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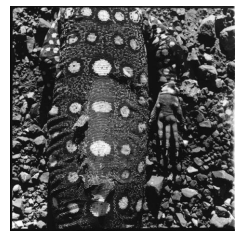

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Tabloidization, journalism and the possibility of critique

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ABSTRACT ● This article responds to what is regarded as a widespread critique of the phenomenon of tabloidization in television news and current affairs. Arguing that this is a phenomenon which cultural studies has found difficulty in critiquing – at least partly due to cultural studies' populist heritage – this article sets out to suggest what kind of role cultural criticism should play in the analysis of contemporary television news and current affairs programming. ●

KEYWORDS ● cultural critique ● journalism ● news and current affairs ● tabloidization

1. Tabloidization and cultural studies

The prevailing definitions of what counts as news and current affairs in the print and broadcast media have been changing for some time now. At least in the UK, the USA, and Australia (the countries where I have some recent experience), there has been a shift away from politics and towards crime, away from the daily news agenda and towards editorially generated items promoted days in advance, away from information-based treatments of social issues and towards entertaining stories on lifestyles or celebrities, and an overwhelming investment in the power of the visual, in the news as an entertaining spectacle. Within the news media generally, the pressure to compete has increased as governments adopt more 'market-friendly' regulatory regimes and as the media industries internationalize. The production

of news and current affairs has responded to this pressure by reordering principles of selection, composition and representation. The consequent reconstruction of the media's relations to its audiences, to institutional politics, and to commerce has interested more than the academy. Successful television sitcoms (the USA's *Murphy Brown*, the UK's *Drop the Dead Donkey*, Canada's *The Newsroom* and Australia's *Frontline*) depend upon public recognition of, and liberal concern about, shifts in contemporary practice in news and current affairs on television.

It has become customary to use the term 'tabloidization' to describe these shifts. As a phenomenon, tabloidization is most definitively located in sections of the British daily press but the term is often extended to refer to a broad range of television formats as well. In the US it includes muck-raking current affairs programs such as *A Current Affair*, 'real TV' programs such as *Cops,* and afternoon talk shows such as *Oprah* and *Ricki Lake*. By its critics, tabloidization is usually considered to sacrifice information for entertainment, accuracy for sensation, and to employ tactics of representation which entrap and exploit its subjects (the hidden camera, the reconstruction, the surprise talk-show guests). What are considered to be among its constitutive discourses range from the explicitly playful or self-conscious (the staged family conflicts, for instance, set up in *Ricki Lake*) to the self-important *gravitas* of the journalist exposing an issue of 'public interest' (a politician's sex life, for instance). While cultural studies has had quite a lot to say about the formats which employ the first and more benign of these discursive formations in order to celebrate its role in expanding the range of program genres and multiplying the social identities available through the media, it has been less comfortable addressing the end of the spectrum represented by the second group of discourses.

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. Investigations of how ideologies worked through the media – the staple diet for the first decade of cultural studies – became predictable and unfashionable as cultural studies interested itself in more complex negotiations between readers and texts, and in the imbrication of such negotiations within the structures and practices of everyday life. Consequently, perhaps, at least one aspect of tabloidization – the specific performance of that which describes itself as 'journalism' – demands more scrutiny than it currently gets from cultural studies.

Concern about tabloidization is a routine topic for media commentators and pundits of all political persuasions. Customarily, tabloidization is framed as a broad-based cultural movement, most visible in certain media forms, which is made possible by the increasing commercialization of modern life and a corresponding decline in 'traditional values'. While this would suggest that the concept of tabloidization expresses a conservative

hostility to popular culture as a domain, it must be said that it also generates concern on the political left and among many with a strong professional interest in the media and popular culture. Todd Gitlin, for example, criticizes 'the trivialization of public affairs, the usurpation of public discourse by soap opera, the apparent breakdown of mechanisms for forming a public will and making it effective'. For him, 'trivialization – infotainment and the like – works against the principled right and left alike. The incoherence of news, the fragmentation of vision, the personalization of public space militates against all consistent political mobilization' (1997: 35). While he rejects Chomsky and Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* as paranoid and defeatist, Gitlin is equally gloomy about the progressive potential of Western civilization as a whole; we need to admit, he says,

> the possibility that there is a popular will to be distracted and deceived, a will not to know – that is, not to know whatever might jolt one's routines – and that this passion for illusion was integral to Western civilization long before giant corporations became the centres of news and entertainment. (1997: 36)

Not surprisingly, cultural studies greets such claims with circumspection. Jim McGuigan's critique of the British tabloid newspaper, the *Sun*, in *Cultural Populism* is probably among the first explicitly, if carefully, to suggest that there might be some aspects of this sort of concern which cultural studies should consider. Given cultural studies' default investment in the popular, McGuigan asked, how does it account for such reactionary forms of populism as the *Sun*? (1992: 174). Of course, cultural studies never was as populist (nor the *Sun* as uncomplicatedly reactionary) as McGuigan's question suggested, nor should it be the only disciplinary location where close scrutiny of the politics and ethics of the media might be located. It is striking, however, that where cultural studies has addressed the kinds of concern Gitlin raises, it has most customarily been to express suspicion about such critiques and the interests they are likely to serve. Catharine Lumby, writing in Australia but building on her experience of television in the US, places it as a form of conservative panic:

> In the past decade, every conceivable media format, from prime-time news bulletins and current affairs programs to traditional women's magazines seems to have developed a taste for the tabloid. It's a trend which has sparked heated debate in Australia and the United States. Critics across the political spectrum argue the tabloid invasion is responsible for everything from voter apathy to family breakdown. (1997: 117)

Lumby suggests that such criticisms are aimed at protecting traditional definitions of what matters in 'public affairs' – business, parliamentary politics, economics, the law and so on. In response, she argues that it is time such agendas were challenged by the private, the domestic – above all, by the

feminine. For Catharine Lumby, tabloid news and the afternoon chat shows such as *Oprah* and *Ricki Lake* are markers of an expansion in the range of issues and voices becoming audible through the media:

> The tabloid trend has put 'private' issues on the nightly televisual map, from domestic violence and child abuse, to relationships, addiction, eating disorders, parenting problems and sexuality. It blurs the boundaries between women's stuff and traditional public policy matters. And by juxtaposing the usual serious news with the tabloid – putting the public health problem of drug abuse up against personal battles with addiction, for instance – it connects the public and private spheres in an intuitive way that feminists have long agitated for at the public policy level. (1997: 117–18)

A substantial body of writing about the US talk shows supports Lumby's argument, in principle if not always in practice, suggesting that they offer a new form of subjectivity and agency for an otherwise silenced section of the community. Gloria-Jean Masciarotte argues that any individual who falls into one of the categories of 'women, working or lower class, and people of color', are 'read under/by the system of interventionist state organisation as a mass subject instead of as a middle-class, individuated subject'. Oprah Winfrey 'gives voices to this mass subject, showing the struggle, the necessary resistance, the catch on the level of the everyday' (Masciarotte, 1991: 103). According to such accounts, tabloid television has significant progressive potential. However, we need to be aware of the limitations of the identification between textual forms and the social groups deemed to constitute their audiences. John Frow finds a problem with 'the forms of unity and identity ascribed to social groups' in cultural studies arguments 'with [their] habitual reliance on a sociological relativism':

> At the limit, if aesthetic texts and practices of knowledge are closely tied to shared forms of life, and if their force is purely relative to these forms, then they are deprived of all except the most limited cognitive power – since they have no hold over any other domain. There is no scope for challenging the givenness of a cultural order: if every social group, every valuing community or subculture produces only those texts that express and validate its way of life, there is no *strong* ground from which to argue for alternative forms of textuality or indeed alternative ways of life. (1995: 142–3)

Although I have not found evidence of this in the accounts of talk shows to which I have referred, Frow worries that the result of such an identification between textual forms and social groups as 'authors' or audiences has to be a kind of political quietism, as well as a misunderstanding of the potential porousness both of texts and of the boundaries of the communities held to produce and consume them.

To take up the second of Frow's worries, the point of many of these textual forms – both for their audiences and their critics – seems to reside precisely in their capacity to affect those outside the audience group. For some, the fact that what Oprah's guests have to say, and the style in which they say it, irritates or offends other taste formations is further evidence of the show's potential progressiveness. As Jane Shattuc says in her discussion of the guests who appear on the *Ricki Lake* show, 'these people are out of control – their control' (1998: 222). While she is alert to the highly contradictory politics of such shows and of their likely relation to their audiences, Shattuc ultimately defends the talk shows as an 'important venue for average people to debate social issues that affect their everyday lives' and regards much of the media concern about their outrageousness as evidence of the difficulty experienced by the American middle class when forced to deal with the 'impolite and impolitic behaviour of its underclass'. In the case of middle-class criticism of Ricki Lake, she warns, we need to consider 'how our notions of "good taste" mask power and stop debate' (1998: 224).

It has to be admitted that many of the concerns expressed about the influence of tabloidization are grounded in a conventional and long-standing hostility to popular culture itself. Cultural studies has a rich tradition of revealing and challenging this position. John Hartley's *Popular Reality* repeatedly attacks the class- and gender-based binarism which places information against entertainment, hard news against soft news, the public sphere against private lifestyles, and public service media against the commercial media. As Hartley says, such binarism has a long history as 'the "common sense" in the media industry and among policy-makers, academics and listeners to breakfast radio', but that 'doesn't make [it] any the less prejudicial as a mental map of modern media':

> Not only do such binaries reinforce a systematic bias against popular, screen and commercial media, but they also tend to reinforce other prejudices, principally the one which considers many of the [denigrated terms in the opposition] as 'women's issues', with the (silent but inescapable) implication that serious politics and the public sphere is men's stuff. (1996: 27)

Point taken, but that is not the end of the matter – either for Hartley's *Popular Reality* or for my concerns in this article. Masked by this expression of prejudice are certain aspects specific to the performance of journalism which are not addressed adequately either by the moral panic over 'tabloidization' or by its being named, no matter how justifiably, as elitist and patriarchal. To give some sense of how these aspects are being addressed at present I will briefly review the contrasting approaches taken by two books published at the beginning of 1998, Bob Franklin's *Newszak and News Media* and John Langer's *Tabloid Television*.

2. From Newszak to the other news

Newszak and News Media provides, at one level, a history of the news media in Britain – of the kind that students in media or journalism courses need and will use. It is also a polemical account of the 'decline of news' in favour of entertainment which Franklin argues has resulted from changes in the news media's structure, regulation and professional practices:

> Journalism's editorial priorities have changed. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgment has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged to be more 'newsworthy' than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant. (1998: 4)

Franklin appropriates Malcolm Muggeridge's neologism 'Newszak' to describe 'news as a product designed and "processed" for a particular market and delivered in increasingly homogeneous "snippets" which make only modest demands on the audience. Newszak is news converted into entertainment' (p. 5). While he acknowledges that the media have always had to negotiate between the 'potentially conflictual imperatives of providing information that is essential to citizens in a democracy while at the same time entertaining the public', Franklin argues that the current situation is especially worrying because of the conjuncture of a number of distinctive conditions. The shift in favour of entertainment has never, says Franklin, been so pronounced; further, the effect on certain kinds of news (foreign news, parliamentary politics, investigative journalism in general) has been disproportionately negative; its influence has pervaded all media forms to varying degrees; and, finally, it reflects 'an unprecedented congruence of longer-term changes in the financial, organisational and regulatory structures of news media combined with a deregulatory impulse provided by government media policy which will prove resilient to reversal' (p. 6).

Franklin's critique is supported by empirical information which establishes that, given the terms of his argument, there has been a significant shift in the content of news across the media. For example, comparing the UK's *News at Ten* in 1990 and 1995, he finds that coverage of international news declined from 43 percent of the bulletin's content in 1990 to 15 percent in 1995; sports and entertainment stories increased from 8.5 percent to 17 percent; and story length went from an average of 2 minutes 10 seconds to 1 minute 45 seconds. The book argues that research comparing BBC with ITN news bulletins provides evidence of a move 'downmarket'; that is, in all the key indicators (number of news items, duration of each item, range

of subject areas and so on), the trend was towards less detail, less background, less politics, and more sport, entertainment and consumer items. Franklin notes changes in formats and representational strategies as well – such as the increasing use of the 'live two-way' interview, the intensive cultivation of star presenters, and the reliance on eye-catching visuals. He nominates some broad, structural determinants for the trends he outlines. Increased competition, a direct result of government policy on (for instance) cross-media ownership; developments in print and broadcast technologies; and changes in the structure and practice of journalism as a profession are all implicated.[1]

While the empirical data Franklin cites certainly supports his case, his argument is inflected with a discourse of moralism which seems to blind him to the cultural values implicit in many of his judgements. For instance, the proposition that one might have objective indicators for a category as saturated with taste implications as 'downmarket' must alert the reader to those aspects of Franklin's position which fall prey to the elitism Hartley claims is endemic to such critiques. The opening paragraph of the book, in fact, offers us an example of journalism in decline which is highly debatable:

> This is how ITN (Independent Television News) anchor John Suchet introduced the filmed report of the funeral of James Bulger for the News at 5.45: 'Hello. The teddy bears he loved so much sat side by side in church today. The day of the funeral of James Bulger. The toys were propped up on a seat that had been made specially for James by his father. It was placed a few inches from James's coffin'. (The accompanying camera shot moves to inside the church and focuses in close-up on the two teddy bears.) It seems unthinkable that this could be the transcript of a genuine news bulletin rather than some grotesque parody of the cynical antics of the fictional journalist Damien Day from the satirical television series *Drop the Dead Donkey*. (Franklin, 1998: 4)

Franklin claims that such exploitation of 'personal tragedy for public spectacle' would have been 'unthinkable even a decade ago' but it does not seem to me significantly different from, say, the representation of JFK's children during television coverage of his funeral more than 30 years ago. And while it may well be tasteless to some, it does not strike me as an example of any of the practices I would most want to criticize in contemporary journalism. Here and elsewhere in this powerfully written book, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Franklin's critique is motivated as much by considerations of taste as by professional principle. Hence, he does lay himself open to being identified with those whom John Langer attacks in his *Tabloid Television: Popular Journalism and the 'Other' News*: the exponents of what Langer, like Lumby, sees as a standard conservative 'lament' about the state of the popular media.

Most treatments of journalism ignore the kind of news upon which

Langer's analysis is focused;[2] what Langer calls 'the other news' includes precisely the stories (human interest, disasters, lifestyle, celebrities) which are the object of Franklin's criticism. Langer thinks of such criticism as a genre, 'the lament for television journalism', and describes it as an anachronistic misrecognition of what actually occurs (has always occurred) on the news. Pragmatically, he concludes that 'the lament' is also probably futile, inasmuch as while 'the voices that make up the lament have been wide ranging and insistent, . . . broadcasters . . . have not been sufficiently remorseful to change their practices, nor apparently have audiences felt enough shame to avert their eyes or demand alternatives' (Langer, 1998: 4). As he says, the incidence of such forms of journalism is increasing worldwide, even producing 'spin-off' programming like *Rescue 911*, *Cops*, *Hard Copy*, *Police, Camera, Action*, and so on. The case does not rest upon a populist defence of whatever forms attract a mass audience; Langer's concern is with the inaccuracy of the understandings of news which lie behind 'the lament'. For example, Langer is critical of the lament's implicit assumption that journalism is 'primarily about the transmission of information which can be used by a citizenry to accumulate knowledge and engage in responsible judgements':

> Yet, relying on the 'informational model' to explain television news and its unworthy tendencies may fail to recognise that in the daily recurrence and recognizable features of such programming viewer linkages to the news and the larger world it represents may be more ritualistic, symbolic and possibly mythic than informational, and in this sense television news might better be conceptualized as a 'form of cultural discourse' . . . (p. 5)

Langer remains sympathetic to what he sees as the legitimate objectives of the lament, an attempt 'to imbue journalism with a more "responsible" attitude'. But he does suggest that a critical project needs to be based on a more sophisticated understanding of what news does than is possible by simply 'dumping all the disreputable elements together':

> This study begins where the lament in a sense ends. It argues that this purportedly insignificant news has to be approached and understood in exactly the opposite ways, and precisely for the reasons the lament would wish it to go – its longevity, its palpable and influential presence, its use of a logic based less on models of information transfer than on structures of sentiment and sensation, its commitment to story-telling, its formulaic qualities as well as its search for visual impact are all key features which provide the grounds for assessing this disreputable news from an analytical perspective rather than through mere prescription. (p. 6)

What emerges from this, according to Langer, is no longer a view of journalistic practice as a 'problem' requiring prescriptive interventions; rather,

we have a 'critical project' interested in this same practice as a 'site' from which, following Stuart Hall, 'certain "ideological work" can be accomplished' (Langer, 1998: 6).

This is a distinctive formulation which places 'the other news' at the forefront of an explanation of the social function of news. Langer sets out to explain the 'ideological work' accomplished by broadcast journalism's 'trivialities' through close analysis of their form as narrative, as ideology, even as metaphysics. While the argument steadily turns towards the cultural function of these formats for their audiences, the book is unusual in these days when the recuperation of disreputable media formats tends to be dominated by arguments about access and agency. Far from offering this kind of account, Langer turns out to be a bit of an unreconstructed structuralist; hence the use of structuralist narratology and a roughly Althusserian model of ideology in the analyses he elaborates later in the book. It is clear that Langer is not interested in recuperating these forms for their own sake; rather he wants them to be included in any critical account of contemporary journalism because they are there and must be performing functions we would do well to understand.

Most interestingly, Langer ties the other news into the kind of arguments about the licensing of hitherto subordinated formations of cultural identity that have marked the defence of the shifts in content and address usually located under the heading of tabloidization. Although elaborated specifically in relation to such program formats as *Candid Camera*, his argument is also relevant to the emphasis on the private, the domestic, the ordinary and the everyday which permeates the programming form he has been discussing throughout the book:

> At a time when the traditional social methodologies for the confirming of identity and prestige are perceived to no longer work or to remain inaccessible, other sites of social validation and identity affirmation come into play. I want to suggest that the possibility of an appearance on television may be one of those newly constituted sites, that the 'other news' and now more expansively reality television offer 'videated' spaces where these appearances can regularly occur, and that, in a culture where an 'identity principle' is increasingly 'ratified by publicity', these sites become significantly more important for identity validation and the confirmation of prestige when the more traditional and conventional mechanisms are perceived to have broken down or failed completely. (Langer, 1998: 169)

Tabloid Television is idiosyncratic in terms of its theoretical positioning but it presents a serious challenge to the account presented in Franklin's book if only in that it demonstrates what is lost by the dismissal of so much of contemporary news production as an irresponsible aberration or a failure of taste. Langer is also right, in my view, to suggest we look for explanations of the appeal of the other news which are broader than those accessible

through an enclosed debate about the ethics of journalism. This has to do with more than journalism – but I will return to that later.

Both books, however, have their limitations. As I suggested earlier, the call for a more responsible media in *Newszak and News Media* is compromised by the suspicion that it is not interested in distinguishing between failures of taste and the transgression of an appropriate ethical standard. The problem with Langer's book – both in general and as an answer to Franklin's – is that the model of tabloidization with which it works is entirely benign. Just as it is easier to accept the defence of the US talk shows when they are based on a discussion of the richly identificatory world of *Oprah* rather than the spectacle of exposure and abjection so often presented by Ricki Lake (although it has to be said, Jane Shattuc does a pretty convincing job on the latter), it is not hard to accept Langer's argument when he is dealing with the 'trivial' or the domestic, the playful or the iconoclastic, the 'human' or the sentimental. What his argument does not address at all is the predatory side of the tabloid trend in news and current affairs journalism: the relentless intrusiveness of the paparazzi, the bullying foot-in-the-door reporter who uses media exposure as a weapon and as a genre of performance, the lynch-mob mentality of so-called 'attack journalism', or the sleazy self-righteousness of the 'hidden camera' stories. It is in precisely these areas, where the issues are those of power rather than of taste or news values or even of ethics, that 'the lament' may have most cogency and Langer's response is most inadequate.

3. The category of 'tabloidization'

That said, it has to be acknowledged that one of the difficulties in engaging with what are actually highly specific media forms and practices lies in the nature of the 'lament' about tabloidization. Given its compatibility with elitist and conservative readings of popular culture, aligning oneself in agreement with any one of its criticisms is to risk being aligned with the whole agenda. The problem is compounded by the exorbitant comprehensiveness of that agenda. As Lumby implies, the phenomenon of 'tabloidization' has become implausibly inclusive; it incorporates lifestyle programming, advice columns in newspapers, afternoon talk shows, viewer video formats, hidden camera journalism, gossip magazines, and much more, into a miscellany of symptoms for a cultural malaise. Collecting such a heterogeneity of media products under the heading of 'tabloidization' forces one to respond indiscriminately or, in the case of formats not in any way related to journalism, inappropriately and inaccurately. Some of these forms are legitimately seen within the history of journalism and are affected by changes in format, address and content that are specific, say, to the tabloid press. Nevertheless, to regard them as the only significant shift to occur within journalism over

the current period is simply misleading. In Australia, for instance, while the last decade has seen the infiltration of tabloid strategies into television news and current affairs it has also seen the disappearance of the vast majority of metropolitan tabloid newspapers and the establishment of the 'quality' end of the newspaper market as the best prospect for sales growth. Further, over the same period, Australian television significantly increased its daily news coverage, with the addition of a late news bulletin of up to 30 minutes which has substantially increased the number of sets in use in the timeslot, and the development of a one-hour early morning news program by Channel 9, the market leader.

Some pet targets of the lament have no place in the argument at all; they simply belong to a list of those things the complainant finds offensive about contemporary popular culture. It doesn't much help our understanding of, say, *Oprah* to see it as representative of the cult of the personality and the trivialization of news values held to be consequences of tabloidization. It is more productive to see *Oprah*'s appeal in the way feminism has tended to do, as a program which accesses modes of expression identified with sections of the community hitherto virtually unrepresented in the media – except as victims in the news. *Oprah*'s success probably needs to be tied to a larger, different, cultural shift in the content and function of television visible in network primetime through formats which deal with personal relationships, talk, lifestyles, celebrities and entertainment. As the pattern of programming reveals the effects of this shift towards the private, the domestic and the feminine, it is likely that television is entering a new phase in its participation in community debates and in the formation of identities.

It is worth acknowledging that those shifts in programming usually criticized as the consequence of tabloidization can also be explained as the consequence of deliberate industrial strategies adopted to resist the challenge represented by Pay TV and the declining share of the audience enjoyed by broadcast television. Australian commercial television spokesman Tony Branigan has described the Australian context in a way that must have its analogies in other markets:

> It is worth remembering that the shadow of Pay TV has hung over television since the early 1980s, and some of these program innovations were conceived with future competition from Pay TV at least partly in mind. Since the mid-1980s, what has sometimes been called do-it-yourself Pay TV – home video – has also coloured program decisions. The threat to movie ratings is a major reason why commercial television has actively explored programming that is relatively 'Pay-TV proof', such as infotainment. Theatrical movies make up almost 25 per cent of prime-time hours and ratings on Australian commercial television. By contrast, they account for well under 10 per cent of prime time hours on US network television. (1998: 56)

As I said earlier, much of this is not just about journalism.

But there is one aspect that is – and this takes me back to the problems I raised at the beginning of this article. What I described as 'the performance of journalism' which should receive more scrutiny than it has is not marked by a specific content – 'downmarket' or otherwise. Rather, it is marked by a mode of operation that is the consequence of the programs' evident confidence in their power to control representation and their readiness to exercise that power in the interests of the program. I don't see this mode of operation as isolated, but it would be wrong to see it as simply a component within the whole package of tabloidization. So I wish to jettison the category of tabloidization 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. To illustrate what I have in mind, let me provide an example from the leading current affairs television program in Australia, *A Current Affair*.

4. The case of the Paxtons

In March 1996, *A Current Affair* ran a story on the destructive effects of long-term youth unemployment. In a relatively sympathetic piece three unemployed Melbourne teenagers and their mother, the Paxton family, were interviewed in their home; one of the three teenagers was shown, stagily, getting out of bed at 11 in the morning, a victim of the apathy produced by the lack of job prospects. A follow-up story set out to 'do something for these kids'. They were flown to a tourist resort in Northern Queensland, 3000 km from Melbourne. Shane and Mark were offered labouring jobs while their sister Bindy was offered a job as a waitress in the resort restaurant. There was a hitch, though. The resort had a policy which required their employees to cut their hair short, something the boys refused to do. Stuck with the prospect of moving there alone to work as a waitress, Bindy (aged 16 at the time) mumbled something about disliking the colour of the uniform and declined her offer too. Dumping the heartwarming 'we'll fix it' story without missing a beat, *ACA* turned it into an indignant teenage-dole-bludgers story. The three were shown flying into the Whitsunday Islands, riding on a catamaran, taking in the beach, and then scandalizing the parents of Australia by turning down the job offer of a lifetime.

All hell broke loose. The network's phones ran so hot with outrage that *ACA* was able to cover the public reaction to their story on the following night. The Paxtons' neighbours were offered the chance to fire off some *vox pop* vitriol, the Premier of the State of Victoria deplored them, even the Prime Minister (being interviewed on the same show to talk about his newly elected government) was happy to agree that the Paxtons' actions were 'totally unacceptable'. The ratings went through the roof so it didn't

stop there. *ACA* demonized the family for six consecutive nights. Only in one story (of the total of eight) did *ACA* provide air time to anybody prepared to defend the family: this was someone from the Anti-Discrimination Commission who pointed out, to no effect, that it was in fact illegal to require anyone to cut their hair in order to gain employment unless it was an issue of health or safety. Eventually the family realized they were never going to get their side of the story heard and refused any further interviews. 'We don't want to be in it anymore', Mrs Paxton said, in a choice of phrase that indicates something about how she was encouraged to be 'in it' in the first place.

Elsewhere in the media, some were smelling a rat. The family maintained that they had been set up and that *ACA* knew they would refuse jobs which required cutting their hair. Inquiries at the resort indicated that a barber's appointment had been booked for the boys before they arrived. Media commentators Philip Adams and Stuart Littlemore attacked the program, its presenter (Ray Martin) and the reporter (Mike Munro), for manipulating vulnerable teenagers and cynically exploiting the results. Littlemore, the host of a media watchdog program on the public service network, the ABC, screened out-takes of the original interview which showed Shane Paxton telling Mike Munro that he would not cut his hair to get a job. It was also suggested that the whole affair was a publicity stunt for the resort, which was in financial trouble (it was placed in receivership six months later). In his column in the national daily, *The Australian*, under the headline 'Bend over Ray', Philip Adams suggested just where he would like to stick Ray Martin's recent Gold Logie Award (for being voted the most popular television personality by the readers of *TV Week*). A talkback radio announcer in Melbourne came out in support of Shane Paxton, attacked *ACA* and the Nine network (a key advertiser with his station) and promptly lost his job.

How did the Paxtons benefit from their decision to allow the leading national current affairs program to represent their point of view on the difficulties they experienced in dealing with long-term unemployment? They were spat upon in the street, pilloried in the press, and received death threats. In a crowning irony, the dole office cut off their unemployment payments because they had refused a legitimate offer of work. Eventually, inevitably, Shane's notoriety landed him a job in the media – as a youth affairs spokesperson for an *ACA* competitor – but the novelty soon wore off for both parties to the arrangement. Inevitably, too, the November 1996 issue of *Australian Playboy* featured a topless pictorial of Bindy Paxton alongside a defiant interview expressing her anger and resentment at *ACA*'s treatment. A story which may have started out intending to help the audience understand the corrosive effect of unemployment upon young people was reframed in response to the ratings so that it wound up hugely victimizing a family who were already at risk, and who were unable effectively to defend themselves.

This is not the worst instance of victimization with which *ACA* has been associated. In 1997, they chose an immigrant video repairman, Benny Mendoza, about whom there had never been a complaint, as the subject of a hidden camera story. They fed him a number of VCRs for repair, secretly filmed the repairs he carried out and compared them with the invoice presented after the job. In several instances the invoices and the film did not match, suggesting he was trying to con his clients. Confronted with the evidence on camera, Mendoza, like the Paxtons, was unable to defend himself. His English was extremely poor and his understanding of what was happening to him limited. It was sufficient in one respect, however. Convinced of his incapacity to defend himself against *ACA*, he committed suicide.

What can we say about such stories? What kinds of critique do they provoke? The assistance Franklin's and Langer's discussions of contemporary journalism can offer me is limited: either a detailing of the justification for liberal anger at 'the decline of journalism' or an acknowledgement of a broadened definition of news which nevertheless stops short of thinking how specific instances may enact a specific politics. Crucially, neither account can help me understand why so many people chose to watch the Paxtons' humiliation, avidly, night after night. Cultural studies has to be the place where such questions can be addressed – but it remains slightly uncomfortable about them. There may be good historical reasons for this. Cultural studies learnt during the 1970s that it was not good enough to think of popular audiences as 'cultural dopes', and so perhaps we became reluctant to look at programming that tempted us towards such an explanation. In many cases, this may have accorded with our personal preferences and enabled us to explore, along the way, our enthusiasms for certain popular cultural forms. As a result, cultural studies knows a lot about the appeal of soap opera, game shows, drama series, and music video, but there are still very few elaborated explanations for the success of reactionary and/or populist media products: newspapers like the British *Sun*, men's magazines like the Australian *Ralph*, sitcoms like *Men Behaving Badly*, the abusive talk shows hosted by Rush Limbaugh, or the 'shock-jocks' on talkback radio in the US and Australia. By and large, while noting their significance (and, I admit, with some notable exceptions), cultural studies has preferred not to deal with them in any detail and has taken their offensiveness, more or less, as read.

The word 'offensiveness' is a crucial one here. A common characteristic of media criticism – within the media itself and within the academy – is to elide the connection between cultural politics and taste. Jane Shattuc, in the discussion of Ricki Lake referred to earlier, regards certain forms of media criticism as an attempt to bully the popular audience into adopting more middle-class standards of taste – standards which denigrate, repress and subordinate those 'regimes of value'[3] identified with less powerful sections

of the community. Those whose favourite programs are among the targets of such critiques are not unaware of this; hence their adoption of a mode of consumption which does not so much fail to perform in ways that fit with the tastes of 'the knowledge class' as deliberately set out to offend them.

John Frow has reminded us that it is necessary to recognize the direct connection between the interests of specific groups and the regimes of value within which their consumption of popular culture is organized. (Included here are the interests and tastes of the 'knowledge class' itself, to which those who work in cultural studies belong.) Frow (1995: 156–9) draws on the work of Andrew Ross to explore the need to understand the politics behind specific regimes of value from the point of origin, not just through the lens of a 'knowledge class' critique. Ross, in *No Respect*, frames the 'offensiveness' of popular culture as a *deliberate* affront to elite standards and to the intellectuals who defend them:

> Intellectuals today are unlikely to recognize . . . what is fully at stake in the new politics of knowledge if they fail to understand why so many cultural forms, devoted to horror and porn, and steeped in chauvinism and other bad attitudes, draw their popular appeal from expressions of disrespect for the lessons of educated taste. The sexism, racism, and militarism that pervades these genres is never expressed in a pure form (whatever that might be); it is articulated through and alongside social resentments born of subordination and exclusion. A politics that only preaches about the sexism, racism, and militarism while neglecting to rearticulate the popular, resistant appeal of the disrespect will not be a popular politics and will lose ground in any contest with the authoritarian populist languages that we have experienced under Reaganism and Thatcherism. (1989: 231)

The difficulty of using this valuable insight as a means of framing a mode of critique for popular culture, though, emerges when Frow goes on to ask how should intellectuals learn to 'engage' with popular culture:

> On the one hand, this appeal assumes . . . that the power of the knowledge class is in some sense the dominant social power, and it thereby both underplays the dominant role of capital (intellectuals may run the schools and the mass media, but they do not own them), and accepts what may be a scapegoating of intellectuals. At the same time, Ross offers no indications of how, or from what political position, such an 'engagement' might be possible without a repetition of that imaginary identification in which intellectuals have constructed 'the popular' as a fantasy of otherness. There are clear limits to the extent to which it is possible for intellectuals to associate themselves with anti-intellectualism; and there are limits to how far they can or should suspend their critique of, for example, racism, sexism, and militarism. By the same token, Ross begs the question of bad faith that might be involved in

> intellectuals identifying with a position that directly attacks their own status and activity, including that very act of identification. (Frow, 1995: 158)

This problem is not solved by the end of Frow's book either – as he says, it is a dilemma 'we should not seek to resolve too quickly' (p. 159) – although his elaboration of the notion of regimes of value substantially clarifies what the problem is. However, Ross's appeal – for all its inconclusiveness – does help resituate the cultural politics of scandalous popular texts by refusing to accept that they can be dealt with by way of any universalizing standard of taste.

What continues to be puzzling about popular media texts such as the *ACA* stories is their victimizing of those who are already marginalized or dispossessed – already, that is, members of those groups Ross would see as the authors of, indeed beneficiaries of, a populist 'disrespect'. Milliband argued that the resentment produced by class subordination, expressed so clearly in relations to work and welfare, produces a search for victims – in the media and elsewhere – that is actively 'desubordinating': 'De-subordination means that people who find themselves in subordinate positions and notably the people who work in factories, mines, offices, shops, schools, hospitals and so on do what they can to mitigate, resist and transform the conditions of their subordination' (1978: 402). McGuigan revives this idea by proposing a connection between scandalous popular pleasures and a politics of the resentful and dispossessed in his description of the *Sun* as 'symptomatic and contributory to a political culture in which popular pleasure is routinely articulated through oppressive ideologies that operate in fertile chauvinistic ground' (1992: 184). In such arguments, a corrosive populism – expressed as a deliberate affront to decorum and taste – is motivated by the operation of a subordinated politics. This is not the resistant politics of the kind so affectionately discovered by the active reader arguments of the 1980s, indeed it would be dangerous to identify it in advance with any specific orientation, but it is a politics nevertheless.

Such accounts help us think about the appeal of what I have called the predatory strategies of contemporary television journalism. They also help to resituate television journalism by disarticulating it from the ethically driven journalism-as-a pillar-of-democracy definition implied by Franklin's approach, and emphasizing instead Langer's view of journalism as 'a form of cultural discourse'. As a form of cultural discourse, the predatory strategies of television journalism – the self-interested mode of operation I was talking about earlier – are actually legitimated, rather than undermined, by the old-fashioned view of journalism Franklin supports. The 'information-democratic' definition of the social function of journalism is appropriated by such programs as *ACA* to mask the motives of those dealing with the lives of the public and to plausibly defend journalists' right to use what they can as they see fit. I would not see this as a consequence of 'tabloidization'

but rather of the failure to fully recognize, or alternatively of the capacity to obscure, the implications of journalism's institutional reconciliation with its commercial function as a form of entertainment.

Some of these implications are profound, demanding examination and elaboration. Such an examination does not have to belong to the 'lament for television journalism' Langer attacks so resoundingly in his book, nor should it be an expression of the ingrained class prejudice Hartley attacks in his. By turning its attention to a range of practices and texts which have largely been left to fend for themselves, despite their enormous audiences and despite the frightening incommensurability between their power and that of their victims, cultural studies is returning to some core territory – the critique of contemporary media practice. However, cultural studies has to accept that it cannot do so in the spirit of a relaxed pluralism, dealing only with 'the difference that makes no difference' (Hall, 1993: 362). More challenging is the acknowledgment that this is ultimately an issue of discrimination and cultural value – the hottest potato in the cultural studies kitchen. What has to emerge more clearly in contemporary cultural studies, in response to the kinds of provocations I have described, is a critical practice which explicitly acknowledges that its judgements are derived from cultural sources, from particular regimes of value, in response to a specific deployment of media power; and which refuses the temptation to authorize the value judgements thus made by folding them back into the kind of generalized cultural critique which is usually mounted under the heading of tabloidization.

Notes

1 In regard to the latter, Franklin notes in particular the growth in the size and media influence of the profession of public relations. He quotes the editor of *PR Weekly* as estimating the amount of PR-generated material in the average broadsheet newspaper at 50%, and higher in the tabloids and local press (p. 2). As a result, the profession itself has changed in its orientation: 'this growing army of journalism-competent public-relations specialists and freelances increasingly subordinate [traditional] professional values to the requirements of commercial values or political persuasion' (p. 21).
2 The most obvious exception to this would be Hartley's *Popular Reality*.
3 Here used in the manner adopted by Frow in *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (pp. 144–54), which in turn draws upon its usage by Arjun Appadurai.

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