumptions that ‘you have to use a dictionary’ to understand other papers, and the extremely frequent praise of the tabloid language as easily understood, highlighted this aspect of perceptions of the newspapers. For example, Maria later explained how ‘big words’ made her ill at ease:

I mean, as I said the other papers, the *Daily Mail* and other ones, they use big words and sometimes I do think to myself, ‘well what does that mean?’ You know what I mean? Whereas the *Sun*, you know exactly what they mean when they’ve written it. So, there’s no problem understanding it.

The issue of literacy, it would seem, was at least for some of the readers underlying the appreciation of ‘an easy read’.

Finally, to fully appreciate the appeal of that which is ‘easy’, it might be revealing to apply a structuralist, semiotic perspective, as this provides the opportunity for insights into the symbolic element of language, and could be particularly relevant for such a recurrent depiction. Within structuralism, as noted by van Zoonen, any particular sign, in this case ‘easy’, ‘derive meaning not only from its relationship to signs within the same system of signs, ‘but also from its relation to its absent opposite’ (1994: 75). Thus, if ‘easy’ is seen as a sign of significance in relation to its opposite – all that which is hard, difficult and a
struggle – perhaps the constant emphasis on this notion can be connected to aspects of everyday life that would create a desire for ease and lightness. Certainly, there seemed to be some facets of the day-to-day existence of participants in this study, evident in comments on long working hours, repetitive job tasks, mundane routines or financial worries, which would warrant such a perspective. These reflections, and the way that they tie in with the reading experience overall, will be considered in more detail in the following chapters.

The Sun versus the Mirror

Brand loyalty

In terms of descriptions of the Sun and the Mirror in relation to other papers, there were, then, some striking similarities in understandings of the two. Accordingly, readers frequently commented on the similarities between the two papers, with some even regarding them as ‘basically the same paper’. However, all readers said they favoured one of the papers, and displayed a ‘brand loyalty’ in a number of ways.62 For those who additionally read the Sun or the Mirror, this activity was for example commonly described as a substitute for the more familiar paper:

Well, I will sometimes look at the Mirror. But the Sun, they summarise everything, in a nice way. Yeah. In the Mirror, the pages are so many! The pages are many, and then you get lost. Sometimes when you read something else, you don’t know what to look for. (…) Maybe if there’s no Sun around, then I’ll go for the Mirror.

(Mustafa, 27, construction worker)

Others, moreover, felt an even stronger loyalty to ‘their’ paper, showing a hostile attitude to the competitor:

I tend to buy the Mirror. I bought the Sun once or twice and I don’t really like the Sun because the Sun, it… the paper looks cheap. The way that they put articles looks… just tacky. (…) I mean if there wasn’t a Mirror on the stand I wouldn’t buy the Sun.

(Victoria, 33, secretary)

62 Loyalties to one paper may have been exaggerated through the research setting, since the research design meant that the discussions were focused around one paper.
These quotes highlight the most common understandings of the main negative differences between the two papers, with Sun-readers contrasting the Mirror as for example demanding, ‘boring’ or ‘more technical to read’, and the Mirror-readers describing the Sun as ‘tacky’, ‘embarrassing’ or ‘extreme’.

**The Mirror as alternative**

But, while the Sun-readers usually had little to say about differences, other than stating a preference for the Sun as more ‘fun’ or easier to read, Mirror-readers were adamant to elaborate. As is made clear in this interview with Patrick, a 34-year old newspaper deliverer, the Mirror was considered ‘one step above’ the Sun, and, with special reference to Page Three, a more socially acceptable option:

Interviewer: How would you compare the Daily Mirror to other newspapers?
Patrick: Mm... The Daily Mirror is kind of like the Sun, but one step above. Definitely. If you can’t read, you read the Sun. But if you want a little bit of reading, you want a little bit of excitement, you will read the Mirror. Some people will buy it to show that they’ve got a little more brains than the Sun. A lot of people. As I said, you’ve got a little bit more brain.

Interviewer: Mm. Just to show, kind of…?
Patrick: Well, it will keep you hooked for... the Sun, it takes me 15 minutes to get through it. This will take me half an hour. Yeah? So... Because I can read... There is some information in the Sun. Some really good bits. But they... put it up with all this dodgy stuff that makes you not wanna read it. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah... Like, what sort of stuff?
Patrick: I.e., if I’m sitting next to you on a train, I would be embarrassed to take the Sun out. It’s the Page Three thing. [Laughs] I would not do it. (...) But with this [the Mirror], you just say, ‘I’m not a sex maniac.’

Reading the Mirror, thus, could be a deliberate statement about one’s own identity, projecting an image of ‘more brains’ by disassociation from the Sun.

Similarly, some readers, in these comparisons, explained how they appreciated the Mirror for having a social conscience, with a less sensationalist approach to news. The following extract from a group of friends in their late 20s (all in white-collar occupations) is an example of how the Sun was regarded as ‘nasty’ and offensive in comparison, in this case in its reporting of Diego Maradona:

Douglas: The Sun does come out with stuff which I think is... even though I used to buy the Sun a lot... there’s stuff in there that I think, that I actually do find a little bit offensive. I don’t know if it’s in my ‘old age’ that I’ve got a little bit... funny about certain stuff, but...
Interviewer: Like, what sort of things would offend you?
Douglas: Well, there’s one thing, and it’s quite a silly thing, (...) but, erm… Diego Maradona, the Argentinian footballer, he’s been very ill, and in hospital recently. He had a heart attack and he was basically, sort of… I think he thought he might be on his deathbed. And the Sun had a headline which said, literally the day after his heart attack, the headline was, cause he’s quite fat, it said, ‘What a waist!’ – waist spelt w-a-i-s-t with an exclamation mark. I thought that was kind of… it was nasty. I don’t know, pretty bad taste, really. I don’t think you get that in the Mirror though. (…)
Andrew: I think it’s just a little bit more responsible than some other newspapers.
Douglas: Yeah, yeah.

Again, the Mirror is here understood as an alternative tabloid not only in terms of image but also in terms of the treatment of news, meaning that the simple act of not choosing the Sun would be a conscious alignment with alternative ethical or moral values. The Sun, reflecting its position as a market-leader, thus came to frame the discussions about the Mirror, as the dominant tabloid norm against which the Mirror was measured and picked as a more ‘responsible’ option.

‘There’s politics involved’

While the discussions about different moral or ethical values are clearly interlinked with personal politics displayed in the choice of newspaper, these sometimes led to talk about the political outlooks of the papers themselves. Perceptions of political differences, then, are a final area of analysis relevant to the overall context for how the Sun and the Mirror were understood. Somewhat surprisingly for someone who had spent time looking into the history of the two newspapers and having noted in their content what I saw as references in support of a left- or right-wing ideology, many readers were not familiar with the editorial outlook of either paper, and would offer guesses and speculations in terms of whether their newspaper supported a political party.

Often, both papers were considered to show affinity with a majority view rather than with a particular party or political ideology, or, despite the Sun’s history of supporting the Conservative party and emphasis on right-wing policies, be broadly considered ‘Labour’ by their readers. But in comparisons, there was a common perception of some form of political difference between the two. As this group of shop-fitters (aged 27-29) pointed out, ‘there’s politics involved’:

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63 On two occasions, the Mirror was described as a ‘black man’s tabloid’, meaning that it was perceived as more open to different ethnicities.
Ronald: I think the *Sun* is, like, a left-wing paper or something, innit? Or it’s Labour? One of them is Labour and one of them is Conservative…
Adam: Conservative or something…
Ronald: So, there’s politics involved.
Adam: The *Sun*’s a Labour paper, yeah. And the *Mirror* is Conservative.
Ronald: Yeah.

Although there could be some uncertainty in terms of the political outlook of each paper, shown here in fluctuating judgements of which paper would support which party, there was still a widespread perception of an existing political difference between the two papers.

For a number of the male *Mirror*-readers, moreover, this perceived difference in political outlook was described as a main reason for choosing this newspaper. In part connected to rejections of what was seen as the *Sun*’s extremism, buying the *Mirror* for these readers was considered a political choice, signalling an active support for a left-wing agenda, as well as for the paper’s radical stance on issues such as the Iraq war. Held together by an overt political viewpoint rather than socio-economic similarities, these readers would state the *Mirror*’s political outlook (i.e., ‘it’s more left-wing’) as a reason for buying it. This difference will be given more consideration in terms of the relationship between the reading and public life in the final analysis chapter. By contrast, the political outlook of the *Sun* was not discussed in the same context, and this final observation underlines an important difference in attitudes to the two papers.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have attempted to contextualise the reading, by highlighting characteristics of the readers as a group, habits of reading the *Sun* and the *Mirror* as well as common ways of talking about these. As shown, the papers are part of a wider news landscape, for these readers appearing to fit into a range of interconnected news sources, in particular other tabloid newspapers and commercial broadcast news. Within this news landscape, the tabloid reading can be described as a highly public practice, easily fitted into daily routines and, importantly, itself contributing to an everyday structure of familiarity and habit.

As habits and routines pave the way for manners of making sense of the papers, so too, do understandings of their image. Overall, comparisons to other newspapers fluctuated between negative and critical perceptions of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* as ‘rubbish’ and the more positive and constant notion of them as ‘an easy read’. Such contradictory discourses can moreover be seen as interlinked with ambiguous perceptions of the own identity in relation to the reading, particularly when touching upon social class. Individual and social identity was also
brought to the fore in comparisons between the *Sun* and the *Mirror*, where *Mirror*-readers in particular were keen to distance themselves from the competitor, on ethical and moral grounds as well as in a deliberate attempt to portray oneself ‘in opposition’ to the normative influence of the *Sun*. Clearly, such distinctions need to be taken into account when going forward with the analysis. The next chapter will build on some of the insights granted here: looking at the appeal of reading the *Sun* and the *Mirror*. 
CHAPTER 8

Enjoying Tabloids

Introduction

Given the popularity of the Sun and the Mirror, a central question to consider in a readership study is what makes these attractive to read. This chapter looks at the appeal of reading, examining readers’ understandings of style and content. The findings point to a substantial part of the reading as a way to relax and take the mind off day-to-day routines, and the chapter focuses on readers’ experiences of especially entertaining content. A close examination of these responses opens up analysis of the cultural and even political roles of material often dismissed as ‘trivia’.

The chapter considers three different levels of the appeal of reading. Starting with an analysis of tabloids as ‘fun’, I discuss the enjoyment readers take from the style and modes of address of the papers, as well as their experiences of particularly well-liked content. Using responses to celebrity coverage as a case study, the enjoyment of reading is then related to a more political aspect; as an attack on social privilege. Finally, the reading is linked to experiences of community and belonging.

Tabloids as ‘fun’

*Humour and story-telling*

When talking to readers about what they liked about either paper, a recurring description was of the reading as ‘fun’. Exemplified in explanatory statements such as ‘It makes me laugh’ or ‘it’s a fun newspaper to read’ this was deemed a primary reason for buying the papers, with experiences of amusement central to the reading. The further examination of these responses is important to gain an understanding of what makes the Sun and the Mirror pleasurable to read.
Part of this enjoyment was centred on humorous headlines, jokes used in stories and pictures, and a clever deployment of word-games and puns. Readers would for example commend the journalists on their skill with headlines, with admiring acknowledgments such as ‘I don’t know how they do it, but they crack me up’. But the ‘fun’ here was also derived from the stories themselves. As recognised by both Bird (1998, 2000) and Langer (1998), the ‘pleasure of the text’ is an important element to journalism, and both regard tabloid journalism as a form where this is particularly evident. Langer sees ‘the grip of the narrative, the savouring of the story regardless of the fact that it is news’, or possibly because of ‘the narrative status as news, as “the real”’, as a main attraction of tabloid news (ibid: 158), whereas Bird points to how lively and dramatic qualities contribute to making news memorable and enjoyable for audiences. And certainly, for the readers in this study, dramatization and ‘story-telling’ were appreciated elements of the reading:

They just put things… kind of fun. You know, ‘Prince Charles found in a hotel room with a stocking painted blue’, instead of ‘Prince Charles in incident at hotel.’ Or evil mad-hatter al-Qaeda boss held captive in the desert’ or something. You know what I mean? It kind of catches your eye.

(Albert, 27, telephone sales assistant)

As evident in this quote, the lively tabloid news style contributed to the experience of the reading as exciting and stimulating. That this style also, in accordance with Bird’s suggestion, can make news memorable for audiences was apparent in how participants over and over again would, as in the above example, mimic the tabloid news style. The way that tabloids express news and other matters had clearly made an imprint on readers, who were familiar with their lively style and were able to reproduce it in everyday talk.

Apart from the enjoyment of narrative qualities, the ‘fun’ of reading was derived from joking about scandalous, humorous or strange stories. During the fieldwork, I was often struck by the centrality of laughter to the conversations about these papers; there were many occasions where readers demonstrated how being able to joke about something they had read was as much part of the enjoyment as reading about it. An example can be given from an interview with a secretary (aged 33) who recounted how a bizarre news story in the *Mirror* provided an opportunity to share an amusing moment with colleagues:

**Interviewer:** Do you talk about what you read in the *Mirror* with other people?

**Victoria:** Some of the articles, yeah. If I find a good article in there. I found one in the paper not too long ago, and I cut it out and photocopied it and sent it round the office!

**Interviewer:** Oh, ok. What was that about then?
Victoria: It was about the…the man that kept spiders and they broke free of their glass…and they actually bit him and he died.

Interviewer: Oh…

Victoria: And… he had snakes, he had spiders, he had (…). And they had actually started eating on his body. And cockroaches all over… [Laughs] It’s true! I put it on my wall upstairs [in the office]!

Interviewer: How funny. Oh well, I mean…

Victoria: Yep. Then I photocopied it. I gave a copy to Alex [a colleague], to all the girls in the office.

As evident in Victoria’s jovial fascination for this actually rather tragic story, it is notable that readers might use ‘sombre’ content to fit into a general frame of humour – again demonstrating how entertainment and amusement were overriding aspects of the reading.

**Sport and gossip**

While pleasure was connected to lively tabloid narratives and humour, some genres also appeared more closely connected to the prevalent idea of the newspapers as ‘fun’. These included bizarre human interest stories such as the one detailed above, as well as agony aunts and horoscopes. However, perhaps not surprisingly given the tabloid focus on these areas, ‘sport’ and ‘gossip’ dominated discussions of particularly well-liked reading material. ‘Gossip’ was sometimes taken to include material such as agony aunts, but generally referred to the celebrity coverage. These categories were gender-coded, with female readers stating they would read the newspapers for ‘the gossip’, with particular preference for the *Mirror*’s ‘3AM’ and the *Sun*’s ‘Bizarre’ celebrity columns, and male readers preferring ‘the sport’. Readers would acknowledge gender perceptions of these content preferences, understanding celebrity coverage as for ‘the girls’, and sports coverage as aimed at male readers.

These content types were subjects of much amusement and animated talk in the groups, and appeared relatively easy to talk about – at least within the gender confinements. For example, although celebrity gossip was described as a ‘guilty pleasure’ by some female readers, it could still be given as a reason for reading either paper, and there was little hesitation to elaborate on different celebrity stories. Male readers, on the other hand, often showed reluctance to admitting liking ‘gossip’, with initial reactions either distancing, such as ‘Who cares?’ or derogatory, such as ‘I think it’s rubbish’. This parallels Bird’s findings with U.S. tabloid readers (1992: 151). But as shown in this extract from a group of *Mirror*-readers in their late twenties, negative perceptions of ‘gossipy’ coverage did not rule out enjoyment:
Andrew: And it’s like, ‘who’s been seen messing about in Hampstead Heath with his boyfriend?’ You know? What’s the point?

Mike: Yeah, why have it?

Douglas: Having said that I do…when I buy the Mirror, I do read all this…

Andrew: Oh, absolutely! (...) So, everyone says that, like, they hate gossip, but when it comes down to it, everyone reads it.

Responses to celebrity coverage will be considered in more detail in the next part of this chapter, but it is worth noting here that taking an interest in ‘gossip’ is contradictory to traditional masculine areas of interest (see Jones, 1980/1990), and such contradictions can signify a struggle between competing notions of masculinity amongst readers.

Conversely, while female readers were largely negative to the sport coverage, for example describing it as ‘a waste of the back of a newspaper’, male readers praised the Sun or the Mirror for their extensive football coverage and breaking sports news, with only one male reader showing disinterest for this part of the newspaper. As in this talk with an electrician (aged 27), an appreciated feature was of the sports writers’ ability to come across as ‘ordinary’ football fans:

Interviewer: Is there any particular part of the paper [the Sun] that you like more than others?

Mick: Mainly the sports. I think that the sports is very, it’s accurate and it’s interesting, and that is the main thing. Yeah, I’ll read it for the sports.

Interviewer: In what way is it interesting, the sports?

Mick: I just find that... that they get the stories before everybody else. It’s always, like, well-written, and it’s as if it’s written from a football fan’s point of view, not from a reporter’s point of view.

It was also clear the enjoyment taken from the football coverage was significantly interlinked with televised coverage, with frequent references to games that were watched as well as read about. A moment of conversation with a group of students (aged 18) gave an insight into how this interplay between television and text could be experienced:

Tariq: We all watched this game yesterday, and we all like to read it, yeah.

John: You wanna know what they think about the game. Because, obviously, if you support a team, you’re quite biased. But with the Mirror, they sort of come in with unbiased commentary on the game. So you can read what they think about it, and if they think… (…), you know, they’ll say what they think about it, like, penalty decisions and stuff.

Interviewer: So you get another perspective?

John: Yeah.
Here, the paper serves as an interpreter, reworking the football event into a meaningful narrative; evoking the pleasures gained from watching and creating new ones through an endorsed version of the event to be shared with others. Thus, just as the sports writing could be appreciated for its familiar tone, it was also liked for providing an interpretative structure to the game which readers participate in on a daily basis.

Probing further into experiences of tabloid sports coverage, however, it became clear the newspapers’ opinions were valued not just for the game commentary, but, interestingly, for ‘transfer gossip’ and features that would go beyond the sport itself. As one construction worker explained his penchant for the Sun’s football coverage:

I just think that they [other papers] tend to pick the mundane sort of thing, which… No one really wants to know if (...) sacked their manager. But everyone wants to know what Ferguson’s done, or what Chelsea are doing. Or someone putting coke up their nose. These… That’s the sort of thing you wanna know what’s going on in football.

(Daniel, 35)

The links to gossip, touching on the details of footballers lives, are clear here. Although the male readers initially rejected ‘gossip’ as a key motivator for reading, the interest in the sports coverage appeared linked to very similar mechanisms, based on curiosity of the situations of others and a desire for ‘behind the scenes’ revelations. While sport has historically been one of the key signifiers of masculinity in many Western societies (Wheaton, 2003: 193), and studies of sport coverage often focus on stereotypical representations of masculinity (e.g. Sabo and Jensen, 1992, Clayton and Harris, 2002, Wheaton, 2003) these responses serve as reminders of how, on a reception level, such representations can mask pleasure gained from its co-existence with the more feminised pursuit of insights into human relations – a pursuit clearly pleasurable to both male and female readers.

‘Pretty girls’

Not surprisingly, for the male readers a content type equally regarded as part of the ‘fun’ was the tabloid presence of topless or scantily clad women. ‘Pretty girls’, as one Sun-reader described them, would sometimes be held up as a main attraction of both newspapers, in particular in the male focus groups. Yet, there was generally a very deep sense of embarrassment in talking about this for both male and female readers, only partially overcome later in the interviews. For example, when asked whether pictures of girls was an attraction of the Mirror, Albert, a 27-year old telephone salesperson who had previously stated he espe-
cially liked the ‘beautiful women’ in this paper, said ‘It may be for some, but I wouldn’t buy a paper for that’. As pointed to in the previous chapter, the Mirror was nevertheless regarded different from the Sun in this respect, so that both male and female Mirror-readers distinguished between what they considered this paper’s more tasteful images and Page Three in the Sun. While the objectification of the female body as part of the news is likely to touch on similar issues for readers of both papers, the subject of the Page Three was the more sensitive and the discussions about this the most revealing.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject, likely to have been heightened by my presence as a young female, male readers would come up with a number of ‘defences’ for looking at ‘boob pictures’, as another Sun-reader expressed it. These included emphasising that pictures of girls were not essential to the reading, as in ‘it’s not that important, but it does brighten up your day’, as well as assertions such as ‘it’s a paper everyone can read, me wife reads it’ in connection with discussion about Page Three. Some male Sun-readers would level perceived criticism with more aggressive outbursts, such as: ‘If they [critics] don’t like it, buy another paper!’ Notably, in these defences the pin-up models were sometimes situated in a context of power, with readers stressing their financial success, which, as Luke, a 25-year-old bartender, said ‘shows you how powerful being on the third page of the paper can be.’ This discourse about the Page Three girl in terms of power is interesting, as, while on one level it is a defence for an activity these readers clearly felt was culturally provocative, it could also be indicative of the ambiguity in fetishism; where submission to and domination over the imaginary other can be seen as part of the same practice (see Chapter 6).

Yet, while the enjoyment gained from Page Three was difficult to pin down, the conversations at times offered vital glimpses into how it was experienced by male readers. As shown in the following example, a main pleasure appeared related to taking part in a typically ‘masculine’ activity:

I mean, women, they probably look at Page 3 and then move on but a man would look at the page a bit longer [laughs] and then flick through. (…) Women, they’re not interested in that but a man would stop and just read the caption at the bottom. And that caption, (…) it’s written in a masculine way so a man would appreciate it. It’s a bit, it would be a bit smutty, and so, a man could have a little giggle about this girl in a skirt and bla bla. It’s a masculine paper.

(Kiani, 28, cinema manager)

The references to ‘a man’ and ‘masculine’ in this extract highlight the strong links being made between identification with the male gaze in the consumption of Page Three and being a man. Aside from the sexual allure, tabloid pin-ups appeared to provide opportunities to strengthen a masculine identity. Such an
interpretation is supported by the fact that this was an area that seemed to allow male bonding across cultural boundaries. For example, a Nigerian, Muslim, _Sun_-reader explained that at the building site where he worked ‘we talk a lot about ladies that are naked’. For him, the interest in _Page Three_ had become a way to identify with and be accepted by his mainly British colleagues. A feeling of connectedness and unity with other men appeared important to the enjoyment of _Page Three_, and it is my belief that this experience plays a major part in the pleasure this feature offered the male readers.

Female _Sun_-readers, conversely, expressed aversion for _Page Three_. While I was prepared for certain disregard from female readers, having read Holland’s interesting article on the subject (1984, see Chapter 6), which highlights the potential pleasure for _women_ in looking at other women, I was also expecting evidence of a more playful reading of this feature. However, the female readers were unilaterally disparaging. Further, they often displayed very fierce reactions, shown in the use of emotive language such as ‘disgusting’ and ‘hate’. These reactions were expressed more clearly in the single-gender groups, whereas in the mixed gender groups the female readers were muted in the joking that ensued around the feature, and did not express these criticisms in relation to the male participants. However, this was not the case in talk with other women. One reader demonstrated how she would cover _Page Three_ with her hand while reading, whereas another explained how the feature made her feel low in self-esteem:

Maria (age 20): I don’t like her. I don’t like any of them! I don’t think… I prefer… not to open the paper and see them in there. I mean, I don’t think, you know, if you’re gonna have a newspaper, I don’t think you should have some… whoever it is… Some girl in there taking her clothes off and having pictures of them. I don’t like it.

Interviewer: Why don’t you like it, then?
Maria: I just don’t think that… To me, I don’t think it’s right and… especially if I have a partner and he’s sitting there and opens the paper and he sits there staring at them. I mean you’d get jealous if it was your, your man was walking down the road with you and he was looking at somebody else, and it’s the same thing. […] I mean it’s not just that… They put in someone skinny, with a nice body or whatever. Never do you see a woman with a fuller figure. (…) Why does it have to be skinny, white ladies with blonde or brown hair?

While this reader liked talking about these ‘ladies’, he also stated that as a Muslim, he ought to think pin-ups should not be in a newspaper. His resolve for this obvious contradiction was that although ‘Muslims are religious people’, ‘when they come to the Western [sic] it’s okay’. This response to Western media exposure of nudity illustrates how identity positions shift over different sets of values, and how the reading is one area where different aspects of these are emphasised and juggled with.
Revealing an aversion to sexualised news, as well as the way that the uniformity of the image can be experienced as disempowering to real-life women, such responses support Pursehouse’s suggestion that women can only enjoy the Sun through negotiating their identity positions to fit into the emphasised male heterosexual perspective, or ignoring aspects of the paper (1992: 14). Although academic theorists may find liberating or playful qualities in such images, these were not directly accessible to the female readers in this study.

The obvious tension between experiences of disempowerment by Page Three, and the women as regular readers, was dealt with through what, paraphrasing French sociologist Michel De Certeau (1984), could be seen as ‘strategies of resistance’, whereby the female readers had developed ways of thwarting their dissatisfaction. Toying with demands of a ‘Page Three man’ to counteract the impact of the Page Three girl, as exemplified below, can be seen in this light:

> Cause it’s alright for women to look in the paper and see that [Page Three]. Why can’t a man open it and see another man?  
> (Helena, 18, retail trainee)65

Likewise, ridiculing the glamour models appeared a way to gain superiority over the image:

> Tina (age 25): I just think it’s like, embarrassing. It’s, like, I don’t know… People call them models. Like, people that…Like, the Page Three girl, is like, ‘oh, the model…’ She’s not a model!  
> Interviewer: What is she, then?  
> Tina: She’s just…just a girl, ain’t she?  
> [Laughter]  
> Tina: She’s just a tart…

Such contemptuous denouncements could be a way to extend oneself above the image, providing a protective barrier between the reader and the girl in the picture. Contradictorily, this contempt could exist alongside what seemed a fascination for her perceived lucrative, perhaps glamorous, career, with frequent references made to the models as being financially successful. Then, as with the male readers, responses to tabloid pin-up images by female readers is far from straightforward.

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65 Incidentally, a female Mirror reader that I interviewed spontaneously mentioned the Mirror’s run of ‘Mirror-hunks’, as something that she said ‘made my day’.
Just ‘fun’?

While entertainment is important to tabloid reading, it is worthwhile going beyond ideas of this as simple and self-explanatory. However, in line with Ang’s claim that ‘pleasure eludes our rational consciousness’ (1985: 84), readers found it difficult to describe the pleasure connected to the ‘fun’ of the reading, and would give solipsistic ‘it’s just fun’-replies to further probing. Yet, the centrality of fun in these discourses, which, despite some gender differences in content preference, was prevalent in discussions with women and men, requires further analysis. ‘Fun organises and contains emotion’, writes Holland, pointing to how the *Sun* have used this to ‘tame’ unmanageable forces such as shocks, thrills and desire and package these into a more accessible form (1983: 85). The humour with which the content is offered and read clearly provided opportunities for relaxation – giving way to the release of emotions rather than increased stress. And just as wanting something ‘easy’ (see Chapter 6) would be desirable in relation to everyday life, so too the relaxation and enjoyment derived from the experience of ‘fun’ could be tied in with at least two aspects of this.

Firstly, it gave a welcome break from mundane habits and routines, such as commuting or repetitive job tasks:

> Like on the bus to work, you’re tired, and you just wanna be entertained. You know, get the latest on the sports, get a peep into the glamour world [laughs]. So the *Sun* is good for that.
> (Adam, 28, shop-fitter)

Secondly, for some, it was a way to cope with experiences of events and circumstances of the surrounding world as threatening or depressing, where the newspapers would have a ‘cheering-up’ function:

> I don’t wanna wake up in the morning and read about a rail crash that’s happened in Iraq, or Taiwan, or Australia. I don’t wanna be depressed when I read the news. I wanna be cheered up.
> (Daniel, 35, construction worker)

A parallel here can be drawn to Ang’s (1985, see Chapter 4) concept of the ‘melodramatic imagination’ as a means to deal with the mundane elements of the everyday, which is also drawn upon in Bird’s (1992) study of U.S. tabloid readers. Therefore, although these newspapers can be enjoyed in a number of ways, the emphasis on fun overall might be understood as a response to day-to-day struggles, where, in some cases, the newspaper reading works both as a way to release unwanted emotions and as a coping strategy for more general anxieties. In the next part of the chapter, I will develop a more detailed case study of how, in the area of tabloid celebrity, content included in the framework of ‘fun’
can also be used to cope with and criticise more specific social structures, providing an outlet for frustration with experiences of social inequality.

Attacking social privilege

Relationships to celebrity

As shown, celebrity stories were part of the especially popular reading material in the Sun and the Mirror, with ‘the gossip’ being an area of interest to female and (albeit less overtly) male readers. Although research on the consumption of celebrity media is rare, existing studies have emphasised the way that such material stimulate social interaction (Bird, 1992, Hermes, 1999). In this study, celebrity stories were the cause of much amusement and animated conversation, and, as with the Page Three feature for male readers, appeared to bridge cultural divisions. Previous research has pointed to how celebrity stories can play a role in the negotiation of social norms, and a main part of the conversations about these focused on morality. Tabloid celebrity stories appeared to share functions with other media in these respects, but the findings pointed to a more genre-specific role, bringing up questions of social class and inequality in relation to the reception of tabloid journalism, where responses to celebrity stories can be used as a case study. Although not confined to celebrity coverage per se, these issues became particularly evident in readers’ relationships to celebrities, which, following the newspapers’ shifts between humanising and exalting their celebrity subjects (see Chapter 6), was marked by a dramatically contradictory process of identification and distancing. Readers, on the one hand, understood celebrities as inhabiting a distinct and glamorous world whereas on the other hand they stressed the human qualities of individual characters.

The following extracts from interviews with a 32-year-old catering assistant and a group of shop-fitters in their late twenties show that the perceived difference from celebrities, allowing readers to imagine themselves in a different role, could work as a welcome change from the routines of everyday life:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>Ok, about the celebrity coverage…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael:</td>
<td>Yeah, yeah. I just suppose that everybody likes to read it at the end of the day. It’s glamorising. It’s a very glamorous life, isn’t it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Why do you think it’s fun to read about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael:</td>
<td>Don’t know… I suppose… Why is it fun to read about? It’s just… that you’re doing the same job everyday, yeah. And you’re kind of,</td>
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66 The material in this section has been published in a different version in the anthology Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture (2006), edited by Su Holmes and Sean Redmond. See Acknowledgements.
like… it’s a bit of fantasy reading, isn’t it? And you can kind of like imagine this image of this person that… you know, there’s a photograph of… You know. I don’t know, it’s just a fantasy isn’t it?

Interviewer: Reading about, you know, David Beckham or other high-profile people, can you somehow relate those to your own lives, or…?
Ronald: Well, we can relate to their lifestyle. Like, we can wish that we was them, you know?
Adam: Yeah.
Ronald: Yeah, I know what you’re saying.
Interviewer: In what ways would that be, then?
Chris: Three girlfriends at once!
[laughter]
Adam: Yeah, you wish!
Ronald: Always.
Ronald: Erm…
[silence]
Interviewer: But is there anything about those sorts of stories that you can connect to, somehow?
Chris: No… My life’s too boring.
Ronald: Yeah. Same here actually.

Precisely the dissimilarity of the celebrity’s life, then, could make the adventure of reading all the more satisfactory.

As some readers emphasized the clash between a mundane everyday life and the glamour of celebrity life, other conversations show the connections between an at times ironic distance from the ‘fantasy’ of celebrity and the recognition of aspects of their lives:

Interviewer: Do you think that celebrity stories somehow relate to your lives, or…
Helena: No.
Marissa: No.
Helena: I like, I like hearing about how they started, like, before they became famous, yeah. I like to know them things. But when they… [become successful] they don’t interest me. I don’t think their lives are like ours at all.
Joanne: Some of them are though, like Britney Spears. Yeah, she’s got her millions and they don’t have nothing to do with me, but she’s got boyfriends and arguments and…
Helena: But they have arguments with their boyfriends and they go on TV and they can get their boyfriends back by… making a song or something, do you know what I mean? And they flippin’ got money. They split up with their boyfriends, they can go out and spend, cause they’ve got loads of money. When we split up with our boyfriends, I ain’t got loads of money to go out and spend nothing.
This example from a group of retail trainees (aged 18-21) illustrate how individual experience, especially individual vulnerability, appeared the main subject of empathy, as it provided a gateway into another world. However, reading about celebrities could also become a harsh reminder of their very different circumstances. While offering a way to cope with difficult circumstances through identification, tabloid celebrity stories simultaneously laid bare the dearness of the everyday. For example, in this extract, the repetition of Britney’s money is significant. Another example of such a negation was clear in an interview with a 20-year-old laundry assistant:

Interviewer: Do you think, like, some stories about celebrities, do you think they somehow connect to your life, or…?

Maria: Some of them do… I mean, I’ve got a nine months old baby…

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Maria: Yeah. So… And I split up with my partner. […] I mean, as mothers, like, Jordan again, she split up with her partner, and she’s got a son, and she looks after him by herself.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maria: But then, I suppose, in other ways, I don’t… I can’t really relate to the celebrities because they’ve got the money to support themselves and their child and get the… support they need. Whereas I can’t, I have to work for my money and look after my little girl at the same time. Which… can be quite hard, so…

**Tabloid celebrity and social mobility**

When elaborating on this more ‘painful’ aspect of tabloid celebrity coverage, Nick Couldry’s (2003) argument that the media represents what he calls ‘the myth of the [social] centre’ is illuminating. Wanting to be in the media, according to this line of thought, means aspiring to inclusion in main cultural procedures; into ‘a “central” space where it makes sense to disclose publicly aspects of one’s life’ (ibid: 116). This logic of inclusion through the media can also be seen in relation to ideas of social mobility. Couldry has argued elsewhere (2000) that the sense of inclusion into such a ‘central’ social space is an engaging idea for those excluded from wider means of social and economic power, especially if other class-based identities appear remote or impossible to emulate. To view tabloid celebrity as related to discourses on social mobility may equally help explain how, rather than in the aspiration to a different class-based identity, the appeal can lie in the celebrity’s perceived proximity to one’s own position in the social system, and consequently to the notion that social class is escapable. When readers emphasized how celebrities were ‘just human’ after all, and especially liked to read about a celebrity’s route to fame or about a sudden transformation from ordinary person to celebrity (for instance through winning the
lottery), this can be seen as connected to a hope of social mobility and self-transformation.

To further support such an interpretation is the trend in contemporary celebrity culture in general toward the emphasis on those without cultural capital or elite roles rising to fame, which can be seen as a form of dramatic presentation of social mobility. For example, given their disconnection from traditional hierarchies of influence, this has been pointed out as integral to the popular impact of many Reality TV stars (Biressi and Nunn, 2004). When embracing ‘down-market’ celebrities, such as soap actors, pin-up girls and reality TV participants, whose backgrounds may not be dissimilar to that of their largely working-class readerships, tabloid newspapers can be seen as working within the same boundaries of ‘democratic’ fame, where there is at least the suggestion that one’s position in the social structure is escapable.

However, as shown, such a conception often appeared contradicted by the experiences of the readers that participated in the study. Following the vacillation between identification, disassociation and even aggression that was apparent in these talks with readers, it is therefore worthwhile pointing out, as has been done by Jo Littler in an analysis of celebrity culture, that the consumption of celebrity can be understood as a form of ‘symbolic disempowerment’: reading about celebrities may signal our exclusion from the symbolic social centre of the media, but it should also be read ‘in the context of economic and social disempowerment: in terms of unequal access to material resource and social mobility’ (2004: 10). Recognising such an underlying tenet to readers’ relationship to tabloid celebrity helps to create an understanding of the more derisive treatment of celebrities.

‘Picking on’ celebrities

Readers were certainly alert to the fact that for the tabloids, celebrities were ‘fair game’, showing a clear grasp of the particularities of the genre. The newspapers were described as ‘picking on’ celebrities or, as mentioned in the following extract from a group of female clerical workers (aged 28-32), showing them ‘making a fool of themselves’:

Alexandra: I don’t think they [the celebrities] are portrayed as real people in this [the Mirror]. They’re just portrayed as people on the pavement, walking into or out of a club, or you know, with their shopping bags…

Helen: With a short skirt, falling out of a car…

A comparison can be made to Richard Dyer’s concept of the ‘success myth’ in relation to film stars (1979: 48-49), whereby they become symbols for success contingent on discourses of ‘ordinariness’ and ‘luck’. However, the star system Dyer describes is also perceived to reward ‘talent’, which marks a difference from the kind of celebrity discourse referred to by Biressi and Nunn.
Alexandra: ‘Oh, look at her knickers!’ ‘Isn’t she looking a bit rough?’ You know…
Helen: Or no knickers!
Interviewer: But do you feel that they’re kind of being mean then, when they show
those kinds of pictures?
Helen: No. No, I don’t think so.
Alexandra: I think they’re… I think they want to see people fall over, if you know
what I mean?
Interviewer: Ok. What do you mean…?
Helen: Yeah, to… to make a fool of themselves, really.
Alexandra: Yeah, like, you’ve got all the money in the world but you still look
rough, or whatever, when you get up in the morning.

[laughter]

Some readers, both male and female, expressed worry for how individual char-
acters were treated in the tabloids, feeling ‘sorry’ for someone like David
Beckham or Prince Harry for what was felt to be an unfair intrusion into their
privacy. But, as exemplified in the following interview with a 35-year-old con-
struction worker, a more common, and sometimes coincident, response was to
enjoy this treatment:

Daniel: They, cover, yeah, they seem to pick on the top celebs. Catherine Zeta
Jones can’t move without the Sun doing it. Jordan can’t change her
underwear without the Sun knowing about it [laughs]. […] They must
hang around night clubs 24/7 waiting for a celebrity to fall out the
door.
Interviewer: Yeah… Is it something you like to read about, or…?
Daniel: Oh, I’d gloss over it. Unless, there’s… it’s an amusing picture of
Naomi Campbell or someone, falling over with her legs in a twist
[laughs].

Just as in the previous interview extract, the laughter here is suggestive of a
distanced approach, where witnessing the celebrity’s minor or major misfor-
tunes can even serve as the main basis for reading pleasure.

Sentiments such as frustration, resentment and anger have been found in
other studies of celebrity consumption (e.g. Hermes, 1999: 80), and they were
unmistakable in the talk about tabloid celebrity coverage here. The hostility
with which celebrities were often discussed must be seen in relation to the dis-
tinctive fault-finding and ridiculing of celebrities particular to tabloids and
demonstrated in Chapter 6, but it could also be analysed as a reaction to the
way that tabloid celebrity stories carry the promise of social mobility, and yet
invoke restrictions of the social structure. Some readers would connect their
resentment of celebrities to jealousy, related to a sense of discontent with their
own circumstances:
I couldn’t care less about them lot [the celebrities]. It just makes me jealous. Especially when I’m out there driving a bus picking up all them people all day.

In this interview with Ronnie, a 35-year-old bus-driver, it is clear that the newspapers’ belligerence may provide the opportunity for a temporary vindication of injustices. It allows readers to indulge in what Catherine, a 21-year-old shop assistant, described as a ‘hate’ for celebrities:

Sometimes you just wanna hate celebrities, you know? They’ve got money, and the life…

Here, the newspaper exposés of celebrity misdemeanours appeared to have the potential to reverse experiences of disempowerment, with celebrities conceived of as representations of social privilege and power.

As shown, there is some empirical support for Connell’s (1992) hypothesis, discussed in previous chapters (Chapter 3 and 6), and which claims that an implication of tabloid celebrity stories is that privilege is *attackable*. The discussions with readers showed that celebrities were understood to represent privilege and these stories did appear to nurture an insolent attitude to this. As exemplified in this quote from the interview with Maria:

Maria: Yeah, they [the Sun] are always chasing up celebrities. […] The things that you don’t know about, they tell you. So, I think it’s quite good.
Interviewer: So you think it’s good to read?
Maria: Yeah, I think it’s good to read. I think it is fun to read. I mean, you know… I mean, the celebrities they think… You know, they think they’re great and… they’ve got lots of money and they think they’re powerful. But then you find out that they’ve been taking cocaine for instance, then you think to yourself, ‘well, you’re not so great are you?’

Interviewer: No…
Maria: I mean, I think it’s good that they do that.

In concurrence with Connell’s hypothesis, then, a wider questioning of privilege appears central to the enjoyment of reading tabloid celebrity stories, here exemplified in Maria’s appreciation of the Sun’s exposure of those who ‘think they’re powerful’. To this experience, the question of whether celebrities yield ‘real’ social or political power on an individual level is irrelevant, as it is the representations of privilege that are torn down and the sentiment that rebellion against social privilege is possible that is nurtured. Whether a symbolic attack on privilege could be used to challenge real social inequalities is however questionable as that, as Connell admits, would be dependent on the existence of persuasive alternative socio-cultural arrangements (ibid: 83). But an explanation
to the popularity of the tabloid celebrity story is that it works as a vent for discontent with situations resulting from social inequality.

The interest in tabloid celebrity stories can therefore be seen as a commentary on some very real social tensions and power-struggles in the society in which they operate, where pleasure taken in venomous or revelatory treatment of celebrities must be seen in the light of what they symbolise in relation to the lives of readers – not only, in several cases, dashed hopes of social mobility but also the privilege and power that by and large appeared out of reach for those who participated in this study. It can be argued that the ‘celebrity-bashing’ of tabloid newspapers offers a momentary experience of power and control to readers. They are the audience for which the celebrity is sacrificed, for a moment given the chance to debase the rich, famous and powerful.

‘Seeking safety’

Sociability

The attractions of reading as discussed so far in this chapter – the way these papers provide an entertaining break from day-to-day struggles and the way they can simultaneously be experienced as attacking social privilege – are bridged by another, fundamental aspect of their enjoyment. Connected to the idea of the Sun and the Mirror as vents for dissatisfaction with social subordination are these as inspiring a sense of affinity among readers, for ordinary people and against elitist structures in society. As I demonstrated in Chapter 6, both papers draw on sentiments of collectivism and a dialogic approach to conjure up an image of the reader-paper relationship as based on shared values and interests. On a reception level, the notion of community can however be used to understand a number of reading pleasures, partly related to readers’ interpretations of the collective identities as conveyed in the papers, and partly to the use of these in the social settings of everyday life.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which the idea of community is useful to understand the roles of the newspapers is when thinking about the importance of these to the social life of readers. Tabloid reading was without exceptions described as a social activity, exemplified in how some of the participants would read the papers together (see also Chapter 7), in the focus on ‘gossip’ and evident in the often lively and animated focus group discussions. A significant use of the reading was to strengthen social bonds with other individuals, as highlighted in this discussion with a group of friends (aged 18-21):
Charlotte: They give you, like, enough to… basically understand what has happened, and maybe even, kind of, discuss it with other people, kind of thing. It’s like a social thing.

Interviewer: Do you talk about what you read [in the Sun]?

Charlotte: If I… like, I might read it in my house and I read something funny, then I kind of tell my flatmate about it. But… I don’t know… I think I just…

Nicole: I think newspapers and even the news on the telly are conversation points anyway. They can lead to… Like, my boyfriend works and I’ll… If I’ve read the newspaper today… If he phones me, I go, ‘have you read the newspaper today?’ We generally read the same thing or we watch the same news, if we haven’t seen each other. And, he’ll say ‘yeah, I heard about so-and-so.’ And we might discuss it for a couple of minutes. But it’s something… I don’t know. It’s like it’s something to talk about. It generates conversation between people.

As observed by Nicole, such sociability can be seen as a major use of news in general (see e.g. Jensen, 1992: 230 and Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 55-57), and was especially encouraged through these newspapers.

And while the reading contributed to a sense of shared experience in the immediate social sphere, this also seemed to extend to a wider readership, to some extent generating a feeling of connectedness with other readers. Comments on the newspapers’ inclusiveness and popularity, such as ‘It’s an everybody’s paper’ or on social interaction on a wider level, such as ‘I can talk about what I read in this paper with anybody’ reflect the way sociability as part of tabloid reading is not only a question of day-to-day interaction, but also of experiencing oneself as part of a more widespread collective of readers. This sociability can be seen as furthering a sense of shared interests both within the immediate social circle and within a more abstract collective.

**Collective identity**

Although one should be cautious with asserting the media’s impact on collective identities (see Schlesinger, 1991), there is some room for thinking about tabloid reading in terms of feelings of belonging. As was established in Chapter 7, these newspapers were generally seen to aim for ‘ordinary people’, and there was evidence of how, particularly the blue-collar workers, would identify themselves with the papers in this respect, evident for example in how the newspapers were regarded to voice the concerns of relevance to a majority, in a language close to the everyday - ‘like we talk’ or ‘like something I’d say myself’, as two blue-collar readers described the language used by the Mirror and the Sun respectively. The responses to celebrity coverage can also be regarded in this light, fitting in with the newspapers’ anti-establishment stance that creates the experience of being on the side of ordinary people. In this respect the Sun and
the Mirror were felt to provide a welcoming, easy to relate to, connectedness with the newspapers as well as other readers.

The experience of being part of a large collective of ‘ordinary people’, in some instances appeared related to identification with the nation at large. Whether in talks about particular content types such as sports or about general impressions of the journalism, both newspapers were commonly referred to as especially ‘British’ papers, and reading them corresponded with an experience of ‘Britishness’:

Kiani: I think the Sun, it is a paper that I think to really understand you have to have been born in this country. I think that there are a lot of people from overseas especially that... It is a bit of a jokey newspaper, but they can’t quite grasp that the paper is the best-selling newspaper. It’s not really an in-depth read, it’s not really a ... that’s why I think it’s a very British paper that people from overseas don’t really understand.

Interviewer: So, if you’re British, how would you get it more?

Kiani: I think cause of the humour of the paper as well. Cause the humour is a very British humour. English humour. Like Page Three for example, ever since I’ve grown up, whenever the Sun’s there, Page Three has always been there. But in all the foreign papers, Page Three is never ever there. And then people come over and go ‘what!’. So it is in a way like a British institution where, me personally, I think that you can only really understand the paper if you were born here. Cause then you understand the Sun’s mentality and the whole thing the Sun does.

As a second-generation immigrant from Pakistan, the daily connection with the Sun for Kiani appeared to strengthen his own identification with ‘Britain’. His relationship with the Sun is therefore a good example of Hall’s (1996) argument that individual as well as collective identities are processes in flux, with different allegiances in different contexts. It also highlights how perceived stable identities, such as the security that comes with belonging to a nation, may be especially appreciated in the context of volatile identificatory relations in other areas.

The papers’ invitation to identification with a collective was thus interpreted through the very experience of being part of something popular, ordinary, anti-establishment and ‘British’. But as shown in Chapter 6, the discourse of community in the newspapers is also based on the guarding of its boundaries against the abnormal or dangerous, which for some readers led to a highly conflicting experience. A moment in an interview with a Muslim construction worker (aged 27) showed how he had to negotiate his experience of being part of the Sun’s community through suppressing other aspects of his identity:

68 It is likely too that this readers’ stress on having to be British to fully understand the Sun is aimed at me as a foreign (Swedish) moderator, perhaps in particular as a defence for Page Three.
Interviewer: You mention their coverage of Islam before… What do you think about the way the Sun covers…?

Mustafa: They always tell the truth. They always tell the truth. About the Muslims too. We’ve got bad Muslims, we’ve got good Muslims. But Muslims have… we don’t always…

Interviewer: Ok…

Mustafa: But… About Muslims, in the Sun. Sometimes I don’t like, me personally, I don’t like the way they are saying about Muslims. Cause if one Muslim will do something, they give them, they reject a lot of Muslims, you get me. Like, how they say about Abu Hamza, and that. It’s just… he’s Muslim and then people go with that. But in the UK here, there’s a lot of Muslims in different places, and you don’t get Abu Hamza, the way he is, everywhere. (…) And when I think of that, it makes me unhappy. But I like the Sun. I like the way they are talking, yeah.

The criticism of Sun’s coverage of Muslims, where the individual interview provided the space for a personal confession of disappointment, was counteracted by the emphasis on Mustafa’s willingness to be part of the community it offered.

Another aspect of how the ‘guarding’ of the boundaries was experienced on a reception level was to do with how readers, through particular content, appreciated to be able to ‘test’ what is to be construed as normal. The fascination for tabloid stories on the bizarre, as noted previously, may be seen in this light. Likewise, the popularity of the agony aunts should be paid attention to here, as these, as illustrated in this extract with a Mirror-reader (aged 27), were used to interrogate normative behaviour through the use of humour:

Albert: I read them [the agony aunt columns] for amusement. I read them because they are so farcical that I can’t actually believe that anyone would get themselves in that situation. Erm… Like, sleeping with your girlfriend and her mum. And then they go ‘oh, now what do I do?’ […]

Interviewer: Yeah… Ok. But you still find them enjoyable to read.

Albert: Yeah, you know, they’re amusing. You know, it’s… it’s the stupidity. It’s, like, Jerry Springer. You don’t (…) admit to liking the programme, but you’re, like, laughing at the freaks that are on it.

Highlighting the relatedness in the consumption of parts of tabloid journalism and popular television genres such as the talk show, it is clear here how the agony aunt column offers the ability to distance oneself from ‘the freaks’ on parade within it. As seen in Chapter 6, they often deal with gender insecurities, and so the pleasure in distancing might also be seen to invoke a sense of security in a gendered position. But as expressed in the following quote with a female group of administrative workers, they could also relate to the comfort of experiencing everyday problems as normal:
Thus, while part of the enjoyment may lie in certain recognition of problems and emotions, there is also pleasure in the reassurance that one is still within the boundaries of normalcy and acceptance.

**Certainty**

Even if the bizarre and volatile elements of the ‘freak’ stories of the tabloids were enjoyed, ultimately, then, they provide reassurance to stable interpretations of oneself. In other ways too, these newspapers were perceived as bringing an element of stability. For example, both papers were linked to certainty in the way they were perceived as ‘opinionated’ and ‘black-and-white’, transparent in ideas and with writers firm on their views. ‘You know their angle’, as one reader described her appreciation for the *Sun*, whereas another felt it ‘spells it all out’, enabling the forming of own opinions in relation to the view of the newspaper. Such qualities provided a frame of reference in which the readers would develop their own standpoints, but, paradoxically, could also be linked to the pleasure taken from knowledge free from contradiction. The enjoyment derived from the stress on traditional attributes linked to gender could possibly be placed in this context.

Likewise, certainty as part of the reading should be mentioned in terms of the discourse on these papers’ historical presence, with readers for example emphasising that ‘it’s like it’s always been’ [about the *Sun*] or ‘it’s been around for a long time’ [about the *Mirror*]. Anderson writes that symbols of the past, ‘mythically infused with timelessness, (...) attain particular effectiveness during periods of intensive social change when communities have to drop their heaviest anchors in order to resist the currents of transformation’ (1996: 102). The *Sun* and the *Mirror*, in evoking a sense of tradition, could possibly have a similar function.

The observations made in this last part of the chapter point to tabloid reading as connotative of the warmth of human interaction, of belongingness and
security. Illuminating Anderson’s point above, these are precisely the features that Zygmunt Bauman, in *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (2001) suggests are most sorely missing from modern life, which he sees as increasingly marked by flexible social relations, competition and indifference. Perhaps here, there is a final clue as to how the popularity of tabloid journalism can be explained within the fabric of society at large. Certainly, it is interesting to juxtapose the emphasis on ‘black-and-white-ness’, graspable morals, history and community against the context of an increasingly complex society, where forces of globalisation and commercialisation have been seen to contribute to eroding traditional values and working-class forums, such as trade unions and the security of a lifetime workplace. The search for community, real or imagined, appears crucial to understanding the reception of tabloid journalism.

**Summary**

In analysing the appeal of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* for readers, I have focused on responses to content perceived as typically ‘soft’ tabloid focuses, such as human interest, sport and celebrity stories. The reception of such content shows that it is considered especially pleasurable and therefore provides a key to understanding the popularity of tabloid journalism. An in-depth analysis of this side to tabloid reading reveals much about the complex ways in which these newspapers link in with readers’ everyday lives, contributing to knowledge of how this material is to be explained within the fabric of society at large.

The findings have illustrated how the roles of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* in these respects are multi-faceted but similar, with at least three important common aspects to their appeal. On one level, an attraction of the reading can be understood as a way to deal with day-to-day struggles, which, particularly through the deployment of humour, provides an opportunity for relaxation and the release of general everyday anxieties. Demonstrated here through responses to celebrity stories, these newspapers on another level act as a vent for frustration rooted in experiences of social inequality, which means that an equally significant attraction is being able to criticise social privilege within the reading experience. Finally, overlapping both of these tangents is what, drawing on Bauman’s analysis of modern Western culture, could be called the ‘search for community’, which helps explain the appeal of the sociability, collective identity and clarity as experienced through the *Sun* and the *Mirror*.

These three ways of explaining responses to the newspapers show how tabloid material often considered trivial is made meaningful in the linkages between the papers, readers and the social structures surrounding readers’ everyday lives. Thus, what the chapter has accomplished is to shed light on how
main attractions of the newspapers relates to deep-seated human desires, life experiences and uncertainties, as well as how these are shaped by a social context. Yet, while such an insight brings an enhanced understanding of the *popularity* of these newspapers, it tells us little about their role as providers of information from the perspective of political communication and public life. The next and final chapter of the readership analysis looks at readers’ responses to the *Sun* and the *Mirror* in terms of politics, trust and public life.
CHAPTER 9

Tabloid Reading and Public Life

Introduction

The previous chapter showed how some of the main attractions for the Sun and the Mirror lie outside of traditional conceptions of news as ‘information about public affairs’. But, to conclude that tabloids bear no relation to politics and public life in general would be to ignore significant aspects of the way readers understand and use them. As shown in the discussion about tabloidization (Chapter 3), it is on such issues that the controversy around tabloid journalism focus – this news form has been analysed through theories of its influence on politics and society, in particular with relation to Habermas’s (1989) concept of the public sphere. The final chapter of the readership analysis returns to this debate by examining how tabloid reading connects to the macro-perspective of the media, politics and public life.

The first part of the chapter relates to some common criticisms of tabloid journalism from this perspective, looking at connections between tabloid reading and distancing from mainstream political processes. The second part problematises these criticisms; exploring how the reading is used as a resource for political knowledge, but also how it establishes a framework for interpreting political events and processes. Finally, I investigate aspects of the reading which highlight the communicative and participatory potential of tabloid journalism. The chapter will draw on some of the findings presented in the previous parts of the book, reinterpreting these within the wider framework of tabloid reading and public life.

69 Some of the material in this chapter has been previously published in the anthology Media and Public Spheres (2007), edited by Richard Butch. See Acknowledgements.
Reading politics

Tabloids as public affairs news?

Tabloids, as I have showed, can be analysed from the standpoint of what makes them popular with readers, and this analysis draws attention to cultural functions concerning questions of identity and belonging. Tabloids are part of a ‘circuit’ of popular culture, where some of their attraction to readers on the surface can be seen as having little relevance to political communication, or more generally to the analysis of public life; the spaces and practices where members of a society come together as a public body. However, tabloids do form news discourse. They play a role in establishing topics for public discussion, and interrelate with political developments. The relationship between the reading and perceptions of politics, public affairs and the newspapers as part of political communication can thus be used as a starting-point for the discussion of the wider role of tabloids.

Thinking about this relationship, it is necessary to problematise the presentation of tabloids as ‘entertainment’. Readers, as demonstrated earlier, generally did not describe the Sun and the Mirror as high-quality sources of information about politics and public affairs, but portrayed the papers as being of poor journalistic standard – often using highly disparaging descriptions such as ‘crappy papers’ (see Chapter 7). Instead of emphasising the quality of content or its importance for monitoring public affairs, I have also demonstrated that a contributing reason given for reading the Sun and the Mirror was simply that they so easily fitted into the daily routine. ‘An easy read’ as a common description was explained in part by their absorption into routines such as commuting or breaks from work. Likewise, the reading practice was framed in terms of a ‘flick-through’ engagement with the newspaper, more commonly associated with the relaxation and recreational pastime of men’s and women’s magazines than with active engagement in public affairs.

Such a relaxing, entertaining function could be interpreted as showing that tabloids, for readers, have little relevance to wider questions of news as political communication; as they can be seen as dealing with other aspects of an individual’s life. There were some readers in this study, for example a group of female Mirror-readers in administrative jobs, who explained how they took an active interest in public affairs but used the Mirror solely to catch up on the celebrity gossip. It is clear that the newspapers can be used in this way and in fact invite readers to do so. But, it is still relevant to analyse tabloids as part of political communication, both on the grounds of the fact that for some readers tabloids serve as a main source of printed news about public affairs (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of news sources of participants in this study), and because of the
linkages between identity formations in non-political spaces and political life overall.

‘Fun’ and engagement in public affairs

Having clarified the value of perceiving tabloid reading as part of political communication, it is, as stated previously, in this area that many of the critical arguments about tabloid journalism have been brought forward. Here, there were several ways in which the criticisms of tabloids can be seen as borne out in the research with readers, and I would like to draw attention to these before developing a more differentiated analysis.

One key question raised in the criticism of tabloids is whether a humorous, at times ironic, understanding of news reduces the capacity for sincere engagement with critical political issues. The appreciation of ‘story-telling’ qualities, as explained in the previous chapter, could for example also be used to produce a distancing from the events of the story, as when readers emphasised that they overall didn’t take what they read ‘too seriously’. Although reading modes are subject to change, so that in the same conversation a story on the Beckham’s love problems could be used for a joke, while some of the attention given to coverage of the Iraq war would not, there was some evidence that the idea of ‘fun’ became an overarching interpretative framework – possibly acting, in the words of Langer, ‘not to engage the viewer/reader in its premises and potential outcomes, but to produce distanation: these are real people, here is misadventure, but after all, it’s only a story’ (1998: 159).

For example, in the instance reported on in the previous chapter of a reader who perceived a story on an individual’s death as ‘hilarious’, this could be perceived of as an obstacle to engagement with the issues reported on. However, this kind of humorous approach was most evident in talks of subject matters outside of traditional public affairs, as in the discussions about celebrity stories or about the problems brought up in the agony aunt columns, whereas news about parliamentary politics overall seemed to produce a less ‘jokey’ or ironic response. This highlights that readers are sensitive to different styles of reporting and to the different content categories in their newspaper. As I will cover in the last part of this chapter, approaches to the newspapers overall as ‘fun’ can also contribute to making the news memorable. Yet, this argument does not mean that readers’ engagement with the political reporting in these newspapers is unproblematic, and it is worthwhile further investigating correlations with some of the concerns raised within the debate about tabloid journalism.
Politics as ‘over my head’

The question of how tabloids relate to engagement with political news leads on to another key criticism here, which claims it either produces or interrelates with a distancing from political processes. The one previous interview study of tabloid newspaper reading drew the conclusion that tabloid readers are ‘apolitical’ (Pursehouse, 1992), and other text-based analyses (e.g. Rooney, 2000) have assumed that readers are uninterested in public affairs overall. In this study, too, it was the case that many readers declared a limited interest in what could be considered traditional public affairs news, particularly more abstract news or news of events outside of a direct sphere of experience. The tabloid reading, furthermore, appeared to fit into this perspective. The blue-collar readers in particular described the reading as part of a disengagement from more wide-ranging or abstract current affairs analysis, which was understood as having little connection to their lives. An example can be given from an interview with Daniel, the 35-year-old construction worker, who preferred the *Sun* because he thought more abstract social issues irrelevant:

> I mean, this [the *Sun*] is light reading, in general terms. And I think the broadsheets… for my life, I don’t wanna know about stocks and shares, and I don’t wanna know about Wall Street crises or…what’s going on in Beijing or whatever. As I say, day-to-day things, I just wanna know about. A light read.

Such emphasis on the separation of ‘day-to-day things’ and more wide-ranging issues, also exemplified in how readers stated they preferred their tabloid because it focused on ‘London’ or ‘England’, could be seen as supporting notions of tabloids as fostering a distancing from the wider structures governing society.

Similarly, news about parliamentary politics overall emerged as a less favoured part of the content, and was only discussed after prompting. The majority of male readers, irrespective of social grade, stated they had some interest in politics and would read the news about this, which gets an assigned space on page 2 in both papers. But, as opposed to news about celebrities and footballers, stories about parliamentary decisions and events did not seem easily remembered or talked about. When I asked what the readers thought of ‘political news’ in the papers, they became silent, or spoke with difficulty, interrupting their speech with pauses and hesitations. The difficulty remembering or talking about these stories could be explained by the more conventional style of writing displayed in their reporting, as opposed to the more easily absorbed narrative qualities to tabloid stories about personalities (see Connell, 1998, for distinc-
tions in tabloid reporting). It may equally be related to the perception among some readers that politics was too contentious to discuss in public. Mustafa, the Muslim Sun-reader from Nigeria, was as opposed to the British readers vocal about his interest politics, but said that although reading the Sun helped him communicate with British colleagues at the building site where he worked, he did not see politics as a topic for public discussion:

Interviewer: And, do you talk about what you read in the Sun with other people?
Mustafa: Yeah, yeah. A lot. About sports….
Interviewer: You said you talk about it at work?
Mustafa: No, I was talking about when we say ‘oh, yeah’ [about 'the ladies, discussed previously'].
Interviewer: Oh right. So you talk about girls?
Mustafa: Yeah, we say ‘oh, yeah’. And then sports as well. We talk about sports a lot. Yeah.
[...]
Interviewer: You said you’re interested in politics, as well. Do you talk about that too at work, or?
Mustafa: Yeah, with my friends. Yeah, we talk about everything, with friends. Yeah. But not at work.
Interviewer: Not at work?
Mustafa: No, not at work, yeah.
Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
Mustafa: About the politics at work? No, it doesn’t happen like that. You know, someone is banging something and making loud noises and you can’t talk about politics.

Where talking about sports or ‘the ladies’ seemed acceptable, discussion of news about politics, ironically, was here described as confined to the more private communicative spaces.

Equally, female readers of both the Sun and the Mirror were vocal about their apprehension to politics, and did not like to read the page 2 news. As exemplified in this interview with a 20-year-old laundrette assistant, for many female readers ‘politics’ was simply a difficult subject to talk about:

Interviewer: When it comes to the way the Sun reports on politics, how would you describe it?
Maria: Erm... I think they tell you everything about politics, you know, they tell you what each party has said and they...(...) to be honest I haven’t really got much to say about it, cause I don’t... really take much notice of it. Of the...you know, polling and all the rest of it, and... So I wouldn’t really... I can’t really tell you much about it.

70 Elisabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne (1988) have made the point that a ‘story-telling’ news form, populated by recognisable characters, are most easily absorbed by audiences.
Interviewer: Is there one particular story that you’ve read that you do remember or…?
Maria: Not at all.
Interviewer: No?
Maria: Not at all. I don’t really read…na, I don’t really read about that. It’s not…for me [laughs].

As accentuated by Maria’s nervous laughter in this conversation, the ‘disinterest’ here appeared linked to a view of politics as out of reach of one’s competencies, ‘way over my head’ as one female Mirror-reader expressed it. Such lack of confidence in the ability to understand political processes can be seen in the light of the general population, where voter turnout in the general election 2001 for example was lowest among young females. But it is possibly furthered by newspapers that place a heavy emphasis on traditional conceptions of gender, where, for example, the political news on page 2 is juxtaposed with the infamous Page Three pin-up in the Sun and ‘scantily clad girls’ in the Mirror. As discussed in the previous chapter, the female Sun-readers did not like Page Three, and the placement of this next to the political news might have an influence on this kind of reading of political news in the paper.

‘They can’t be true to their words’

Distancing from politics as a subject should be seen in the light of the common distrust in politicians articulated by readers across the board. Statements like ‘politicians can’t be true to their words’ or ‘they’re all the same’ highlighted readers’ suspicion of political representatives. As shown by Esser, a case could be made that press coverage which mixes frequent allegations of political misconduct with disreputable gossip and scandal (as is the case with the tabloids) may deepen public distrust for political institutions and governments (1999: 315-318). And although one should be careful with assertions of causality, the pessimistic attitudes to politicians shown by readers could be placed in this context. As illustrated in this extract from a discussion with another construction worker (aged 33), at times these attitudes certainly appeared linked to the tabloid reporting:

Don: When…[browsing through the Sun to describe the current political reporting] it used to be all the time, it seemed every other day there was

71 Female voter turnout in age groups 18-24 and 25-34 was 46 and 56 per cent, compared to a male voter turnout of 60 respectively 59 per cent. Figures from Social Trends 32, National Office for Statistics.
72 Esser points to a correlation between an increase of the word ‘sleaze’ in the British press and a sharp drop in public trust in political institutions between 1987 and 1995. However, he stresses that such a development can also have to do with an increase in ‘real-world cases’ (1999: 315).
a political issue. Now…here you are [reads headline]: ‘MPs CASH IN’. But they [the *Sun*] don’t seem to… they’ve not gone to either party, sort of glossed over it.

**Interviewer:** Do you think, if you are reading something like that, the story about the MPs, about them spending a lot of money, would it affect what you think about MPs?

**Don:** I don’t… I don’t need to read it in the newspapers. Cause… I mean, they’re in a privileged position, and it’s… (...) What we know about the Euro MPs is: £350,000 a year and an expense account as long as your arm. They sell out! So… I’ve not got a lot of time for politicians.

Despite Don’s assurance of not needing ‘to read it in the newspapers’, the connection between the typically accusatory *Sun*-headline and his view on MPs, especially those working for the EU, which, with its anti-EU stance, are one of the *Sun*’s favoured targets, is striking. While there is a fine line between a critical outlook and cynicism, then, the harsh anti-establishment stance favoured by the popular tabloids can clearly link with distancing from mainstream political processes and with negative perceptions of ‘politics’ as a subject.

This sceptical and at times cynical approach was also extended to the newspapers themselves. In line with market research which has shown a decreasing trust in the press as a medium for political news (see e.g. Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 53) all of the readers apart from, perhaps indicatively, the two non-Western readers in this study said they distrusted their paper. Often this distrust was described as part of a cynical stance to the press in general, expressed for example as ‘don’t listen to paper-talk’ or ‘you can’t believe what you read in the papers’. Here, a parallel to the responses solicited can be found in Richard Hoggart’s (1957) seminal excursion into working-class culture in Britain. Although published half a century ago, Hoggart’s observations of working-class attitudes to the press and representatives of the elite bear a striking resemblance to the findings of this study, even with regards to the language used to express distrust in the newspapers (ibid: 277). Such a parallel illustrates how the popular tabloids draw on long-standing discourses within working-class culture, as well as potentially perpetuating some of these. However, apart from linking with such enduring discourses, the approach of readers in this respect seems to correlate with ideas of tabloid journalism as establishing distrust in the press as a source for political communication.
Political knowledge, political frameworks

Current affairs interest

The issue of how tabloid newspapers inter-relate with political engagement and the knowledge-base for this is far from straightforward, and it is worthwhile developing the view of their role both in framing and furthering knowledge of political processes. This is also imperative to consider given the comparative value of print media and television as means of political learning, where studies have shown a consistent correlation between exposure to print media and higher levels of political knowledge (Buckingham, 1997: 346).

Despite negative attitudes to ‘politics’, both male and female readers were keen to get an overview of the daily round-up of current affairs – to ‘know what’s going on’. Reading the daily tabloid was seen as a digestible way to keep informed, ‘up-to-date’ with the news agendas of the day, as a supplement to broadcast news. And, as questions phrased in terms of ‘political news’ generated the kinds of distancing and disinterested responses described in the first part of the chapter, my impression from observing the focus groups was not that political issues were uninteresting to the readers, particularly if these had been covered in-depth by the papers. Instead – primarily in the male focus groups with readers of both papers – when topics such as the war on Iraq, asylum-seekers and the tactics of politicians and journalists were talked about, they caused animated discussions, which in some cases went on after the interviews had ended. The focus group situations might have provided a context for such discussion that would normally not occur, but my observations point in a direction away from restrictive ideas of tabloid readers as inherently uninterested in political issues.

An aid for interpreting such a seemingly contradictory finding can be found in the research of Nina Eliasoph (1998). Eliasoph carried out interviews and participant observation among a range of social groups and networks in the U.S., to find out how political talk is produced in everyday life. She documented a consistent reluctance to discuss wide-ranging political issues in public, which were opened up only in more private contexts; finding a prevalent social discourse which asserts ‘anti-politics’ as a dominant attitude even though individuals may have political concerns. However, her argument is that while ‘many social scientists say that Americans are ignorant about politics because they simply do not care and simply prefer to leave the wider world in the hands of experts (…) what looks like apathetic “ignorance” is actually much more complex than that’ (ibid: 132). Political disengagement, according to Eliasoph, is not any more natural than involvement, and the active ‘avoidance’ of politics can instead be seen as a result of a lack of available meaning-systems that can connect the individual concerns with wider politics. While, she states, there is
over-whelming evidence of ignorance about politics, studies have shown that ‘being interviewed can make interviewees into thoughtful citizens; the interviews opened up free, unjudgemental space (…) for talking through vague political ideas, playing their ideas in the light of the day’ (ibid: 231). It is possible to read the participants’ responses in this light, where an avoidance of ‘politics’ as a subject may not necessarily be a sign of political apathy or an ‘apolitical’ existence, but a result of perceptions of this subject as out of reach of one’s own ability to connect to it.

Neither did it seem that the tabloid reading was necessarily part of an entirely different, ‘non-political’ aspect of the individual’s life. As discussed in Chapter 3, it can be argued that tabloid news has the potential to both contribute to such disconnection and to facilitate more wide-ranging insights precisely through the lively tabloid style. Particularly at times of explosive current affairs issues, the interest in the news could turn into a pressing desire for information, where the paper had a given role. Talking about such occasions, the blue-collar readers in particular explained how the Sun and the Mirror were used as resources to learn about the current affairs unfolding. During the course of the fieldwork, this was most evident in the references to the war, as it had been covered in the papers:

> When the war kicked off, and you know, it was in the whole paper [the Sun]. I mean, you read it, and you… you’re engrossed in it for a good hour, aren’t you, when you’re reading the paper. Reading all about it.

(Chris, 29, shop-fitter)

A news issue heavily emphasised by both the Sun and the Mirror (see Chapter 2), here the papers had contributed to stimulate a curiosity and will to learn more about an issue of high relevance to socio-political events – taking on an interpretive, analytical function, which complemented televised news and gave a concrete edge to complex political events. This role seemed especially important to the non-Western readers in this study, who, in contrast to the British readers were vocal about their interest in politics, and praised the Sun for helping to clarify the TV news about this. Certain columnists in particular, such as Richard Littlejohn in the Sun and Jane Moore in the Mirror, also appeared to be important in their ability to, as a Sun-reader described Littlejohn, ‘have his finger on the pulse’. Corresponding with the interest to ‘know what’s going on’, then, a certain amount of information necessary to participate in public sphere discourse is clearly distributed through these papers, understood as helping to clarify and structure knowledge about current affairs.
'Tony Blair and them’ – a personality perspective

Of course, this interpretive function adds weight on the quality and type of information provided, highlighting the constitutive authority of the newspaper to define frameworks for knowledge. Such frameworks are not necessarily to do with the specific information given in a news story, or with readers’ identifying with the paper’s editorial stance or that of a columnist. Instead they can relate to how the news is discussed.

In the interviews, a particularly noticeable way in which readers’ vernacular and modes of discussion paralleled that of the tabloid news style was in the adoption of a perspective which emphasises personification (see Chapter 6). Political events and processes, to a large degree, were discussed in terms of different characters involved – ‘Tony Blair and them’ as a female *Sun*-reader referred to politicians. The following two extracts, with a telephone sales assistant (aged 27) and a civil servant (aged 28) are examples of discussions where readers used the papers’ outlooks as a springboard for the development of independent opinions, but did so through the personalised framework which characterises tabloid news:

Albert: Yeah, I don’t particularly think that we should have invaded Iraq because of the war on terror. Because, the terror in Iraq has been going on for years! And the only reason we went into... well, the only reason the Americans got into Iraq, was to basically gain revenge on September 11. Which had nothing to do with Iraq. It had something to do with Saudi Arabian, erm, terrorists in Afghanistan. So we decided – we as the coalition forces – decided to go and invade Afghanistan.

Interviewer: So did you like then, the way the *Mirror* took a very strong stance against that?

Albert: I don’t... As I said, I don’t think we should have invaded Iraq to start with, but at the same time there would have had to come to a point where either Saddam died or he was going to be removed. And, he’s been there for ten years, you know, causing genocide amongst his own people, then... it’s a good as time as any. Whether it had been... It’s better sooner rather than later, to take out someone who’s killing their own people, rather than let it go on for another ten years and then go... you know the same sort of things that’s been going on with Gadaffi (...).

Interviewer: Do you remember reading a story about politics lately?

Douglas: I remember reading a bit in there [the *Mirror*] about Michael Howard, when he, when he, you know, got in as the head of the Conservatives.

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Douglas: And obviously they sort of put this slightly negative slant on it. Just purely cause they don’t like the Conservatives. Having said that I don’t think it would sway me to think that, you know, they can’t be any good.
Mike: Yeah.
Douglas: But actually, I don’t like the Conservatives, but Michael Howard, I do... I’ve got a little bit of time for him, I think he’s alright. I quite...
Mike: He’s a bit of a character, isn’t he?
Douglas: Yeah, he comes across really well. Yeah, the paper would obviously put a negative slant on it. But, obviously it didn’t really change my mind to Michael Howard.

Focusing on the well-known personalities of international conflict, ‘Saddam’ and ‘Gadaffi’, or on the ‘character’ of a political party leader, such accounts, while demonstrating how the readers would not necessarily ‘agree’ with their paper, point to an understanding of political events through the tabloid lens of personality reporting. However, it is also clear from these examples that in spite of, or indeed perhaps because of the more readily accessible personalised tabloid news style (see the discussion of accessibility of news below) some readers showed considerable ability for informed discussion of these events.

The politics of the non-political

Then, the newspapers could clearly be used as resources for political learning, albeit often through a ‘tabloidized’ perspective. There are also reasons to widen the parameters for what constitutes political knowledge, acknowledging that this to a large extent will be formed outside of overtly rational discourse and only indirectly related to the practices and institutions of parliamentary democracy. Garnham has for example argued for an understanding of entertainment as closely related to political engagement (1992: 374, see Chapter 2). From this perspective the ‘non-political’ must be considered important to the analysis of the media as political communication.

There are at least two ways in which the ‘entertainment’ side of tabloid material contributes to opinions and identities which have a bearing on public life in general. Firstly, such material can link with views on the world and the individual’s position in this in ways which indirectly impacts on political action or non-action as much as news about public affairs, as argued by for example Gripsrud (1992) and Langer (1998). The time spent with the participants in this study was too limited to be able to get a comprehensive grasp of wider worldviews or deeper connections between the reading material and general life-choices, and any such connections should not be over-stated. Yet, it is possible to take something as widely appreciated as the horoscope reading, which most readers considered an essential part of the reading experience, to coincide with a position of tabloid journalism overall that puts faith and chance over possibilities of social action, as suggested by both Gripsrud and Langer. 'It shows

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73 For a similar point, see Curran (1991). See also Johansson (2007) for further discussion.
you that it just depends on whose day it is – you can’t be lucky all the time’, as one Sun-reader elaborated on her penchant for the horoscopes. However, such an approach can be but one aspect of fluid identity-formations, where a moment’s comfort in the capriciousness of external forces can co-exist with substantiated social criticism – in this interview as to how women were portrayed in the press. The point here is to show that how the reading relates to life-views and expectancies, clearly a highly ambiguous area, is relevant to consider in terms of wider public life.

Secondly, the ‘non-political’ stories and features can be seen as equally having their own place in public sphere discourse, as their reception shows that they can be used to deal with issues of direct relevance to social debate. Celebrity stories, as discussed in the previous chapter, presented opportunities to debate morality and social norms, ranging from whether violence is an appropriate response to provocation (following Prince Harry’s attack on a photographer) to how to deal with infidelity (regarding David Beckham’s alleged extramarital affair). Tabloid celebrity exposés also contain an element of criticism of social privilege that was appreciated by readers (see Chapter 6 and 8). Again, such ‘personality politics’ are not necessarily progressive (see Buckingham, 1997: 358), in that using celebrity stories as an outlet for social frustration can be working against societal change as much as it cultivates a critical stance towards privilege. But, it is important to recognise tabloid content outside of traditional current affairs as contributing to competencies or viewpoints of relevance to the public sphere.

In addition, it should be noted that readers perceived non-political content that aims to teach or instruct, such as advice on finance, lifestyle and relationships – what Eide and Knight (1999) call ‘service journalism’ – as an area where the newspapers fulfil a valuable role in society, through helping with different aspects of being a member of this. In this discussion with a group of administrative workers (aged 28-32), for instance, an article about computer-safety became a point of appreciation:

Alexandra: It’s good, too, they [the Mirror] have like, money sections in there as well. And that’s quite nice to have. And it is very easy to understand, it’s easy to understand.

Susan: And also… they have these kinds of advice, I mean I don’t always read those, but for example this [points to article in the newspaper], computer-safety for kids. I mean if you have kids, that’s good advice to read.

Helen: Mm.

Susan: Not that I have read this article, cause I don’t have kids. But at least they give some advice. Cause that [computer-safety for kids] is a big problem, isn’t it? Sometimes parents might not know anything about computers, but the kids do…
Eide and Knight argue that service journalism, while addressing audiences as part consumers, part citizens, ‘is amenable to politicization’ as it ‘politicizes the problems of everyday life’ (ibid: 525). Even though some of the subjects of such instructive articles can be seen as dealing with private, as opposed to public, matters, when discussed by readers they were referred to as of relevance to public life.

The issue of trust

To describe tabloid reading as ‘apolitical’, then, is incorrect on the grounds of both the engagement in certain political issues stimulated by the newspapers and the links between non-conventional public affairs material and political identity formations.

It is also worthwhile considering uses of the newspapers as contributing to political competencies in a wider sense, through a development of critical media literacy skills. Here, it could be claimed that in a media-saturated society, a prerequisite to knowledge of political processes is the ability to critically evaluate media texts, and that on one level tabloids equip readers with this skill to a greater extent than the more objective ‘quality’ press, through a self-reflexive relation to the news production.

As explained previously, the participants were highly sceptical of their reading material, sometimes expressed as cynicism and distrust that appeared to relate to distancing from the political process. The other side of the coin, however, is that taking tabloids ‘with a pinch of salt’, as was the norm, indicated a critical engagement with the news process. All readers showed a clear understanding of the effect of commercial pressures on news output, for instance in commenting on the competition between different tabloids and explaining that ‘they’ve got to sell’. Indeed, part of the pleasure was to read between the lines – believing ‘half of it’ (see also Pursehouse, 1992) – with readers using various strategies to evaluate different journalistic techniques, for example by deeming political news more ‘true’ than the reporting of celebrities, by thinking of quotes as more important than the reporters’ comments, and not believing a story until it was widely reported or ‘on telly’. Here, a comparison can be made to viewers of Reality TV formats, which have been shown to be sensitised to production strategies from watching the shows, and to apply a more critical mode of viewing to Reality TV than to other formats (Hill, 2005a: 106, 2005b: 50).

In addition to a sceptical, critical reading mode, there were several instances in the discussions where readers expressed criticism of the newspapers overall, such as being ‘fed up’ with an overly extensive and sensationalist coverage of news issues such as the war and the coverage of the David Beckham affair. Likewise, biased and superficial news handling was a topic of spontaneous an-
noyance in interviews across the board. While much of this research account has concentrated on what makes the newspapers attractive to read, it should be remembered that regular readers, too, show concerns about the kinds of issues raised in the tabloidization debate, and that the consumption of a media form does not automatically mean an overall affinity to this, or an uncritical acceptance of its news values.

So far, these findings correlate with Fiske’s (1992) argument that tabloid journalism works against producing a ‘believing subject’ (see Chapter 3). However, the issue of trust is an ambiguous area. It became a point of controversy in the group discussions, with differing opinions among the group members concerning the extent and consequences of their trust in their reading material. Paradoxically, when asked how their newspaper held up to the rest of the press, especially to other tabloids, responses commonly emphasised trust – ‘it’s more to-to-the-point than the others’\(^4\). There were also numerous instances of contradiction, where readers would claim an all-encompassing sceptical attitude only to later on take on a seemingly trusting approach to the material. For instance, in one group of female Sun-readers where the ‘pinch of salt’ perspective had been heavily emphasised, an ‘opinion’ blurb that accompanies the Page Three girl – always moulded to the stance taken in the editorial – was accepted as entirely expressing the opinion of the model herself. Likewise, the same reader could appear sophisticated in some areas of decoding, for example another female Sun-reader who provided an in-depth critique of the sensationalist headlines, but less so in others, as when this reader showed little awareness of the Sun’s political allegiances or its place in a larger media corporation. Equally, none of the Sun-readers and only some of the Mirror-readers felt they had a clear idea of the papers’ political positions (see also Chapter 7).

Such ambiguity shows the difficulty in establishing any firm ideas regarding the level of agency that readers have in relation to the material. While the participants drew on information supplied by the newspapers to form their own opinions on public affairs, likely to be supplemented by other sources, and critically and actively interpreted the newspaper content, this knowledge-base can still be considered framed by the news agenda set by the papers, with the issue of trust complex and the extent of critical abilities knowledge-dependent. The newspapers’ encouragement of a sceptical reading, in particular, does not automatically extend to a critical approach to a wider media landscape. For example, a main televised news source for many readers was Sky News (see Chapter 7), yet the economic and editorial connections between this news source and the Sun was left uncharted. Instead, Sky News was in some cases

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\(^4\) Some Mirror-readers however felt that the Mirror’s publication of fake images of war prisoner’s abuse, a story that unfolded during the fieldwork, had decreased their trust in the paper overall.
talked about as an independent standpoint used to verify the ‘truth’ of the newspaper content:

Yeah, your mind is set so you only believe half of what you read in the Sun. But, like, say we [Adam and his colleagues] look at it on the teletext or… we look at it on telly, see it on the Sky News and then it’ll be in the paper. Then, you know [that it is true].

(Adam, 28, shop-fitter)

While the papers provide opportunities for learning about politics and public affairs, and readers are evidently far more critically engaged with the material than commonly assumed, the observations here serve as reminders of the essentially unequal relationship between newspapers and readers. Caution should therefore be applied in terms of how far such critical media literacy skills puts the reader in a position to ‘see through’ the newspaper as a product, as this is contingent on more wide-ranging knowledge about media and society.

Reaching out, talk and participation

‘You can relate to it’

Thus, the relationship between tabloid reading and political knowledge is far from clear-cut. Readers can and do use tabloid papers to aid knowledge and competencies that can enable participation in the public sphere, even though I have also underlined the constitutive authority of the newspapers in framing these. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the roles of the Sun and the Mirror to public life this part of the chapter switches the focus from political knowledge-bases and frameworks to the communicative and participatory elements of the reading, which highlight the potential of tabloid journalism in creating alternative communicative forums and its ability to make news ‘come alive’ to a wide range of people.

One of the crucial issues to consider here is accessibility; an essential element to Habermas’s public sphere and clearly a basic requirement for citizenship in a democracy, where access to a range of information is necessary to make informed decisions. Accessibility was unquestionably a strong theme in the conversations with readers. While mid-market tabloids, such as the Daily Mail, were seen as too text-heavy and conservative in their views, and the ‘quality’ broadsheets were often deemed entirely out-of-bounds – ‘for business-class people’ as one reader put it – the Sun and the Mirror were appreciated for being non-elitist, ‘informal’ and ‘down to earth’, for voicing the concerns of ordinary people, for keeping an affordable price, and, importantly, for making ordinary people visible in news discourse. As illustrated in the following extract from a
group of students in their late teens, this visibility provided a vital identificatory link between the news and readers’ own lives:

Interviewer: Are there any other parts of the paper [the Mirror], apart from sport, celebrity and politics, that you read?
John: Just the general, the general articles at the beginning of the paper, sort of thing. Just the everyday stuff that they report on.
Interviewer: Do you like the way they report on everyday stuff?
John: Yeah. Cause, they report about normal people as well. Not just famous people. So, it’s just a bit more on your level. (…)
Tariq: Yeah, like, that’s when you can really reflect [sic] to it. Cause that’s just like a normal person like us.

The tabloid attention to ‘normal people’, then, could facilitate a more in-depth understanding of news items, and contribute to an experience of inclusiveness. Although this experience was widespread, for the blue-collar workers – as shown in the following extract from a group of bus drivers (aged 26-35) – it was moreover related to the notion of a specifically proletarian forum, unobtainable elsewhere in the press:

Ronnie: I suppose the papers are structured for people in all walks of life, you know. And this [the Sun] is more or less for the working class than your middle class. And then you get your Mail for the middle class or the upper class, and…
Interviewer: Right. So it’s kind of different in aim…
Ronnie: Yeah. You know, they aim… this is really for us, you know… We don’t end up going out buying the Times or the Financial Times cause we don’t really need to read that, do we?
Jack: The English (…) is different too… it’s less grammatical, you know what I mean, it’s got pictures, and kind of…
Nick: The lower class papers, they’ve got like…a little of life.
Jack: Yeah.
Nick: I mean, that’s how you live. Some people don’t admit it because they’ve got a few pounds in their pocket (…). But at the end of the day, if you’re gonna go and buy a paper, this is it.

As emphasised by Nick, a Greek immigrant, the Sun was in this group considered the only paper that reflected the experiences of ordinary working people. We can thus begin to see how the tabloids may constitute a public forum paralleling that of the quality press, providing an identifiable source of printed news lacking elsewhere. In this study, it was clear that this experience of tabloids as an alternative forum for ordinary people came to the fore in the discussion with blue-collar readers, which, as I have noted previously (Chapter 7) could indicate a different kind of identification with the tabloid material for these readers when it comes to tabloids as news about public affairs.
The way that the newspapers provide symbolic offerings of activity on readers’ behalf, as discussed in Chapter 6, could be brought up here, as these seemed understood by some readers to further the sense of the tabloids as an alternative proletarian forum. To continue with the example of Nick, he later on in this discussion explained how he perceived the *Sun* as taking political action on behalf of ordinary people, for example in relation to local authorities:

```plaintext
Nick:  But the *Sun*. If you’ve got a problem with the council, right? You can phone this paper, and say ‘I’ve got this problem, right, and they [the council] don’t want to know, they don’t want to sort it out, they don’t want to do anything.’ So, they [the *Sun*] can put it on the front page, so they can go down the council and ask ‘what’s going on here?’
Interviewer:  They can make a difference?
Nick:  Yeah, they can make a difference, yeah.
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As this moment in the discussion draws on common ideas of the media as a fourth estate, scrutinising authorities and taking action on behalf of citizens, it is clear that it is the *Sun*, as opposed to the ‘quality’ press, that is understood as taking up this function on behalf of ordinary people.

**Making sense**

The ability to reach readers alienated from other sources of print news should also be linked to how comprehension of news is facilitated. Not unsurprisingly, the lively, humorous style contributed to the ease of reading, with the youngest readers in particular stressing their preference for catchy headlines and ‘graphic pictures’ to make the news interesting. Likewise, the newspapers were appreciated for using a language close to everyday speech. ‘I’d rather read something I’d say myself’ or ‘they talk like us’ are examples of how the preference for the tabloid language was explained. As emphasised in this conversation with a secretary at an accountancy firm (aged 33), this informal vernacular further contributed to an experience of ‘making sense’:

```plaintext
Interviewer:  How would you describe the language of the *Mirror*?
Victoria:  It’s easy to read. It’s easy to read.
Interviewer:  In what way is it easy to read?
Victoria:  It’s just… it will put it plainly, kind of informal… It just makes sense to me!
```

Crucial in this sense-making process is the role of literacy. Jack, in the previous extract, was not alone in perceiving other newspapers as too long, using complicated language, and, in some cases, simply being too difficult to understand — an obstacle that, again, in this study seemed especially manifest for some of the
blue-collar readers as well as some immigrants. As was discussed in Chapter 7, these readers could make self-deprecating comments on their own literacy, and praised the tabloid language as easily understood. This particular finding highlights that literacy, even in a developed Western democracy, is a critical factor to be accounted for in terms of the ‘choice’ available to newspaper readers.

It is worthwhile, too, thinking about the act of reading itself as a way to further literacy, and thereby provide better access to information in general. Although not a common observation among readers, the following interview extract with a 34-year-old newspaper deliverer is a good example of how, for some, the simple act of, for instance, working out a daily crossword could be used as such a resource in everyday life:

Patrick: Also, excellent about the Mirror: crosswords.
Interviewer: The crosswords?
Patrick: Yeah, definitely. If you look at the other papers, they’ve got some stuff in there, but this one keeps me hooked. In case, cause, as I said, I don’t know how long I said it takes me to get through the paper, but this…will hold me to it. You know? And I’ll struggle all day. Because…I’m read, but not well-read. And it helps me… get through with my own words… and this.
Interviewer: So, do you learn something from it?
Patrick: Definitely.

While this reader’s highly self-conscious effort to advance his reading skills was an exception rather than a general theme of the study, the example nevertheless shows how parts of the reading can be used as tools for self-advancement, to extend general learning capabilities. It also points, again, to the fruitfulness in incorporating items other than public affairs news into the discussion of the role of newspapers to political communication; as other mediated experiences gained from the newspaper contribute to capacities required to participate in this. The next sections of the chapter delve a little further into these experiences, looking at how the reading created the basis for communicative activity and a sense of belonging to a social entity.

**Talk and public discussion**

These newspapers are able to communicate with groups alienated from other sources of print news, and provide at least some of the competencies necessary for forming opinions on issues of public interest. In this context, the sociable and participatory nature of the reading should also be noted, as it points to another key potential of tabloid journalism as contributing to democratic processes. Equal participation and interaction are guiding principles to Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, and the ability of the mass-media to stimulate sociability and communication between citizens is also central to the idea of
civic culture as a pre-requisite to the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2000, 2003, Dahlgren and Gurevitch, 2005), which might be of relevance for thinking about the way that tabloid newspaper reading more indirectly may pre-condition participation in social and democratic processes. Dahlgren highlights through such a perspective how elements of the socio-cultural world facilitate democratic life through a continuous process, where public discussion and affinity among members of a society play key parts in constituting this. Although such discussion can take many forms, informal talk between members of social groups is arguably a vital part, and one where tabloid newspapers, among the readers in this study, played a crucial role.

To understand the role of the Sun and the Mirror in such talk, their very public use, outlined in Chapter 7, must be stressed. As the newspapers were read and discussed in communal spaces, such as in cafés and workplaces, they can be seen as providing opportunities for deliberation separate from the private confines of the home, providing a base for reading and discussion in public. Tabloid reading was without exception described as a social activity, exemplified in how some of the participants would read the papers together, for instance ‘for a banter at work’, and evident in the lively and animated focus group discussions. An important use of the reading, then, was to strengthen social bonds with other individuals.

Partly, such social interaction was facilitated precisely through the ‘soft’ tabloid focuses criticised in the tabloidization debate – celebrity stories, sports, agony aunt columns, horoscopes and bizarre human interest were eagerly debated and appreciated. Shudson (1997) has suggested that there is a difference between ‘political discussion’ and social chitchats stemming from such subjects, and, as I have argued there was at least in part an unwillingness to discuss news about the subject of ‘politics’ publicly. But most readers did not distinguish sharply between different kinds of subjects, with group discussions moving freely between the ‘main stories’ of current affairs, such as the Iraq war, to Big Brother and Britney Spears’ love life. As Dahlgren reminds us, ‘the permeability of contexts, the messiness and unpredictability of everyday talk’ means that that “the political” is never a priori given, but can emerge in various ways’ (2003: 160). Thus, the everyday conversations stimulated by these papers can, at least, be seen as having potential to open up into political discussion.

‘Your say counts’ – participation in a public forum

The communicative aspect of the reading should also be placed in relation to the overall sense of participation in a wider forum for public discussion, which relates to the discussion of community in the previous chapter. Readers experienced dialogic tabloid textual devices such as phone-ins, calls for stories and pullout posters as furthering the sense of a community, discussed in the previ-
ous chapter, with the *Sun* and the *Mirror* having established an overall feeling of connectedness between readers. As exemplified in the following discussion with a 27-year-old Portuguese catering assistant, reading the daily newspaper, consequently, meant feeling that ‘your say really counts’:

Interviewer: Do you think that what you read about politics in the *Mirror* would contribute to how you feel about politics?

Luigi: I think so. Most of the people who read it are just ordinary people so... And they [the *Mirror*] do things quite good, like, surveys and stuff, which is good.

Interviewer: What, surveys of...?

Luigi: Something like, what people think. It gives you the opinion, like, that your say really counts. So that’s nice as well.

Again, perceived as listening to, and giving a voice to ‘ordinary people’, this participatory, community-building characteristic to tabloid newspapers must be seen as crucial to their appeal, and underlines the ability of popular journalism to mobilise a sense of collectivism.

At times, this collectivism could purport to affect social change. A difference emerged between the *Sun*- and *Mirror*-readers in this study, where a number of male *Mirror*-readers in particular had embraced an overtly political approach, in the discussions taking a strong standpoint against for example racial discrimination, sexism and warfare. In a café where I recruited some of the readers and where the *Mirror* had a strong presence, this paper appeared interlinked with community-building around common political aims, which included taking part in anti-war demonstrations and, in the case of one reader, in activities relating to internet-based global activism networks. Buying the *Mirror*, for this reader and for others less overtly politically committed, signalled active support for the paper’s radical stance on issues such as the Iraq war, as well as an appreciation for its broader left-wing agenda.

As touched upon in Chapter 7, the *Sun*-readers in the study on the other hand did not discuss their reading as part of taking a stand, other than that the *Sun* was favoured because it was more fun, ‘to-the-point’ or easier to read than other papers. The *Mirror*-readers however interpreted their own reading as a rejection of what was seen as the *Sun*’s extremism. Such an ‘alternative’ approach could be made reference to with concerns to more political issues such as asylum-seekers or the portrayal of women, but as this final extract shows, it was also of relevance for interpretations of other parts of the content, such as the sport section:

Interviewer: Do they [the *Mirror*] cover a particular team more than other papers?

Michael: Erm... No, they’re quite...actually, they’re not biased to one team, which is good. (...) You know, it’s interesting to see what’s gonna happen now, with, you know, this tournament [the European Cup].
Choosing the ‘alternative’ tabloid in itself became a way to develop conscious viewpoints on social and political issues.

Then, a final point to emerge out of this study is that while, in the academic debate, tabloid newspapers are generally treated as a singular phenomenon, readers make important distinctions between them. These distinctions, moreover, may have a bearing on the way the reading relates to public sphere discourse, and are worthy of further research.

Summary

In this chapter, I have shown how tabloid newspaper reading relates to public life. The overall approach when doing this is that the debate about tabloid journalism, on the level of the macro-perspectives of the public sphere and the mass-media’s role in democratic processes, lacks a developed perspective based on empirical research with audiences.

It is clear some tabloid readers do feel distanced from mainstream political processes, with a common distrust of both politicians and journalists. In particular, female readers in this study experienced politics as outside of their experience and competence. It is likely that these newspapers, in drawing on anti-establishment sentiments as well as emphasising traditional conceptions of gender, play a part in maintaining this experience. Overall, likewise, it appeared the newspapers had an agenda-setting function as to what kind of – and how – the news was discussed. Readers’ responses, shaped by a continuous interplay between trust and scepticism, highlight the relative difficulty to be able to ‘see through’ the newspaper as a product, and a point emerging from the study is that, in spite of the distanced and sceptical approach encouraged by tabloid journalism, the newspapers could contribute to determine conceptual frameworks for understandings of society.

However, it would be inaccurate to describe the reading as apolitical. Although an interest in politics may not be directly articulated, current affairs news is valued as part of the overall content, with readers keen to get a daily
round-up of ‘what’s going on.’ Importantly, for some, tabloids are also the only accessible forum for printed current affairs analysis, and can help clarify and give a concrete edge to complex issues. The major function of the newspapers to stimulate interaction with others further correlates with a communicative public sphere ethos. Such discussions obviously are not necessarily confined to public affairs in a strict sense, but, as in the case of talk about celebrity stories, covering morality, ethics and social privilege, they raise questions of what is deemed to be in the public interest.

A strong theme emerging from the readership research is that tabloid reading contributes to an experience of participation in a wider collective, which, again, is contrary to ideas of tabloid readers as simply engrossed in the individualized consumption of culture. It points to the potential of popular journalism in encouraging participation in a public forum. However, it was only in the discussions with a number of male *Mirror*-readers that such participation had taken a more overtly political and considered form, indicating a possible difference in the role of the two newspapers, and highlighting the need for a more differentiated and medium-sensitive outlook on tabloid media. There is a suggestion here that editorial and ideological functions of individual newspapers are more important than the stylistic features of tabloid journalism per se for contributing to a progression of the public sphere. Likewise, such a contribution is clearly dependent on a much wider socio-economic context, where general education and media literacy are crucial to developing the skills necessary for an equal participation in the public sphere.
CHAPTER 10

Conclusions

Introduction

This book has investigated tabloid journalism from an audience perspective. It has presented findings that challenge as well as complement previous theories about its role in society, which will be discussed more broadly in this concluding chapter. The first part of the chapter provides a summary of the research findings. These are then analysed in relation to different theoretical perspectives in the second part, placing the study within the theoretical context explained in the review of literature. Finally, I discuss the key arguments that have emerged, and reflect upon the limitations of the study and possibilities for further research.

Summary of research

*Why study tabloid reading?*

The study of how tabloid newspapers are received is of value to those interested in the workings of the press, the news media and popular culture in contemporary society. It can give insights into how a newspaper functions in a day-to-day environment, as well as offering new perspectives on the way that audiences engage with popular journalistic formats. To take the British tabloid newspaper as the basis for such a reception study is relevant for two main reasons. Firstly, tabloid newspapers continue to dominate the newspaper market in Britain – tabloids are clearly at the heart of British newspaper journalism and have influences on the press elsewhere. Secondly, these papers are highly controversial, and have been the subject of debate both within academia and in general public discussion.

This book has taken as its starting-point a debate about media standards, where tabloid journalism has figured prominently. Commonly framed in con-
cerns about ‘tabloidization’, a prevalent notion is that tabloid journalism operates against democratic communication, in sensationalising and distorting news and political processes to the point that it severs its audiences from the social and political structures governing their lives. However, as the review of literature showed it has also been portrayed as an inclusive and democratic form of communication, and in some cases as a subversive form of ‘resistance’ against dominating power structures. I have showed that this academic debate is often polarized in ways which impede a dialogue between what could broadly be distinguished as the intellectual traditions of social theory and cultural studies. Within the former, there is a concern about the influence of tabloid media from the macro-analysis of democracy and public life, whereas there within the latter has been a tendency to challenge elitist and taste bias in such critiques, and to validate popular culture through text or audience studies, focusing on the micro-level of identity, consumption and everyday life.

Perhaps reflecting such a polarity, there is little qualitative research into how readers understand newspapers, even though this medium has a prominent place in theories about democracy and the public sphere. In fact, despite an increasing emphasis on qualitative reception research in media studies overall, there is little research on audience understanding and uses of news in general, and of printed news in particular. Much established research in the field of audience studies has instead looked at popular drama and leisure formats, such as soap operas, television talk shows and leisure magazines. Here, a significant effort has been made to show that audiences are critical and active producers of meaning, that meaning is context-dependent, and that criticisms of these formats in many cases have been based on a misconceived hostility to popular culture overall. However, recent discussion of research in popular culture has included the view that there is a tendency to focus on the less problematic and controversial sides of this (Turner, 1999) and a danger of over-emphasising reception, losing sight of the texts that are the basis for interpretation (Fetveit, 2001). There is also an argument that this research has played a part in pushing media and cultural studies away from wider social questions such as the relationship between the media, politics and social inequality (Murdoch, 2000, Curran, 2006).

The book has aimed to fill a gap in the research on printed news consumption, as well as adding an empirical, audience-centred perspective to the debate about tabloid journalism. The view taken is that readers are active producers of meaning, with views and experiences worthwhile considering within the debate about tabloids, but that reading experiences are also shaped by wider social structures. Set against the one previous interview study on British tabloid reading (Pursehouse, 1992) – which, while offering insights into the everyday use of the Sun, concluded this paper should mainly be seen as a ‘chance for something to do’ – I have taken a broad outlook on the subject of tabloid reading, with the
study incorporating responses to two different tabloids, the *Sun* and the *Mirror*, as well as looking into the social interaction around these papers.

**Building bridges**

When carrying out the research I have dismissed polemical approaches to tabloid journalism as either entirely lamentable or ‘democratising’. Instead, I have taken the view that there are many nuances within this spectrum worth investigating, and that, if a greater understanding of what Langer (1998) has called the ‘staying power’ of the style and narratives of tabloid journalism is to be had, more attention needs to be directed both at the specific texts in question and at the way audiences relate to these within their social contexts.

The research should also be seen as a modest attempt at building bridges between what I have perceived as two different preoccupations within media studies: the analysis of media and society from the point of wider concerns with democracy and social and economic structures, and the interest in culture on the level of identity, everyday life, narrative and consumption. It is obvious that these two spheres are joined, and it seems important to investigate the links and ruptures between them. I therefore believe that a small-scale, in-depth case study, investigating the everyday uses and identity formations around tabloid newspapers, can also be used to discuss how such processes fit in with democratic developments and public life in a wider sense. In fact, the way that what is often dismissed as ‘just’ entertainment links in with broader social discourses and structures has been a central focus in the study.

Such a temperate approach, which emphasises the value of different perspectives in media studies and the need for researchers’ sensitivity to these, can also be traced in my discussion of the research methods. While the qualitative research methods of textual analysis, focus groups and individual interviews were adopted as the most appropriate for the requirements of the study, I have not let a wholesale subscription to either a constructivist or a positivist position over-determine the research, but in practice remain aware of the constructed nature of research while avoiding relativism.

In attempting to adhere to broad ideals of quality for the research, an effort was made to ensure a combination of methods that allowed for learning about the style and content of the newspapers whilst focusing on readers’ experiences of these. However, my discussion of the research process suggests the need for some pragmatic flexibility required in the research practice, as well as for reflections on ethics, research limitations and researching a ‘foreign’ culture. These reflections have highlighted that even though there are problematic aspects to this research, it is still well worth attempting to gain the perspectives of members of a readership group which in spite of its size often is marginalized in cultural debates.
Key findings

Looking at the group of readers who participated in the research, marginalization is in fact a key theme to the interpretation of tabloid reading presented here. Although the Sun and the Mirror are mainstream news discourse in terms of their circulation, and occupy a central place in British popular culture, their reception was framed by distancing from other kinds of printed news sources and from major social and political institutions. Rather than conjuring up an image of tabloid reading as a product of a ‘free’ choice from a range of media, simply representing ‘what readers want’, a key finding of this research is instead how social structures impact on reading choices and experiences. The social context of the readers becomes a vital factor to consider in understanding tabloid reading. Within this overall explanatory premise, however, the analysis has laid bare some further insights into the roles played by tabloid newspapers, and what follows in this section are brief pointers to the contribution to knowledge made in the research.

Through a textual analysis I demonstrated how a variety of narrative and stylistic devices combine to create an accessible tabloid reading experience – contingent on the use of humour and the emphasis on the everyday, and on connectivity between the readers and the newspapers. It pointed to how specific genres paved the way for different aspects of the reading experience, showing how newspaper reading must be considered as much more than ‘just’ the reception of current affairs news. Foregrounding how both papers take a highly dialogic communication with readers, I highlighted three prominent textual strategies that are important for contributing to a particular identity formation within the reading.

- The discourse on reader communities, expressed over a range of content types and styles, can be seen as articulating notions of belonging: to a nation, or to a social entity in a less clearly defined sense.
- The prominent theme of sexuality is constructed in a way which emphasises stability in gender constructions and, in particular, masculine reassurance.
- The tabloid stress on celebrity can be seen as containing criticism of social privilege, ultimately providing the opportunity for a momentary sense of control over this.

What the textual analysis showed is therefore that an overall sense of stability and control lays the foundation for the reading experience.

The research with readers has shown how closely some of the experiences of the reading material correlate to the textual strategies used by newspapers, and how the knowledge of these is vital to interpret readers’ responses. However,
this research equally provided a wealth of insights into reading practices and interpretation processes. Readers of the *Sun* and the *Mirror* fitted their newspaper into a range of interconnected news sources, in particular other tabloids and commercial broadcast news. It was apparent that tabloid reading interrelates with other areas of popular culture, deepening and reinforcing experiences drawn from these. Within this media landscape, everyday habits and routines paved the way for making sense of the newspapers. Indeed, the reading itself contributed to a very strong structure of familiarity, which readers experienced as important for their attachment to one paper. For both male and female participants, appreciated elements to this habit was the use of the newspapers as ‘talking-points’ as well as a ‘flick-through’ engagement, which allowed the papers to fit into daily life. Reading these tabloids was also a highly public practice, for example taking place while commuting, at work and at the pub.

In terms of perceptions of the papers, I have demonstrated how the readers were cautious to detach themselves from the material. This indicates how negative perceptions of the newspapers in other public arenas had filtered through to readers, as well as how the light-hearted tabloid style had led to a particularly distanced way of describing one’s involvement with these papers. But the tabloids had also come to be identified with lightness, ease and comfort. This was in contrast to how some participants described their own everyday situations, which included demanding commuting routines, long working days and financial troubles. Despite the presentation of oneself as distanced, moreover, brand identification with a particular paper was strong, especially evident in comparisons to other newspapers. *Sun*-readers for instance perceived the *Mirror* as ‘boring’, whereas *Mirror*-readers thought of the *Sun* as ‘tacky’ or ‘extreme’. In some cases the attachment to a specific paper was described in emotive language, such as ‘it makes me feel warm’.

While a distanced outlook on tabloids framed the reading, then, it is not a sign of their insignificance to readers. Main attractions were the typically ‘soft’ tabloid focuses, such as human interest, agony aunts, sport, horoscopes and celebrity stories. On one level, the enjoyment of this type of content was a way to deal with day-to-day struggles, where the tabloids, particularly through the deployment of humour, provided an opportunity for relaxation and the release of general everyday anxieties. However, these newspapers also offer a vent for frustration rooted in experiences of social inequality, which means that an equally significant part of the appeal can be the ability to ‘attack’ and criticise social privilege within the reading experience. This use was especially evident in responses to celebrity stories. Such a finding sheds light on a tangent of our engagement with celebrities which hitherto is relatively unknown, and contributes to the analysis of celebrity culture.

Over-lapping both of these tangents to the enjoyment of tabloid reading is what, drawing on Bauman’s (2001) analysis of modern Western culture, I have
called the ‘search for community’, which helps explain the appeal of the collective identity and clarity as experienced through the Sun and the Mirror. Here, the enjoyment of strict gender constructions play a considerable part, in particular for male readers. The analysis of the ‘entertainment’ aspect of reading experiences shed light on how main attractions of the newspapers relate to deep-seated human desires, life experiences and uncertainties.

The research has also demonstrated that tabloid reading can be analysed in relation to politics and public life. Here, I have pointed to a problematic relationship between the reading in terms of public life more widely. A distancing from mainstream politics and distrust in politicians and journalists partly appeared linked to the newspapers. These seemed to have an agenda-setting function as to what kind of, and how, news was discussed. Readers were critical of sensationalist journalistic techniques, yet their responses, shaped by a continuous interplay between trust and scepticism, highlight the relative difficulty to evaluate the newspaper as a product, and that media-literacy skills to one extent are knowledge-dependent.

However, I also highlighted more progressive aspects of this relationship, as well as arguing against the common description of tabloid readers as ‘apolitical’. The latter argument is based both on the grounds of how responses to content outside of traditional public affairs can be seen as having a bearing on political processes, and of how I observed a political interest in the interviews. Current affairs news was valued as part of the overall content. For some, tabloids were perceived as the only accessible forum for printed current affairs analysis, and were understood as helping to clarify complex issues. The social interaction around, and participatory nature of, tabloid reading further point to the potential of popular journalism in encouraging participation in a public forum. Tabloids provide access to a news forum, and, publicly read and debated, they can connect certain social groups to information about public affairs. But in this study, it was only in the discussions with a number of male Mirror-readers that such participation had taken a more overtly political and considered form, which indicates a possible difference in the roles of the two newspapers.

What about difference?

So far, I have drawn attention to common themes running through the research with readers. Navigating relatively uncharted territory in academic research, the study was also to an extent set up to reveal areas of homogeneity surrounding the reading, looking for common understandings rather than differences. Nevertheless, individual interpretations of the papers recurred, and there were some important variations between different groups of readers.

The most apparent difference between social groups was to do with how readers portrayed themselves in relation to the papers. As stated previously,
readers across social categories would make some attempt at distancing themselves from the newspapers; to show that they considered tabloids for example ‘rubbish papers’ that were taken ‘with a pinch of salt’. But, age and type of occupation appeared to determine the degree of effort put into such denuncements. Whereas the youngest readers openly exclaimed affinity to their preferred tabloid, using words such as ‘exciting’ to describe it and making positive comparisons to other papers, older readers were more guarded in their attitudes. Likewise, readers in white-collar positions were more likely to show apparent unease, lamenting tabloids for not being ‘proper’ newspapers, and, while admitting to reading a tabloid daily, were especially spirited in disapproving their connection to ‘typical’ readers. Perceptions of a typical reader as ‘unintelligent’ were prevalent among readers in blue-collar positions too – but this disconnection was complicated by the fact that there was a simultaneous perception among these readers of tabloids as written for ‘the ordinary man’, and identification with that ‘ordinary man’ as ‘me’.

There were other discrepancies of note within different groupings. The study was not specifically set up to investigate variations in reading practices between different ethnicities, but there were nevertheless some indications of differences in this area which would be worthwhile investigating in more wide-ranging research. Notably, the two non-Western readers in this study were more affirmative of their reading choice and less distrustful of the tabloids overall; displaying a less sceptical attitude to the content. They were also more positive to politics as a subject of discussion and were especially appreciative of how the *Sun* helped to clarify televised news about this. Such variations may be seen as based on culturally contingent understandings of Western political processes and media systems, and, to some extent, the different approach of these readers is a result of the appreciation by non-native speakers of the concise tabloid language.

This should also be seen, however, in relation to how both newspapers were linked to notions of a national identity. The tabloid reading, for immigrants as well as British readers, was a way to construct an identity around ‘being British’. Tabloid reading had for some immigrant readers become a way to gain the acceptance of British colleagues, whereas a second-generation immigrant used it to strengthen his identification with the present homeland. These experiences of ‘being British’ were not uncomplicated, shown for instance in the ambivalence of a Muslim reader’s discussion of the *Sun’s* Page Three. Yet, they illustrate how identity positions shift over different sets of values, and how the reading is one area where different aspects of these are emphasised and juggled with. These findings also highlighted how perceived stable identities, such as the security that comes with belonging to a national entity, may be especially appreciated in times of volatile identifications in other areas.
Complex identity positions were evident, too, when looking at readers’ responses from a gender perspective. There were overarching similarities between male and female readers in terms of reading modes, perceptions and overall uses of the newspapers, but also some notable areas of difference. To some extent, male and female readers appreciated different parts of the content, with male readers most notably preferring ‘the sport’ and female readers stating a preference for celebrity gossip. Indeed, some female readers thought of the sport as entirely aimed at men, and experienced the tabloid emphasis on this as unfair – ‘a waste of the back of a newspaper’. The perception of the sports coverage as aimed at men was not surprising, given that sport is a key representation of masculinity in many Western societies. One of the pleasures involved in the enjoyment of the sports coverage for the male readers seemed to be the opportunity to take part in a ‘masculine’ activity, and to share this experience with other men. However, I also showed how, on a reception level, the appreciation of sport as a representation of heroism and masculinity can mask, and co-exist with, pleasure gained from the more feminised pursuit of insights into human relations – a pursuit that was pleasurable to both male and female readers.

The most sensitive discussion topic throughout the research was tabloid pin-ups, in particular the Sun’s Page Three. There was a very deep sense of embarrassment in talking about this feature, pointing to its culturally provocative standing and its centrality for constructions of gender within the reading. For the male Sun-readers, strong links seemed to be made between identification with the male gaze in the consumption of Page Three and being a man. Tabloid pin-ups, therefore, provided an opportunity to strengthen a masculine identity, in a way which again point to tabloid reading as connected to reassurances of security and stability within this area. However, female readers were unilaterally disparaging in talks about this feature, and often displayed very fierce reactions, shown in emotive language such as ‘disgusting’ and ‘hate’. Even though contradictory elements were evident in these discussions, in for example female readers both admiring the Page Three girls as ‘successful’ and ridiculing the models, such responses support Pursehouse’s suggestion that women can only enjoy the Sun through negotiating their identity positions to fit into the emphasised male heterosexual perspective, or ignoring aspects of the paper (1992: 14). Experiences of disempowerment could also be seen in the light of a difference in attitudes to political news in male and female readers, where female readers commonly perceived tabloid political news, assigned a space on page two in both papers, as outside of their competencies.

75 Such an observation could be extended to the understanding of men’s magazines (see Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks, 2003, for a discussion of men’s magazines).
The discussion about responses to Page Three leads on to the last area of investigation for difference: that between responses to the *Sun* and the *Mirror*. Here, I have shown how the *Sun*’s position as a market-leader was reflected in its normative influence on all discussions. The *Sun* was the standard to which other popular tabloids were compared. For the *Mirror*-readers, this meant that their paper was understood as an *alternative* tabloid, which was seen as the more socially acceptable option – felt to have a social conscience and less of a sensationalist approach to news, in particular sexualised news. Because the *Mirror* was understood as an alternative, the simple act of not choosing to read the *Sun* could be a conscious alignment with alternative ethical or moral values. I have also demonstrated that in some cases, such an alignment was part of a more active political involvement. An important point raised in this book is that readers make significant distinctions between different types of tabloid journalism, which require further research to be understood in full.

Tabloid reading in perspective

*Everyday life*

Moving on to an interpretation of the research findings on a theoretical level, there are at least four different spheres of analysis that are relevant to deepen the understanding of these. While offering different theoretical perspectives on media consumption, I believe that each has the potential to contribute to the analysis of the uses of tabloid journalism, and that interlinking these perspectives is beneficial for a comprehensive discussion of the study.

The first perspective could be found in an analytical approach that emphasises the importance of everyday life to understanding media consumption. As I discussed in Chapter 4, one of the key ingredients of ‘new’ audience studies, if this is to be characterised as a unified approach, is precisely that media consumption is part of a highly intricate web of everyday routines, practices and the use of other cultural texts. This everyday context for reception, as illustrated very clearly in the research of for example Hobson (1982) and Hermes (1996), who showed how the schedule of daily life was a determinant for the media use and interpretations of their female respondents, must be taken into consideration to understand how media texts are made sense of.

On this ‘ground’ level, tabloid reading must clearly be seen as shaped by the routines of everyday life. According to the study participants, a contributing factor for the choice of newspaper was precisely the ease with which tabloids

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76 As shown in Chapter 4, ‘new’ audience studies is a very loose term sometimes used to keep together a fairly broad range of research.
could be adapted to day-to-day habits, such as commuting, or work routines suited to a ‘pick-up, flick-through’ read. The handy format, short articles and light, humorous take on news were simply convenient for the lives lead by the participants. Hermes’ (1995) research with magazine readers emphasised how such convenience can be more ‘important’ than any meaning made out of the content, which in her case was subordinate to the routine. The present study findings could, at first glance, be interpreted similarly, in that convenience was stressed and readers often emphasised a lack of commitment to the papers, as in ‘I only read it out of habit’. However, I would argue that the convenience of the routine in fact appeared to strengthen the engagement with the newspaper, which had become a daily companion of some significance precisely because of its smooth linkage with daily life.

As acknowledged previously, the day-to-day routine of the reading contributed to a structure of familiarity as gripping as the newspaper itself – it had become a ‘force of habit’ as one Sun-reader described it. Here, I have pointed to how the visual presence of the newspapers, at work and in public, played a part in this everyday structure. To view newspaper reading as a potent habit, which is shaped by and becomes part of everyday routines, is then important for the examination of the level of engagement with the product. The routine element involved in tabloid reading for these participants meant a heightened sensitivity to the content, as the newspapers were relied upon for daily companionship and structure.

As noted in Chapter 7, reading modes are subject to change, and so is the engagement with different aspects of the content. However, the strength of the habit in itself means a daily sensitising to the material overall. It also contributed to an experience of intimacy with a particular paper, which was evident when discussing other newspapers. One Mirror-reader for example explained how he for a while had attempted to buy the Guardian, but had given up because, as he put it, ‘you don’t know your way around with other papers’. Thus, while tabloid reading could be seen as a ‘throwaway’ experience on the one hand, on the other the sense of familiarity and intimacy produced by this habit contributed to a very strong relationship with a particular paper.

A similar contradiction in the day-to-day relationship between readers and their papers can be traced in the notion of tabloids as ‘easy’. This frequent description was related to the effortlessness with which the Sun and the Mirror fitted into daily routines, as well as to experiences of the content and style as easily understood. But the emphasis on ‘ease’ must equally be placed in relation to its opposite: the hardship and struggles of day-to-day life, where tabloid reading became a way to cope with the more difficult facets of the individual life experience. Here, too, there is a tension between descriptions of a lack of engagement, and a potentially more significant function filled by the papers.
A cultural perspective

To examine more deep-seated roles that these newspapers may play in the lives of readers, the theoretical view of journalism as a cultural discourse, as outlined in Chapter 3, can help move the analysis along. Such a view highlights that journalism is a component of our culture which may have many functions outside of providing information about public affairs, and that these need to be considered if a better understanding of its role in society is to be had. Thus, from this perspective the social uses and attractions available to audiences, potential ritual and mythic functions, and the alignment with other genres and modes of narrative discourses are worthwhile studying.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 3, tabloid journalism has sometimes been seen as particularly relevant to analyse from this perspective, as it focuses less strictly on current affairs and more on material that may be of other use and interest to audiences. Bird (1992) can be seen as taking this outlook in her study of U.S. supermarket tabloids, which she stresses have similarities to folk tales both in their narrative properties and in their use by readers. Grippsrud (1992) and Langer (1998), likewise, have conceived of tabloid journalism as closely connected to ‘sense-making systems’, and as, on a structural level, battling with deeper questions of life itself, in ways similar to the myth.

The research has demonstrated how ‘soft’ tabloid content in particular was received in ways which draw attention to the ability of tabloid journalism to be used to work through questions of identity, morality, life-views and belonging. How this kind of material is used and experienced, moreover, should be seen as having a bearing on more political processes, as it is one area where the foundation to more political understandings is formed. However, Gripsrud and Langer have in particular pointed to how narrative and stylistic elements of tabloid journalism contribute to form the basis for a view on life that emphasises stability and permanence – as a system for making sense of an abstract and volatile world – and it is this more all-encompassing idea that I would like to take into consideration. There were many aspects of readers’ responses which correspond to this theory. The importance of the routine and familiarity of the reading habit, the pleasure taken, in particular by the male readers, in stable gender constructions, and the way that tabloids seemed to stimulate experiences of belonging and security can be regarded in this light.

Such an underlying purpose for the popular tabloid is interpretable against the background of social change, as we move towards increasingly complex social systems and processes, where stable identities and institutions have been under attack. Certainly, it is interesting to juxtapose the emphasis on ‘black-and-white-ness’, graspable morals, history and community against the context of an increasingly complex society, where forces of globalisation and commercialisation in some ways have contributed to eroding traditional values and working-class forums, such as trade unions and the security of a lifetime workplace. It is,
as Anderson (1996) has suggested, fully comprehensible that stable signifiers and values will gain increased significance in times of volatile social processes. But, the question is whether a desire for stability and security, as reflected in the reception of tabloid journalism, also extends to a more general perception of life – whether, as Gripsrud suggests, this should be seen as indicative of a fully-fledged popular resistance to more abstract understandings of the world?

There are of course no clear answers to this question, and the data collected in this study, which is the result of one-off conversations with readers about specific tabloids, is too limited to draw conclusions about wider world-views in correspondence with the reading material. When looking at a specific media text and its reception there is also a risk of what Couldry (2006: 182-183) has criticised as ‘media-centrism’, allocating undue weight to media rather than investigating other causal factors for such over-arching interpretative framework as world-views. It is possible to, for instance, imagine the pleasure taken from stable gender constructions as a temporary coping strategy with otherwise precarious gender positions. Or, to think of a reader who would appreciate the ‘black-and-white’ political positions of tabloid journalism as a daily relief from a life otherwise crowded with considerations and decisions on a more abstract level. It is thus important to point out that a correspondence to the ‘melodramatic understanding’ of the world, as brought to the fore by Gripsrud, should be thought of as a temporary glimpse into the excesses of melodrama, and for others it may be part of a more far-reaching experience of life and one’s position within it.

Social Class

An interest in how social class and inequalities impact on media use and understandings has a strong history in media- and cultural studies, with work such as Richard Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams’ essay ‘Culture is Ordinary’ (1958/1997) pioneering in this field. More recent explorations into popular culture have investigated this less in terms of social mechanisms of exclusion and more in terms of a resource to be used for the individual’s personal development and identity-formation (see Chapter 2). Fiske (1989, 1992) is proponent of a view which advocates interpretive freedom of audiences for popular culture, who are envisioned as actively choosing among the range of media products on offer, finding the type of media that suits them and competently using these for a variety of purposes in their interest.

Partly, this emphasis on self-transformation and individual capability in the analysis of popular culture can be interpreted against the background of social change; for example towards an expansion of the middle-class, less strictly divided working relations and the inclusion of women into the workforce (see Roberts, 2001, for a comprehensive discussion of social class in Britain). Cul-
tural commentators have noticed how such changes form the background to a prevalent public discourse on social mobility – the idea of individual’s capacity to transform their life-chances and rewards in an ever-more fluid society (see e.g. Biressi and Nunn, 2004), which is reflected in media outlets and in media research.

However, this study has in several ways drawn attention to the opposite: to the constraint of social structures and to the way in which this interlinks with tabloid reading. Setting aside the most affluent and well-educated sections of tabloid readers, the research has emphasised how social privilege and power was experienced as out of reach for many of the participants, where the tabloid reading worked as a vent for dissatisfaction resulting from social inequality. As I have showed, dashed hopes of social mobility appeared to play a part in the enjoyment of tabloid celebrity exposés. There was evidence among the female readers in particular of feelings of inadequacy and incompetence in areas of political importance, and in part an alienation overall from mainstream politics. For the blue-collar readers and immigrants, problems with literacy and a lack of confidence in one’s ability to understand and to be able to identify with other printed news sources show important restrictions on the range of media available. Such observations paint a dramatically different picture than that of a reader of popular culture free to skilfully dip in and out of a range of printed media. They highlight, how, as Beverly Skeggs has argued, contemporary theories of mobility may ‘say more about the social position of the theorist and the re-making of the middle class than any universal social condition’ (2005: 66).

Class-related inequalities in media use come to the fore through the research, and are vital to take into account in relation to tabloid reading. Even though ‘class’ was not a term frequently mentioned by the readers and there is no evidence that they had any articulated concerns or feelings of connectedness around this issue, the enjoyment of reading tabloids could be seen as closely connected to experiences rooted in social class structures. As discussed previously, a significant part of the appeal of the Sun and the Mirror is to do with their ability to allow readers an experience of ‘attack’ on social privilege, both through their treatment of celebrities and through their general anti-establishment position. My research findings in this respect support Connell’s (1991, 1992) analysis of the tabloid celebrity story, which emphasised an element of social criticism as part of this. I have also noted how, for the blue-collar readers in particular, the tabloid reading appeared related to an experience

77 A similar point has been made by Curran, who notes how in spite of some actual mobility in terms of an expanded middle-class and a contracted middle-class, relative social mobility has been much more stable in Britain. Likewise, he points to how class difference generates other forms of inequality, such as how people in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs can expect shorter life-spans, worse physical and mental health and to more frequently be the victims of crime than those in managerial and professional grades (2006: 142-143).
of a proletarian forum not accessible elsewhere, showing how the reception of these newspapers can be connected to an underlying experience of social class.

An acknowledgment of the importance of a class-based perspective to the analysis of tabloid reading begs the question of how social class impacts on the understanding or level of engagement with tabloid journalism. What are the nuances between how members of different social classes would read it? Again, the present research was not specifically set up to enquire into difference, and more wide-spanning and nuanced research would be able to answer this question better. However it has highlighted some areas of interest with regards to how readers in manual work and white-collar readers in this study related to the material. As described previously, there was a distanced, sceptical approach overall in these discussions, but the level of identification with a perceived tabloid focus on the ‘ordinary man’ differed, and there was a notion among the blue-collar readers that tabloids were speaking ‘on their behalf’.

Such description underlines how, for some readers, the tabloid is felt to be but one part of a varied print media landscape, whereas for others it may be more of a key ingredient in engagement with printed news. As such, tabloids can be seen to play a different role for different readers, where the readers in blue-collar positions in this study appeared to have a closer sense of connection with the newspaper overall. Such a tentative observation is relevant to discuss in relation to the newspapers’ role to the democratic process, and can be followed through in the analysis of tabloid reading from the point of view of democracy and public life.

Public life

While the previous perspectives contribute to awareness of reading habits, attractions and levels of engagement with the newspapers, I have argued for the value in extending this awareness into a wider perspective of the media as a social and political actor; as a main component in democratic processes. To analyse tabloid reading from the macro-perspective of how it plays a part in public life, then, is an acknowledgement of the value of qualitative audience studies in providing glimpses into the connections between the everyday and the over-arching structures and processes that contribute to shape this. As Couldry argues: ‘Accumulating evidence about how people read or engage with this text or that is not, by itself, enough unless it contributes to our understanding of how they act in the social world’ (2006: 188).

Such a perspective can take the concept of the public sphere as a normative ideal against which to measure the way that media contribute to or hinder communicative spaces for political deliberation, or it can look more broadly at how the media produce knowledge, identities and social practices that form the pre-text to a public sphere (see Chapter 3 and 9). To make a contribution to
knowledge in either of these areas of analysis is not a simple task, and the limitations of a small-scale audience study, reliant on limited time with participants, are clear. In this research, I have discussed tabloid reading from the generalised standpoint of public life, providing a fairly wide analysis of its connection to political knowledge, and to social and communicative practices that can be seen as interlinked with this.

In many ways, the fields of enquiry are surrounded by contradiction and paradox, and apparently conflicting elements could be tied to different aspects of the reading. At one end, there is the evidence that tabloid reading can work in conjunction with alienation from mainstream political processes; with a distancing from the wider structures that govern society. A lack of engagement in ‘politics’ as a subject, a distrust in politicians and journalists, an experience of disconnection from democratic institutions and practices could all be seen as reflected in, and in some cases furthered by, reading experiences. At the other end, there are the different kinds of political and social knowledge stimulated by the daily practice of reading one of these newspapers – about socio-political events such as war and governmental elections, and about life, health, relationships and finance. Here, the communicative and participatory experiences so integral to tabloid reading must be taken into account, in creating opportunities to partake in public discussion. In particular, readers’ appreciation of the attention aimed at ‘ordinary people’ is a strong indicator of how these newspapers can constitute an alternative to other news sources in this respect.

This function as an alternative public forum is most relevant to discuss in terms of those readers who are either excluded from other spaces of public deliberation on the grounds of for example literacy issues, or who experience themselves as disconnected from these. It is here that the potential of tabloid journalism to mobilise interest in public issues, to create an experience of collectivism and a sense of social agency, is most notable.

Yet, to view tabloids as an alternative public forum also puts added emphasis on the quality and type of information provided. This reflection is not to be taken as support for ideas of straightforward ‘influences’ produced by the reading, but underlines a need for a better understanding of how it contributes to setting up a context for different kinds of knowledge. The question of trust is important here. I have demonstrated that readers across the board are highly critical of what they read – both on the level of being judicious to the excesses of tabloid reporting and sensationalism of news, and on the level of using scepticism as a ‘reading strategy’, where the familiarity with tabloid journalism seems to have contributed to the development of a particular kind of reading. Nevertheless, the findings also point to a constitutive authority of the newspapers to define frameworks for knowledge, in having an agenda-setting function as to what news is talked about, and which repertoires that are available to utilise in the engagement with this.
Thus, when thinking about the role of journalism to contributing to knowledge and participation in political and democratic processes, I argue that tabloid newspapers should be seen as a relevant subject for analysis, in particular in terms of readers severed from other interpretative discourses. Here they have, as hopefully demonstrated in this research, the capacity to engage and to disengage; to alienate and to connect. Further, some difference was noted between Mirror- and Sun-readers in this study as to how the two papers were used as a link in engagement with wider social processes. This, finally, means that we need a more differentiated and medium-sensitive outlook on tabloid media.

Opening up the agenda

Main arguments

This book has showed that, despite a long-standing and far-reaching academic debate on the subject of tabloid journalism, there is limited public research of what makes this type of journalism popular. I have argued that knowledge about the role of popular journalism in society cannot be drawn solely from analysis of its content, but needs to be based on a view of readers as active producers of meaning. Such a view can help develop the understanding of how the popular tabloid press, at the heart of newspaper journalism in the UK and influential in many other countries, is responded to on a reception level.

Part of this argument is that, rather than treating tabloid journalism as too ‘trivial’ for in-depth academic study, it should be seen as a constituent of discourses that are part of and contribute to shape society. This means taking seriously the ‘non-serious’ side to tabloids, as a site of meaning which is interlinked with more political communicative spaces, and as having the potential to serve functions for audiences on other levels. I have shown how this ‘softer’ side of journalism provides mediated opportunities to work through questions of identity, morality and belonging. The use of popular tabloids in this respect can be interpreted as a response to social change, as a way to cope with the insecurities of late modernity.

However, tabloid readers, as I have noted, do not easily fit into the stereotypical description of ‘apolitical’, and to consider tabloid newspapers solely for their entertaining abilities would be to omit crucial aspects of readers’ experiences. A closer analysis of the way that tabloid reading ties in with wider processes of public life, moreover, unsettles the polarised positions on this type of journalism as either a threat to democratic processes or, as the extreme view at the other end of the spectrum would have it, entirely liberating and necessarily in ‘the people’s’ interest. In fact, the study has gone against the grain of contemporary cultural populism in showing how, rather than as a semiotic democ-
racy available to equal media consumers, the choice of news media as well as the interpretative capabilities of this are still dependent on such crucial but perhaps overlooked factors as literacy and knowledge about media organisations. I therefore propose a more nuanced and empirically based perspective, where the limitations as well as the potential in readers’ engagement with the popular press are taken into account. Important to such a perspective is the re-introduction of social class as a framework for analysis of audiences’ engagement with popular journalism, as the study has pointed to how structural mechanisms of social exclusion can frame the reading and shape interpretative repertoires and identifications.

Finally, although tabloid newspapers are often treated as one entity in academic discourse, and the papers analysed here are very similar stylistically and in terms of their news priorities, readers make important distinctions between them. A last argument that has crystallised here is therefore that the study of popular journalism would benefit from incorporating a more medium-sensitive approach. Here, ideological and editorial functions of individual media outlets may be more important than stylistic features per se for contributions to public life.

**Looking forward**

The styles and narrative qualities that have become the hallmarks of tabloids are not new, and indeed have strong links to earlier forms of folk culture. Yet, the British popular tabloid has come to represent a contemporary journalistic regime prevalent not only in the UK but also in other Western countries. Today, newspaper consumption overall is in slow decline, and the future of tabloids is uncertain. Perhaps, as Langer (1998) has suggested, a main base for the sensibilities of tabloid journalism will be found in television, or perhaps on the Internet. Certainly, tabloids constitute a component of what Victor Turner has called ‘the hall of mirrors’ of culture (in Bird, 1992: 2). They continue to interact with other forms of media and with political and social developments.

This study has established some key areas of concern for further research. Pointing forward, however, also means acknowledging the limitations to what has been presented here. Methodological limitations have been detailed in the methods chapter (Chapter 5), but it is worthwhile to note once again that this is a small-scale study that is intended to serve as a modest starting-point for expanded fields of study, and that it is based on restricted access to the participants’ social context and media use.

As such, it has concentrated on responses to two particular papers, which is clearly only one part of an interconnected mesh of an individual’s media consumption. To know more about the roles and uses of newspapers in general is a pertinent topic for further research, especially as the newspaper is currently
facing a period of dramatic change. Newspapers have often been studied purely for their role as news providers, meaning news about politics and public affairs, but it is clear that the reading of a newspaper comprise of much more than getting updated on what goes on in government. This ‘other side’ to journalism deserves further exploration.

More wide-ranging research might also be able to take into account how the use of different news sources, and other media products, interrelate to produce knowledge and experience drawn on in the social world. The interplay between televised news and tabloid newspapers seems especially pertinent here, and a study of how these two media are used in conjunction would be able to expand on some of the questions raised in this study, such as the issue of trust and levels of engagement with the news, and how different kinds of news sources may serve the basis for different kinds of knowledge. Equally, the way that tabloid reading connects to parts of popular culture, such as celebrity magazines, reality TV formats and soaps would contribute to a better understanding of the ‘circuit’ of popular culture on a reception level.

Likewise, I have focused on readers’ responses to the newspapers and the texts which these responses are based on, which means that the production aspect has been left untouched. A study of the production of tabloid journalism, which looks into the work of journalists and production teams in putting together the newspapers, would be interesting in conjunction with a readership study, as it would capture two different yet entwined aspects of the finished product. To compare journalists’ perceptions of readers and readers’ views on those who provide their daily reading material, equally, could shed light on an intimate and yet highly institutionalised relationship of which there is little public knowledge (see Bird, 1992, and Roufari, 2000, for two rare and fascinating accounts of interviews with journalists about readers).

This research has also been designed to reveal an extent of homogeneity in responses to popular tabloids, providing less information about variations of interpretations between tabloid readers of for example different social classes, ages and cultural backgrounds. The participants were all regular, young, readers from particular socioeconomic groups. While these groups constitute the majority of the readership profiles, it should be acknowledged that tabloid newspapers are read by all social groups, and that they may have different meanings in different contexts. Equally, a casual reader may gain a different experience to a reader for whom the newspaper has become integral to day-to-day habits. Variations in responses and reading modes, therefore, constitute an area to expand on.

Lastly, it is possible to imagine cross-cultural comparative research, which investigates the role of tabloid journalism in different national contexts. I started this book with an anecdote about how, being Swedish, my first acquaintance with a British tabloid took place on the London underground sev-
eral years ago. In a sense, this research has been a continuation of that journey, opening up perspectives for me as a researcher into an area of significance to British culture. I have learned from British tabloid readers not only their views on particular newspapers, but also about their everyday lives, and about the national culture which shapes these. Taking this experience further, cross-cultural research has the potential to provide more extensive insights into how a broader social environment lays the foundation for media use. How, for instance, do tabloid newspapers function in Scandinavia or in other parts of the world, where they are equally debated but take a different form? A comparative research project could help in branching out from a ‘media-centric’ perspective, to looking at how other causal factors shape responses in different cultural settings, and extend tabloid reading to wider fields of enquiry.
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Appendices
QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How often do you read the Sun / Mirror?
   Every day       Every other day       2-3 times a week       Once a week       Less often

2. When and where do you read the Sun / Mirror?
   ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

3. Which, if any, other newspaper(s) do you read on a regular basis?
   ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

4. a) Do you watch news on TV?
   Yes       No
   b) If ‘yes’, which news programme(s) do you watch?
   ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
   c) If ‘yes’, how often do you watch news on TV?
   Every day       Every other day       2-3 times a week       Once a week       Less often

5. a) Do you listen to news on the radio?
   Yes       No
   b) If ‘yes’, which news programme(s) do you listen to on the radio?
   ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
   c) If ‘yes’, how often do you listen to news on the radio?
   Every day       Every other day       2-3 times a week       Once a week       Less often
6. Do you look up news on the Internet?
   Yes       No

b) If ‘yes’, which Internet news site(s) do you go to?

...........................................................................................................................................

c) If ‘yes’, how often do you look up news on the Internet?
Every day   Every other day   2-3 times a week   Once a week   Less often

7. Do you have access to the Internet at home?
   Yes       No

Name:........................................................................................................................................

Age:........................................................................................................................................

Nationality:..............................................................................................................................

Occupation:...............................................................................................................................

Education:.................................................................................................................................

Marital status:...........................................................................................................................

Number of children in household:............................................................................................

Annual income (optional):

0-10,000   10-15,000   15-20,000   20-25,000   25-30,000   30-35,000   35,000+

Thank you for helping with the research!
Appendix B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction
Introduction and explanation of the project. Reassurance of confidentiality. Warm-up round of introductions.

1. To begin with, how would you compare the Sun / Mirror to other newspapers?

Prompt: How do you think it’s different or similar - for example to the Mirror/Sun, or the Mail? Or to papers like the Guardian or the Times?

2. What would you say it is about the Sun/Mirror that makes you want to read it?

Prompt: What do you like about the Sun/Mirror? Are there any parts that you particularly like? Why do like ...? Is there anything you dislike?

3. How would you describe the style of the Sun/Mirror?

Prompt: What do you think about the way it looks? What would you say about the kind of language it uses?

4. Thinking about the Sun’s / Mirror’s reporting of politics, how would you describe this?

Prompt: Do you remember a political story you’ve read recently? (Alternatively bring up a story myself, or start with this story) What did you think about the way the Sun / Mirror reported on ...(said story)? Do you feel that the news about politics and politicians in the Sun contributes to what you think about certain parties or politicians? In which ways?

5. What do you think about the Sun’s / Mirror’s coverage of celebrities?

Prompt: Are there any celebrity stories that you particularly liked / disliked? (Alternatively bring up a story myself) What was it about ... that you liked / disliked? How do you feel when you read stories like...? Do you think stories about celebrities relate to you in any way?
6. Do you think the *Sun / Mirror* is aimed at women or men?

*Prompt:* Why do you feel it is aimed at women/men?

Are there parts of the paper that seems aimed at women or men in particular?

What do you think about the way that women and men are showed overall in the paper?

*Prompt unless mentioned for the Sun-groups* - what do you think about the Page 3 feature?

7. Would you say that you trust what you read in the *Sun / Mirror*?

*Prompt:* Are there any kinds of stories, or a particular journalist, that you find more trustworthy?

Is there anything you’ve read that you didn’t believe?

8. Finally, is there anything that you would like to bring up that we haven’t mentioned?
Appendix C

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

[...]: Indicates part of the speech has been omitted

(...): Indicates words in a sentence have been omitted

…: Indicates pause in speech

*Why do you like the sports pages?*: Sentences in italics indicate the moderator’s intervention

*the*: Words in italics indicate the stressed emphasis of the speaker

[laughs]: Indicates emotion or non-verbal gesture of speaker

[the *Sun*]: Words in parentheses were not spoken but are included to indicate the subject to which the speaker is referring
# Appendix D

## LIST OF READERS

### Interviews

**Sun**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Construction Worker, British</td>
<td>Building site</td>
<td>22nd of Oct 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Construction Worker, British</td>
<td>Building site</td>
<td>22nd of Oct 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jermaine</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Security Officer, Jamaican</td>
<td>Cinema</td>
<td>9th of May 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiani</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Cinema Manager, British</td>
<td>Cinema</td>
<td>9th of May 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Construction Worker, British</td>
<td>Building site</td>
<td>15th of June 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustafa</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Construction Worker, Nigerian</td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>2nd of Oct 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Laundrette Assistant, British</td>
<td>Laundrette</td>
<td>18th of May 2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mirror**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albert</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Telephone Sales Assistant, British</td>
<td>Albert’s home</td>
<td>6th of August 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luigi</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catering Assistant, Portuguese</td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>15th of June 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Social Worker, British</td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>10th of June 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catering Assistant, British</td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>10th of June 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Newspaper Deliverer, British</td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>28th of Oct 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Secretary, British</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td>15th of May 2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus groups

**Sun**

Nick, 34, male, bus driver, Greek  
Jack, 30, male, bus driver, British  
Ronnie, 35, male, bus driver, British  
Stuart, 26, male, bus driver, British  
Tim, 29, male, bus driver, British  
Tom, 26, male, bus driver, British  
Adam, 28, male, shop-fitter, British  
Chris, 29, male, shop-fitter, British  
Ronald, 27, male, shop-fitter, British  
Helena, 18, female, retail trainee, British  
Joanne, 21, female, retail trainee, British  
Marissa, 19, female, retail trainee, British  
Catherine, 21, female, shop assistant, British  
Charlotte, 18, female, shop assistant, British  
Nicole, 21, female, non-working, British  
Carly, 21, female, insurance advisor, British  
Cherie, 18, female, office clerk, British  
Tina, 25, female, insurance advisor, British  
Mick, 27, male, electrician, British  
Pat, 25, male, runner, Polish  
Peter, 25, male, non-working, British  
Stephanie, 24, female, sales advisor, British

**Place and date of the focus group**

Canteen, 12th of May 2004  
Building site, 10th of June 2004  
Shop staff room, 13th of May 2004  
Shop staff room, 1st of May 2004  
Office, 19th of May 2004  
Stephanie’s home, 8th of Jan 2005

**Mirror**

Andrew, 29, male, printer, British  
Douglas, 28, male, civil servant, British  
Mike, 28, male, IT-supporter, British  
Ian, 18, male, student, British  
John, 18, male, student, British  
Tariq, 18, male, student, British  
Tong, 18, male, student, British  
Laura, 25, female, secretary, British  
Linda, 26, female, receptionist, British  
Mary, 29, female, PA, British  
Sarah, 33, female, account manager, British  
Alexandra, 32, female, secretary, British  
Helen, 30, female, secretary, British  
Susan, 28, female, receptionist, British

**Place and date of the focus group**

Pub, 1st of July 2004  
Café, 3rd Nov 2004  
Café, 8th of June, 2004  
Susan’s home, 24th Sept 2004
Andrew, 23, male, shop assistant, British
Erica, 21, female, shop assistant, British
Karyn, 24, female, shop assistant, British
Marissa, 24, female, shop assistant, British
Simon, 27, male, shop assistant, British

Shop staff room, 3rd Dec 2004
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Reading Tabloids

Widely read and highly controversial, tabloid newspapers are often criticized for sensationalizing, trivializing and simplifying journalism. At the heart of debates about media standards, they continue to cause concern about the impact of popular news formats on society at large. Yet, there is little research into how tabloid newspapers are viewed by their readers. Why are they popular? What do readers think about tabloid scandals and sensationalism? What is the attraction of celebrity stories? Do readers trust tabloid news coverage?

Reading Tabloids examines British tabloid newspapers from an audience perspective. Drawing on focus groups and interviews with readers of the popular tabloids the Sun and the Daily Mirror, as well as incorporating a textual analysis of the two papers, it explores how interpretations take place in an everyday inter-play between the newspapers and their readers. The book offers a new perspective on tabloid journalism, of value to those interested in the press, the news media and popular culture in contemporary society.

Sofia Johansson is a researcher and lecturer in Media and Communication Studies at Södertörn University College. Her research interests cover journalism, popular culture and media reception.