

Chapter 57

Sacrificing Credibility for Sleaze: Mainstream Media's Use of Tabloidization

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses an experiment to analyze how mainstream journalists' use of sensationalized or tabloid-style writing techniques affect the credibility of online news. Participants read four news stories and rated their credibility using McCroskey's Source Credibility Scale. Participants found stories written with a tabloid style less credible than more traditional stories. Soft news stories written with a tabloidized style were rated more credible than hard news stories that also had a tabloidized style. Results suggest that online news media may damage their credibility by using tabloidized writing techniques to increase readership. Furthermore, participants were less likely to enjoy stories written in a tabloidized style. The authors conclude by utilizing act utilitarianism to argue that tabloidized writing is an unethical journalistic technique.

INTRODUCTION

There's a journalistic world where old-school objectivity fights for existence against dramatic disasters and fuzzy features. It is a place where journalistic ethics might take a backseat, while reporters or editors douse newspapers with sleaze and entertainment. With little more than a creative selection of verbs and a thirst for a sizzling story, American journalists can venture into tabloid territory.

This technique of spicing up mainstream media news often is called tabloidization. The exact definition of the term varies from one scholar to the next, but it is viewed as a method for attaining audiences in an ever-competitive media environment. Tabloidization has been described as dumbing down the news by giving consumers the stories that they want rather than providing useful public service information (Nice, 2007). The writing tone in these tabloidized stories is designed to be stimulating and exciting (McLachlan

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& Golding, 2000). Tabloidization results in lower journalistic standards, less hard news, and more soft, sensational, or entertaining stories (Kurtz, 1993). It is far too simplistic a notion to assume that tabloidization is a completely negative practice, however. The method also might be utilized to increase the audience of the media and to increase their knowledge of news and information (Gans, 2009).

This chapter is an effort to understand the effects of online news tabloidization on credibility. The study will examine how readers evaluate the credibility of stories written with a tabloidized format compared to how they rate stories written with a more traditional journalistic style. A more traditional reporter's story would stick to the facts and get to the point of the story, whereas a tabloidized story might include sleazy wording or unnecessary intimate details designed to grab the reader's attention rather than inform him or her. In addition, the researchers will consider whether tabloidization is more accepted in certain types of stories, such as feature pieces, as compared to hard news stories. We predict that participants will report a higher level of enjoyment of tabloidized content than non-tabloidized content.

The study also asks how the media should respond to tabloidization pressures. In addition to studying participant responses to tabloidized content, this study will apply normative ethical theory to the tabloidization of the media. By using act utilitarianism, the researchers will examine how journalists should address the challenges of the new media climate and whether utilizing tabloidization for media survival is an acceptable ethical practice.

BACKGROUND

Tabloidization can result from competition, technology, and the desire for circulation. News organizations essentially have restructured, rede-

signed, and degraded their content in an effort to survive. Tabloidization can be viewed as a way of appealing to advertisers above other competing interests (Conboy, 2006). The deregulation of the media is one reason that current affairs programs have become increasingly commercialized. The programs have reverted to a hybrid format that is a combination of news and reality television (Baker, 2006). Not all countries are experiencing the same level of tabloidization, however. Research suggests that the increase of democracy in Brazil resulted in a less tabloidized, and less politically affiliated media (Porto, 2007). An increase in media privatization and deregulation in India, on the other hand, has led to more entertainment news and fewer public service-oriented stories (Rao & Johal, 2006).

Signs of tabloidization can be found in some of the earliest mass media (Tulloch, 2000). Scholars have cited several characteristics as signs of tabloidization. It has been described as an increase in entertainment coverage, a decrease in long stories, an increase in shorter stories with illustrations, and an increase in informal language within news stories. Frank Esser (1999) says the concept "implies a 'contamination' of the so-called serious media by adopting the 'tabloid agenda'" (p. 293). Howard Kurtz (1993) argues that tabloidization results in lower journalistic standards, an increase in sleazy tales in place of thoughtful political pieces, and a transition as to what journalists feel audiences need to know about a politician's capabilities for office. An overall increase in visual elements such as photographs and large headlines are another sign of the tabloidization process (Rooney, 2000).

While many news organizations are developing a tabloid style, mainstream news organizations tend to avoid using the term "tabloid". Journalists have cited the complexities of trying to maintain a serious journalism tradition while reverting to shorter, less complex news stories (Rowe, 2011). Although males and females do not acknowledge it to the same degree, audiences say they enjoy

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