

*Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the Present.* By Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy. Peter Lang, Oxford, 2015. 258 pp. ISBN 978-1906165321, £20.00.

First there was Brexit. One aspect of that campaign was the impact of the tabloid press, whose raucous support for the Leave campaign framed debate and gave currency to claims that echoed around social media. The *Daily Mail's* attack on judges who upheld the rights of Parliament as 'Enemies of the People' was one of the most perturbing in the history of British journalism. Then Donald Trump became President of the USA, following a campaign dominated by controversies on Twitter and talk of 'post-truth' politics.

What did the old tabloid 'rust-belt' media have to do with this new world? Their business model is crumbling as advertising migrates online, and monetizing online presence has been a challenge. Even the immensely popular *Daily Mail* website makes little profit. Circulations are half those in the 1950s. But this is why Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy's book is so useful. They explore tabloid meanings and style—dissecting tabloid content over a hundred years with an astute and impartial eye. It is tabloid culture that matters.

The book is timely because the language, rhetoric, and manner of communications in both these elections were queasily familiar. The 'new' insurgent communication model (online, in social media, and in supportive media) was characterized by an exultant disinhibition and gleeful aggression. The emotional patterning of righteous indignation, the blustering certainty, occasional self-pity, belief that there are 'alternative facts', the venomous attack on anyone or any institution that stands in the way of the preferred ideology or person, the hatred of the 'mainstream' media, and occasional sharp brilliance is not 'new'. It is a way of communicating that has been with us for a long time.

The crafty tweet and tabloid headline have much in common—short, punchy, assertive; trampling over accepted rules of discourse; classically raising the spectre of 'us' against 'them'. In this it typically claims to be expressing the interests of the underdog. The willingness to stalk and attack individuals has become routine. Online trolls have learnt lessons from the tabloids. Now this whole emotional, populist, self-righteous manner has migrated downwards to individuals online and upwards to the top of the political system. Conboy and Bingham observe that the sharp, efficient campaigning style of the 'tabloids' has taken over other media. They are wrong: it has gone pandemic.

They explore the 'tabloid century' by examining how a set of themes was covered over the whole period: war, politics, monarchy (which rather conventionally they lump together with celebrity), gender and sexuality, and race. Some of these topics would have seemed strange to the editors in whose papers the headlines and stories appear, for they did not think in these terms. But the themes are well chosen. The real value of the book is to give readers an accessible, balanced, and yet fruity taste of tabloid words, stories, and habits.

At times the tabloids have been constructive campaigners. Politics and public life were transformed by the involvement and understanding generated by the tabloids, in what might be called public service sensationalism. The *Daily*

*Mail* and the *Express* aimed to be 'popular not vulgar' and the *Daily Mirror* 'vulgar but honest'. In 1949 Sylvester Bolam, editor of the *Daily Mirror*, defended 'the sensational presentation of news and views ... as a necessary and valuable service in these days of mass readership and democratic responsibility'; every great problem could be understood by the common man, if he was 'hit hard and often with the facts'. This was the basis for the papers being 'on the side' of their readers' interests, and speaking truth to power as well as sometimes uncomfortable truth to the public. The campaign to indict the killers of Stephen Lawrence was led by the *Daily Mail*.

Then take the complex and intriguing history of sex and gender. The British are famously hypocritical. They expect others to behave in public differently from how they themselves behave and buy lots of newspapers when they fail. Nevertheless, there have been huge shifts in what is seen as errant. Changes in the law, and in women's economic role, have radically reshaped how sexuality and marriage have been seen over the century. What used to 'shock' is the new normal. Yet how, why, and what shifted the tabloids from their blanket hostility to homosexuality to their acceptance of it remains a mystery. Perhaps they were just following wider change in a sense of propriety. Perhaps it was generational.

However, the book also demonstrates the role of business concerns. The authors point out that the changes 'that characterised the celebrity coverage of the 1980s were rooted in new editorial approaches to risk'. The model mutated from stories that people *did* want to tell (for money) to stories people *did not want* to tell (revealed for money paid to others). This led to wholesale phone hacking, the systematic invasion of people's lives, and a sense of impunity among tabloid editors and owners.

Then there is "Page 3". 'Pin ups', said the *Sun*, were liberated young women who gloried in their glorious selves. When the MP Clare Short pointed out that the girls were getting younger and their bodies more abnormal, she was reviled. Yet as magazines like *Loaded* and *Nuts* became popular, they made tabloids' use of sex look old fashioned, and the overwhelming availability of pornography on the Internet left tabloids struggling.

The book shows how complex and contradictory the tabloids were. It was the tabloids that took over the advice columns that had started in women's magazines and made them mainstream, helpful, and progressive. The pioneering Marjorie Proops in the *Daily Mirror* was humane, wise, and talked about sex as a skilled, communicative, and enhancing part of life. She wanted people to be better at it. Shirley Conran remade the women's pages of the *Mail* in favour of working women, and the *Sun* was unapologetic about 'providing entertainment, information and guidance for a young sexually active audience'. These were advances given real power by the reach and sensitivity of the tabloids.

The powerful advantage of the thematic approach is that it reveals striking similarities over time. There is a 'tabloid' universe with constant responses and a well-rehearsed language. So the authors argue that the 'default position of the popular press during wartime was certainly to try to unite the national community around a patriotic vision of resolution, togetherness and virtue—in opposition to a demonised and caricatured enemy'. But this method can also

mean that differences of meaning and context are elided. Each 'war' is a particular event; the differences matter more than the similarities. Thus the authors argue that the newspaper coverage of government and military authorities in World War II was 'less critical' than during World War I, 'not least because Churchill seemed a more vigorous and inspiring war leader than Asquith'. This seems too easy a judgement. Although there was much moral and organizational mud to be slung at the leaders in World War II, it was a different kind of struggle, under a different kind of government, with different kinds of risk for the public. The real divide is not picked up—between total wars for national survival and the smaller 'voluntary' interventions which have succeeded them.

The book is, however, outstanding on the ways in which all of this colourful cultural meaning is embedded in commercial realities. As well-resourced, reliable, and trustworthy public service broadcast news on the BBC and ITN came to dominate consumption, the tabloids responded by 'diverging from rather than imitating the impartiality of broadcasting'. Pushed into gaps in the market, the *Sun* in particular adroitly moved sideways into celebrities, sex, and entertainment, 'balancing political aggression with cheeky humour'.

Politically the tabloids have called the shots for a long time. The *Daily Mail's* support for fascism in the 1930s was sustained and personal. More recently, the laying waste of Neil Kinnock ('"Why I'm backing Kinnock" by Stalin' was one *Sun* headline) led to Tony Blair's sound bites designed to capture the tabloid agenda.

The authors appear to think that the Leveson inquiry damaged the tabloids and that Rupert Murdoch and News International were weakened by the hacking scandals. They argue that 'The tabloid century ushered in by a triumphant Alfred Harmsworth, in 1901, was coming to an ignominious end'. But this is not the case. This fascinating book already feels of a past when tabloids could be held at a kind of academic arm's length: a time when it was possible to think of the British people as defined by what former MP Tony Wright called a 'mustn't grumble, undemonstrative decency and kindness'.

Perhaps the British people still are those things—but do not have a vehicle to say them with. The tabloids may be withering, but their emotional legacy has grown. This book is important because it anatomizes the tabloidization of feelings.

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