On Going Tabloid: A Preliminary Analysis

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Introduction: In Search of the Tabloid Heart[1]

The tabloid media, ironically, have for some time been getting a bad press, most recently after the death in 1997 of Diana, Princess of Wales and often at the hands of critics of quite different political persuasion. The main components of the critique (and, occasionally, the celebration) of the process of 'tabloidisation' involve the proposition that an axial principle exists around which what is called 'tabloid' plausibly revolves; that this phenomenon is spreading within and across media; and that its consequences are politically and culturally identifiable. Each of these propositions concerning the conceptualisation, incidence and impact of tabloidisation needs to be subjected to critical examination.

This article considers whether a discernible, institutional shift towards 'tabloidism' has, in fact, occurred in the media, or whether it is a 'multi-purpose metaphor' deployed for a range of competing ideological purposes by different socio-cultural groupings. A brief, preliminary case study is presented on a regional Australian newspaper that has recently 'gone tabloid'. The theoretical and initial research analysis suggest that, if the term 'tabloid' is to have any analytical utility, it may be preferable to view it as the product of institutional forces that foster a populist genre originating in the press but portable across media forms. This 'tabloid genre', like all genre types, derives its vitality not from the elimination of other genres but by self-conscious differentiation from them. The conditions under which 'tabloid' texts are produced are necessarily conditioned by specific social and media histories. It is important, therefore, to deploy theory and empirical research appropriate to the spaces and places where discourses of the tabloid are in play.

The term 'tabloid' as (adjective and noun) has proliferated in both academic and everyday discourse over the last three decades. Yet, contrary to general impression, it has much older and more extensive origins (Greenberg, 1996), being first registered in 1884 as a pharmaceutical trademark for the concentrated form of medicines as pill or tablet. This pharmacological tabloid effect has been readily transferred to the media, with the more literal meaning in relation to newspaper size at the turn of the century quickly giving way to descriptions of editorial and presentational style, which in turn were extended to non-print forms like television (Cunningham and Miller, 1994; Lumby and O'Neil, 1994). These predominantly negative connotations (articulated by such literary heavyweights as Arthur Koestler and Vladimir Nabokov) have given the process of 'tabloidisation' a rather pejorative quality well encapsulated in Bob Franklin's (1997) term 'Newszak'.

The typification of the tabloid in the relevant specialist areas of academic inquiry (principally, communication, media and cultural studies, and the sociology of culture) and in

various other intellectual fields where the term has been treated (such as general sociology, political science, psychology and philosophy) has, intriguingly, displayed one of the key claimed features of the object itself - an emotionally charged appeal to collective wisdom. Given the power and pervasiveness of this viewpoint, it is necessary to examine more closely what it actually means to 'go tabloid'. In particular, a cool assessment must be made of whether it can be defined as a thoroughgoing and concrete social process or, instead, regarded as a tendency within media culture that has a much more restricted social impact and which, in fact, reflects rather than significantly precipitates social change. Somewhere in between there may be found a 'tabloid dialectic' in which a complex feedback loop interactively configures and reconfigures media and society. This position will be explored later, but for the moment I want to discuss weaker and stronger versions of the tabloidisation thesis. Most modestly, it could be suggested that 'tabloidism' is a media phenomenon involving the revision of traditional newspaper and other media formats driven by reader preferences and commercial exigencies. Most ambitiously, 'tabloidisation' is a social phenomenon both instigating and symbolising major changes to the constitution of society.

In making this point an eerie similarity is evident to earlier analyses in British and Australian sociology and human geography of postmodernism (a cultural movement/trend), postmodernity (a socio-cultural condition) and postmodernisation (a full-blown socio-historical process). In such works (which include Crook, Pakulski and Waters, 1992; Harvey, 1989; Lash, 1990; Lash and Urry, 1987, 1994), there is a consideration of whether contemporary social and cultural changes are extensions of previous ones (such as the 'project' of modernity), elements of the 'advance guard' of a future social order, relatively autonomous and non-comprehensive aesthetic developments, and so on. For example, in their critique of Lash and Urry's *The End of Organised Capitalism* and Lash's *Sociology of Postmodernism*, Crook, Pakulski and Waters state:

> By and large Lash and Urry insist on the independence of these [principal] elements [of disorganization]. There is no unifying motor or axial principle which drives societies towards disorganization. Lash is particularly concerned to stress the autonomy of postmodernist culture (1990: 3-4) relative to any change in society. Postmodern*ism* is a cultural movement rather than a type of society or a social condition. It is not the product either of disorganization or of postindustrialism [as proposed by Bell, 1973] that is, of processes which operate at the socio-economic level. The most Lash and Urry are prepared to say is that postmodernism is compatible with disorganization and postindustrialism, in effect, that there is elective affinity between them.[2]
> (Crook, Pakulski and Waters, 1992: 29)

If we substituted the above terms 'disorganization', 'postindustrialisation' and 'postmodernism' with 'tabloidisation' and 'tabloidism', very similar theoretical issues can be seen to be at stake. They involve establishing whether a significant change has already happened or is occurring; the degree to which it represents an extension of the old or, in fact, heralds the arrival of the new; and, finally, the depth, scope and aetiology of the identified change. It is no mean task within contemporary media and cultural studies to advance our understanding of what kind of socio-cultural phenomenon - if it exists at all - that tabloidisation can plausibly be said to represent. This paper is predicated on the assumption that there is an identifiable process of tabloidisation in some form, but is more cautious about

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[2] The invocation of Weber's argument (1930) that Protestantism and capitalism are not causally related but, instead, have ideational and valuational elements in common, similarly reveals the 'classic' dimensions of debates about postmodernisation and tabloidisation - that is, the question of determination.

its ramifications beyond media organisations. If the tabloid is only one media genre amongst many it may be clearly important, but it cannot be said to represent a wide-ranging tendency either within or outside the media. Before such questions can be addressed, it is first necessary to discover the distinguishing features of the tabloid.

Tabloidisation Unravelled

In his review of the applications of the concept in critiques of journalism, and in particular the approach to TV journalism that he describes as 'predatory' (*paparazzi* privacy invasions, 'foot-in-the-door' questioning, and so on), Graeme Turner (1999: 70) ultimately decides:

> to jettison the category of tabloidisation as too baggy, imprecise and value-laden to be of any use to me in attempting to understand the appeal and cultural function of the mode of operation to which I have been referring in contemporary news and current affairs.

Turner is concerned that the catch-all nature of the concept of tabloidisation, which is readily available for deployment by any commentator who approves or disapproves of developments in media or society, may blunt the edge of media and social critique with its appealingly intuitive inclusiveness and its consequently hazy, pliable imprecision. For example, it may be felt necessary to defend the 'tabloid' on feminist grounds for its insertion of suppressed or even abject 'private' experience into public discourse (like, for example, Lumby, 1997) or in support of a break with the 'official journalism' that alienates 'the people' from the elites who claim to speak in their name (like Fiske, 1992) and who abjure the 'unworthy' or 'other news' (Langer, 1992; 1998). Or, alternatively, to attack it as a sign of the slowing of the socially progressive impulse (like Pilger, 1998). In other words, the term tabloid can function as a multi-purpose metaphor placed in the service of contending, expansive rhetorics.

Routine classification of the tabloid no less than generalising critique is made problematic by the concept's slipperiness. The tabloid media in Britain, the US, Japan, Hungary, Mexico and Germany (discussed in Sparks, 1998; Sparks and Tulloch, 1999) display parallels and differences in various permutations with regard to mode of address, political stance, literary and visual aesthetics, and place in the cultural formation. The grand narrative of tabloidisation may also tell a very different story in societies where a 'liberal' press is still in the early stages of formation - as, for example, in post-communist Mongolia (Lowe, 199). Even within single nations with an established press the lines of classification may be made less indistinct by market classification. S. Elizabeth Bird (1997: 105), for example, has not only distinguished between 'supermarket' and 'respectable' tabloid newspapers in the United States, but also argues that 'While more mainstream news practitioners like to maintain a distance between themselves and tabloid styles, clearly their human-interest stories adhere to many of the same narrative conventions'. Thus it seems that not only may there be hierarchical and horizontal divisions within 'tabloidism', but also signs and traces of tabloid elements in the very media anxious to distance themselves from it. In discussing tabloid narrative in the context of scandal, furthermore, Stephen Hinerman (1997: 149) argues that the distinctive function of 'tabloid journalism' lies in its treatment of such areas as 'scandal and stardom', where it becomes an 'authoritative source on events in the star's life', passing 'judgment on the star by standing in for the reader'. Yet, it is precisely assuming 'authority' and 'standing in' for readers that (as John Hartley (1996) among others has argued) is a key function of establishment broadsheet, 'quality' journals of record like *The London Times*.

The usual recourse at this point is to propose the ideal typical features of the phenomenon under review. My review of a broadly representative sample of the literature on tabloids and tabloidisation (many of the elements of which are consistently evident in the collection by Greenberg, 1996) has produced the following ten general (no doubt incomplete and sometimes overlapping) characteristics of the tabloid, whose mostly negative features are representative of the tenor of most analyses:

1   decline of orthodox, official or formal institutional politics;

2   passage (often voyeuristically intrusive) of formerly separate private concerns into the public domain;

3   sensationalisation and spectacularisation of news, accompanied by the accelerated ephemerality both of media celebrity and news stories;

4   collapse of the boundaries between news and entertainment ('infotainment') and news and advertising ('advertorial');

5   increasing obsession with and fetishisation of celebrity and stardom;

6   uncontrolled expansion of the media and of media products and uses;

7   overwhelming concern with rapidly accessible and digestible 'bites' of information, frequently coupled with a direct, personalised mode of address;

8   decline in media ethics and of the 'serious', Fourth Estate role of the press, with hypocritical moralising replacing moral seriousness;

9   drift towards a right-wing, proprietor-sponsored authoritarian populism, and a corresponding failure of the political Left to engage with the life concerns of 'the people';

10   general coarsening of the cultural climate and of individual sensibilities.

In reviewing this ideal type of the tabloid as condition and process, it can be seen that some (2, 3, 4, and 8) emanate mainly from within media institutions, some mainly from outside (1, 9 and 10) and some are more legitimately described as cross-institutional processes (5, 6 and 7). However the defining features of tabloidisation might be construed, it is difficult to disentangle the forces external and internal to the media and the characteristics unique to or merely exhibited by what is deemed to be 'tabloid'. All processes, of course, should logically be analysed in processual terms, but that of tabloidisation may not so much be linear (constituting a continuum from more to less tabloid) as cybernetic (multi-directional, dynamic and cyclically productive of patterns of stasis and entropy). Taken at the grandest level of 'narrative', tabloidisation involves large-scale social, ideological and economic forces and structures bearing down on the media to singular effect. Less deterministically, the extension of media power and influence ('mediatisation', perhaps) also has an important bearing on the development of those same large-scale forces in a constant, amplificatory move towards 'the tabloid'. This type of processual, institutional model is of the macro order, but, as was noted above, it is subject, like its metaphorical counterpart, to disabling flaws of teleology, grandiosity and vagueness. It is, perhaps, more useful to take a less

totalising view of the tabloid and to view it, more narrowly and technically, as an institutionally produced media genre whose constituents appear with varying intensity in many media forms.

There is a good deal of disagreement concerning what constitutes a media genre, and film scholars have been particularly energetic in teasing out criteria of genre status. Bordwell and Thompson (1997: 52), for example, outline the different, perhaps contending, criteria of genre status, with some marked out by 'subjects or themes' (such as *film noir)*, others by manner of presentation (musicals), some by 'plot pattern' (mysteries), and still others by 'distinctive emotional effect' (comedy). Given that these different characteristics may be found in the same film, it is apparent that neat formalist categorisation of film genres is impossible.

A similarly flexible, genre-based approach to tabloidisation might help overcome some of the analytical limitations of the approaches discussed so far. The multi-dimensional approach to the tabloid genre it entails does not require the theorist to isolate its exclusive features, and acknowledges that the separation between one tabloid genre from another - and indeed, between the tabloid and other forms of press - is both theoretically and empirically impossible. For example, John Henningham's content analysis of all Australian capital city newspapers (apart from Darwin) in 1993 discovered that while:

> [a]spects of the traditional 'popular'/'quality' division of newspapers remain … even in the metropolitan broadsheet newspapers, sport accounts for almost one-fifth of total items, while popular culture (including entertainment) comprises not much less.
> (Henningham, 1996: 32)

Furthermore, the sports pages of such different newspapers in other countries as the establishment broadsheet *The New York Times* and the somewhat less culturally prestigious British tabloids *The Sun* and *The Mirror* reveal surprisingly similar types of 'copy' distinguished by its brevity, personalisation, condensed narrative, and so on (Rowe, 1999). This is not, however, to argue that all differences have been erased - the broadsheets still contain very different (lengthy, analytical and abstract) material that does not exist in the tabloids. Such variations reflect the differential positioning of readerships (which may be both intra- and cross-sectoral) by, in this case, social class and its associated characteristics like level of education and mean annual income. The idea of genre, then, of necessity introduces the key element of mutual expectations (an implied contract of sorts) between media producer and consumer. The importance of reciprocity illuminates the relational aspects of the tabloidisation process so often neglected in accounts which detail what the media expect of and do to audiences with little consideration for what their audiences might require and make of media texts.

The tabloid genre, furthermore, is when fully embraced self-conscious about its type of speech ('tabloid speak' liberally sprinkled with vernacular terms (Watson, 1998: 46) like 'punter', 'smasher' and 'thrillennium' in British newspapers); category of audience (interpellated as 'our' readers, viewers and listeners); and usual detractors ('boffins', 'do gooders', the 'politically correct', and so on). As Neville Wakefield (1990) has pointed out, some British tabloid newspapers like *The Sport* have made self-parody into a marketing device, in the process playing with disapproving discourses while looking past the conventional working-class readership to an educated, politically jaded middle-class audience with a taste for postmodern irony.

Conceiving tabloidisation in developmental genre terms also recognises how, at least in some tabloid manifestations, it is a process that works by differentiating itself from more formal journalistic genres while also enabling the recognition of variation through the existence of tabloid sub-genres. In this way, some of Turner's (1999) aforementioned objections to the term's mutability may be accommodated. Instead of permitting such a supple, genre-based analysis of the tabloid to descend into a depoliticised formalism, it can be proposed that different aesthetics, politics and textual relations are attached to the variable strategies adopted by these tabloid sub-genres. Of course, it could be objected that such an approach can make the category of the tabloid so infinitely stretchable as to be deprived of any analytical utility. A counter to this argument is direct and pragmatic - the idea of the tabloid has now become so well established that, even where it is rejected, it must be dealt with both by media producers and consumers. That is, tabloidisation is now a culturally sedimented concept about which the media industries and their customers must 'take a position'. To illustrate this point, I will now turn to a concrete instance where, most reluctantly, a media organisation was forced to reproduce and reinforce the concept of the tabloid even as it attempted to repudiate it.

'Compact' not 'Tabloid': Foundations of a Case Study

On July 27, 1998, the largest regional daily newspaper in Australia (with a Monday to Friday circulation of 45,000) adopted a tabloid format. *The Newcastle Herald*, journal of record of Newcastle and the Hunter Region of New South Wales and self described as 'a proud, loyal, vigorous and provocative servant of its community for 132 years' (*Newcastle Herald*, 1998: 3), took on a 'new size for a new century'. The broadsheet once known as the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, after 'extensive [reader] research', became part of the tabloidisation process by relaunching itself as a 'more compact newspaper'. Accompanying the marketing pitch about the 'new, exciting and more convenient form' was an attempt to allay any fears of current readers about the change. The following pre-emptive critical rebuttal appeared in a question-and-answer section about the meaning and consequences of going tabloid:

> **Q: Will the Herald lose its editorial integrity?**
>
> **A:** Absolutely not. Changing the size of the paper doesn't mean editorial quality has to be compromised and it certainly does not mean a page three girl or any of the other undesirable qualities commonly associated with 'the tabloid press'. It is worth remembering that one of the most respected and influential newspapers in the country, *The Australian Financial Review*, has a tabloid format. *The Newcastle Herald* has a long tradition of journalistic excellence and demands nothing less than the highest standards of editorial credibility from its staff. The paper will remain the voice of the Hunter Region. (*Newcastle Herald*, 1998a: 3)

Behind the positive discourses of consumer satisfaction and modernisation (described as 'evolution rather than revolution'), then, lies anxiety about the tabloid image, and what the change to that format might signify. Clearly, this was much more than a technical adjustment of masthead and headline font involving arcane printing terms like 'image area', 'double page centre bleed', 'cmyk' and 'dinkus'. It was driven by falling circulation and a competitive local advertising market in which commercial television, radio, 'junk mail', the Internet and free, weekly suburban newspapers (one of which is owned by Newcastle Newspapers,

publishers of the *Herald* and part of the large Fairfax media group) all offer to connect advertisers and consumers.

The redesign and relaunch of *The Newcastle Herald* involved a 15-month program of questionnaires, telemarketing and independent surveys through which it is claimed that 40,000 people were contacted (ABC Radio National, 1998: 2). The move to tabloid format was, according to the *Herald's* management, by popular demand (hence the advertising slogan - delivered without hint of irony - 'You've Asked For It'). It also necessarily required more far-reaching changes to the paper's layout, design and pagination, as well as a somewhat less mandatory modification to its overall 'pitch', as is revealed in the following excerpt from an interview by radio journalist Robert Bolton with the paper's Editor-In-Chief, John McCluskey:

> RB: ... Does a tabloid format mean less content?
>
> JM: No, in fact there's far more content. Just a simple translation of our equivalent sized broadsheets of a week ago to our tabloids of this week shows our paging has increased and certainly our story count is far higher than we may have provided on Monday and Tuesday of last week.
>
> RB: And what about the length of stories? Have you pared the stories back at all? Is there a percentage less of actual column inches or centimetres?
>
> JM: Individual stories, being a tabloid product, yes, do run shorter, but the actual column inches of copy, more pages, more column inches.
>
> RB: So really you're talking about a change in the format, but is there a change in content in any other way?
>
> JM: No, we've worked very hard to ensure that we maintain the quality of product that this paper has put out in *The Newcastle Herald* for 140 years. We're very aware of the expectation of our current readership, and we're also very aware of the demands which have been placed upon us to present a product in a friendlier, easier-to-read fashion. (ABC Radio National, 1998: 4-5)

The evident tension here between the editor's argument that 'The reality is tabloid is a size of product' and the accompanying adjustments to the newspaper's style, social role and content is brought out in the above exchange and in an ensuing one over whether going tabloid meant 'the "dumbing down" of the newspaper' - as evidenced by a front-page story of a (pictured) dog which survived a fire in which its owner died - as well as the general constraints on the tabloid front page:

> RB: Of course there are just two stories on the front page here, where presumably if this had been a broadsheet sized paper, you would have three or four others.
>   Does it mean that you're able to give less punch with the news in the beginning part of the newspaper?
>
> JM: No, I think you're quite right: if you're a broadsheet you can fit as

many as eight stories on the front page; a tabloid between 2, 3, sometimes one. But the reality is, there are more pages *per se*, and more lead stories per edition on a tabloid product ... My aim is to make sure that after they've bought the product when they read a story on page 32, it's something that stops them and, they find interesting...
(ABC Radio National, 1998: 6)

The desire to make the paper 'readable' throughout perhaps explains such familiar tabloid-style headlines sprinkled throughout the paper as 'Just sick of politics', 'Violent drug freaks junkies', 'Flight of fancy – Boozer tried to take plane' and the *de rigeur* Viagra story, 'Sin's in the sex, not drug' in its August 29, 1998 edition. It is too early (prior, that is, to the completion of content and textual analysis) to assess the depth and scope of the changes prompted by *The Newcastle Herald*'s transformation into a 'tabloid product', although impressionistically it can be suggested that its editorial direction as a broadsheet had become tabloid *avant la lettre* (most notoriously in an aggressive invitation to its readers to proposition (in a political sense) the Prime Minister, John Howard, during his 1997/8 summer vacation in a nearby holiday town). What is clear, however, is the acute sensitivity to the negative associations of tabloidisation, with the editor complaining of the 'misconception of what "tabloid" means because I think the electronic media has picked up on the word "tabloid" to describe some of the lower press in Britain and parts of America' (ABC Radio National, 1998: 5). Not only did the paper try to pre-empt any linkage between itself and 'the lower press' (the workings of which have been tellingly documented by Chippindale and Horrie, 1992) but, as its Marketing Manager, Ron Reedman, made clear, it actively suppressed the term in its marketing and promotion:

RB: I notice in your promotional material you don't actually use the word 'tabloid', you use the word 'compact'.

RR: Yes, that's been a point of discussion within the building for some time, where we in the industry know what 'tabloid' means. You know, it's the size of the paper. But you ask a lot of people in the marketplace, 'what's tabloid?' and immediately they start talking about sensationalism, or the English press, etc. So to not confuse the marketplace, we've decided to coin the word 'compact', for external purposes, not internal ...
(ABC Radio National, 1998: 3)

This technical process of 'compacticisation' does not have quite same commanding sweep as tabloidisation, and this is deliberately so because of the newspaper's strategy of not alienating its core '50-plus' readership while attempting to reach 'those people that are in their early 20s etc and that's how we've styled the newspaper, that it's got a younger, breezier look. It's easier to handle, it fits in with a younger person's lifestyle where they want to be able to take in their news pretty quick etc etc'. (Reedman, in ABC Radio National, 1998: 3). The prime justification for going tabloid is, therefore, attributed to the agentic power of actual and potential readers - as the editor put it, 'I think the decision was made for us by the readers' (McCluskey in ABC Radio National, 1998: 5). The implied 'compact' in another sense between newly tabloidised paper and its readership is that the former can be trusted not to descend to the level of 'the lower press in Britain and parts of America' and the latter can be assumed not to want it to.

This recurrent use of the tabloid press in other English-speaking countries as a reference point is worthy of exploration here given that the 'undesirable qualities commonly associated with

"the tabloid press"' are evident only in muted form in Australia, which does not have the history of intense, nationally based newspaper competition within the same market that exists, for example, in Britain. Over the last two decades there have been continuing metropolitan newspaper closures, creating a market in which Rupert Murdoch's News Limited owns over 60 per cent of the capital city daily press and publishes the only general national daily (*The Australian*); the Fairfax company owns the two most valuable newspaper commodities (*The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Melbourne Age*), and the only other national daily (the aforementioned *Australian Financial Review*), with James Fairfax's Rural Press and Tony O'Reilly's Australian Independent Newspapers accounting for most of the rest of the newspaper market alongside small, statutorily limited holdings by television and/or magazine proprietors like the Kerrys Packer and Stokes. Most major press markets are, therefore, segmented into broadsheet and tabloid or, as in the case of *The Newcastle Herald*, have established local monopolies in their market sector. As a result, there is none of the frenetic competition between tabloid newspapers in Australia that exists in Britain between *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express* and so on, resulting in comparatively restrained and sober publications.

The negative 'tabloid image', therefore, emanates largely from either another medium or another country. In Australia, commercial current affairs and 'crime' television (like Channel Nine's *A Current Affair* and Channel Seven's *Australia's Most Wanted*) and imported American programs (like the now-discontinued Australian edition of *Hard Copy* - see Cunningham and Miller, 1994) have been commonly more subject to negative critiques of 'tabloidism' than newspapers. It is, of course, in prime time commercial television that the kind of direct market competition occurs which, since the many metropolitan newspaper closures of the last two decades, is rare in the Australian newspaper industry (Schultz, 1997). In print, it is British newspapers that are more frequently cited as the classic, 'notorious' instances of the tabloid. Thus, the national and cultural histories and contexts of tabloidisation must be recognised, and the different inflections of genre appreciated. In the case of a provincial daily newspaper like *The Newcastle Herald* with an established local monopoly, overt contestation with rival newspapers is not a feature of its tabloid format - there is no competing newspaper in its market segment to 'best'. Instead, the newspaper feels itself in competition with other media - especially television. The elements of tabloid genre it now displays - convenience, 'brightness', concision, directness, and so on - are inevitably present in varying degrees and permutations in other publications identified as tabloid, but they can scarcely be bracketed comfortably with its British counterparts. It is here, then, that the Anglo-centric origins of tabloidisation theory can be seen to hamper its application in other places across the globe, and a more cautious analysis of tabloidisation is required which takes into account not just visual aesthetics and reader address, but also cultural histories - whereby, for example, in Australia the ribald role of the now closed *Truth* newspaper has been taken up by magazines like *The Post* and *The Picture*. It must also understand the prevailing institutional conditions that may involve the seemingly paradoxical outcome of going tabloid while still holding onto a comfortable local (single medium or 'multi-media') monopoly.

Conclusion: Tabloidisation Reassessed

This assessment of the concept and process of tabloidisation has, perhaps inadvertently, revealed the tensions between ambitious drives to connect social phenomena within a generalising schema and more modest, contingent (often Foucault-inspired) moves to disconnect them by means of a 'politics of detail' (Bennett, 1998). I have attempted to

demonstrate that, as sweeping metaphor or description of socio-cultural development, the concept of tabloidisation as currently articulated has clear limitations. The more limited and tentative proposal of an analysis based on industry and genre, and which takes greater account of local economic, political, social and cultural circumstances, offers I believe a more promising means of discriminating between phenomenon and epiphenomenon, cause and symptom, in the continuing project of analysing significant trends in contemporary media and other social institutions.

In the case of the going tabloid of *The Newcastle Herald*, the new design and heavy promotional expenditure on its relaunch seems to have succeeded. By November 1998 it claimed on the front page 'IT'S official - *The Newcastle Herald* is Australia's fastest growing newspaper', with its Monday-Friday readership up 'by a massive 14.3% or 17,000 readers' (*Newcastle Herald*, 1998b: 1), a trend that broadly continued into the following year (*Newcastle Herald*, 1999: 2). The broader implications of these developments (including whether these trends are sustained) are the subject of current empirical research into the paper's content, style and reader relations. This article's exercise in theoretical and conceptual analysis has, however, revealed that the sweeping social process and all-purpose metaphor of tabloidisation, and the genre status of the tabloid itself, must be handled with surprising care.

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