
'Tabloidization' of News

A Comparative Analysis of Anglo-American and German Press Journalism

■ *Frank Esser*

ABSTRACT

■ 'Tabloidization' is a new, frequently used term equally employed by journalists, media critics and academics to characterize a recent, dubious trend in the mass media. This article sets out to define this diffuse, multidimensional concept and discusses its usefulness for communication research. It emerges that 'tabloidization' can only be analysed adequately with a long-term cross-national design that focuses on quality news media and employs a wide range of empirical measures. This approach is taken here by comparing the press of Britain, Germany and the US, whereas the focus remains on the first two countries. A three-step empirical analysis — based on a definition developed before — demonstrates that journalistic values, media cultures as well as economic and legal conditions are responsible for the degree of 'tabloidization' in a given country. ■

Key Words comparative analysis, Germany, print media, tabloidization, UK

Clarifying a diffuse concept: What does 'tabloidization' of the media mean?

'Tabloidization' is the direct result of commercialized media, most often promoted by the pressures of advertisers to reach large audiences. It began to appear about one hundred years ago when newspapers started

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adding sections emphasizing sports and entertainment, illustrations and sensations that appealed to wider audiences. This process ultimately led to the establishment of tabloid newspapers that produce all news and information with an eye towards its 'saleability' (Wiener, 1988; Picard, 1998).

The term 'tabloid' originally referred to a pharmaceutical trademark for the concentrated form of medicines as pill or tablet. This narcotic tabloid effect and the fact that it is easy to swallow have been readily transferred to the media. In the first part of the 20th century, the term began being used in London to refer to the size of newspapers that could easily be read on trains and buses (Fang, 1997: 103).

The term 'tabloidization', in contrast, is a fairly new word. The dictionary team at Mirriam Webster's found first attestations of this buzz word in American vocabulary in 1991 (Lowe, 1994). Since then, it made quite a career for itself, spreading rapidly into other countries as well. The German word would be *boulevardisierung* of the media. The shortest description of 'tabloidization' is offered by Marvin Kalb, director of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Affairs at Harvard University. In his view it means 'a downgrading of hard news and upgrading of sex, scandal and infotainment' (Kalb, 1997). Whereas the British discussion is mainly confined to the press, the German debate is less intense and mainly restricted to television (Stephenson, 1998; Klein, 1998: 80).

The various concerns voiced around this issue are quite diffuse, however, which indicates that the debate itself is still confused — even in academic circles. The catch-all term 'tabloidization' is readily available for deployment by any commentator who approves or disapproves of certain developments in media or society, as Rowe (1998) points out: some feel it necessary to defend the 'tabloid' on feminist grounds for its insertion of suppressed 'private' experience into public discourse (see, 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 (see, for example, Fiske, 1992) and who abjure the 'unworthy news' (see, for example, Langer, 1992); or, alternatively, to attack it as a sign of the slowing of the socially progressive impulse (see, for example, Pilger, 1998). In other words, the term 'tabloid'/'tabloidization' can function as a multi-purpose metaphor placed in the service of contending, expansive arguments in which rhetoric often overshadows reasoned and reflexive critique (Rowe, 1998).

Any serious scientific discussion of 'tabloidization' must therefore begin with definitions, analytical indicators and conceptualizations. In

that regard, 'tabloidization' can be understood as a micro- or macro-scale process. Taken at the micro-level, it can be viewed as a media phenomenon involving the revision of traditional newspaper and other media formats driven by reader preferences and commercial requirements. On the macro-level, 'tabloidization' can be seen as a social phenomenon both instigating and symbolizing major changes to the constitution of society (signs being, for example, attaching less importance to education and more to political marketing, resulting in an increase in political alienation). The present study prefers a more narrow, focused understanding as given in the first statement. In that context, it means a change in the range of topics being covered (more entertainment, less information), in the form of presentation (fewer longer stories, more shorter ones with pictures and illustrations) and a change in the mode of address (more street talk when addressing readers).

Proposal for a definition

The definition of 'tabloidization' used in the present study is based on Howard Kurtz's book *Media Circus — The Trouble with America's Newspapers* which contains the first in-depth analysis of this process (Kurtz, 1993: 143–7). He describes the 'tabloidization' of the American media as:

- An overall decrease in journalistic standards;
- A decrease in hard news such as politics and economics and an increase in soft news such as sleaze, scandal, sensation and entertainment;
- A general change (or broadening) of the media's definition of what they think the voters need to know to evaluate a person's fitness for public office.¹

This definition contains several implicit elements that also have to be considered if one wants to put this concept to an empirical test:

- 'Tabloidization' is a process, i.e. something which takes place over time. It has therefore to be examined from a long-term perspective.
- 'Tabloidization' means a spill-over of tabloid news values from the popular to the quality press. It implies a 'contamination' of the so-called serious media by adopting the 'tabloid agenda'. Therefore it is not the tabloid press but the quality press that has to be examined.
- 'Tabloidization' is no internationally uniform process. It is likely that studies of different environments will reveal that there are circumstances in which 'tabloidization' proceeds rapidly, and others in which

there seems to be no substantial change. 'Tabloidization' has therefore to be examined with reference to cultural and historical differences between countries.

- 'Tabloidization' is a vague concept that should best be studied with a multi-dimensional approach. Since there is still substantial disagreement as to what precisely constitutes the 'tabloidization' process of the media, a more flexible approach might help overcome the analytical problems discussed above.

These reflections make one realize that 'tabloidization' can only be studied adequately with a long-term, cross-national study of quality media outlets using a broad range of empirical measures and analytical tools. Because of space limitations, the present article focuses on the print media only and leaves the issue of tabloid television to another discussion.

'Tabloidization' in historical perspective: the Anglo-American and German contexts

Although rarely made, cross-national comparisons are essential in communication studies. Without international comparisons one never knows how to evaluate a certain appearance. Is it normal (in the meaning of: shared by others) or an unusual, distinct feature (in the meaning of: characteristic for a certain country or system)? Internationally comparative studies always bring a fresh perspective to things and very often, new understandings.

Great Britain and the United States

The British and the American media industries have the longest histories of tabloidism. The beginnings of 'tabloidization' can be seen in the Yellow Journalism in the USA during the 1890s (the following is based on Picard, 1998). Its full development, however, first occurred in Great Britain when Lord Northcliffe established the *Daily Mirror* in 1903 and made it the first widely circulated tabloid. The idea of the tabloid returned to the US as a result of Northcliffe introducing the tabloid idea to Joseph Medill Patterson, a partner in the *Chicago Tribune*, who was serving with US forces in Europe during the First World War. As a result, Patterson returned to the US and started the *Illustrated Daily News* in New York in 1919 as the first real US tabloid.

Despite their segmentation of the newspaper audience, however, US tabloids were not able to maintain the interest of their readership. By the

1930s, most of the tabloids that dominated the previous decade had disappeared. The casualties include Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, William Randolph Hearst's *New York Mirror* and Bernarr MacFadden's *Evening Graphic*. The *Illustrated Daily News* survived but has had a rocky financial experience since that time. Despite the problems with tabloids in North America, popular tabloid journalism was employed on a widespread scale in Great Britain's Fleet Street in the 1930s, borrowing from earlier American styles. Like its American counterparts, British papers focused on scandals, crime, celebrities and gossip (Picard, 1998).

By 1930, when tabloids began playing a wide role in the press, British papers were receiving nearly three-quarters of their revenue from advertising. This raises the interesting question of why tabloids were becoming successful in the UK while they were disappearing in the US. The answer is, according to Picard, that decline of tabloids in the US is directly related to radio, which rapidly came to replace tabloids as the medium of choice for reaching mass audiences. Because US radio was commercial from its beginnings, and because it generated larger audiences, advertisers immediately moved their money into radio.

Today, the traditional daily tabloid has all but disappeared from the US. Four, now-tamed descendants survived the development of radio and later television: the *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Boston Herald* and *Chicago Sun-Times*. The closest living relatives to the traditional tabloids are the weekly 'supermarket tabloids', including the *National Enquirer*. These papers, however, ignore established news values such as politics and current affairs to concentrate entirely on celebrities, human-interest stories, self-help news and fiction disguised as news (Bird, 1992).

The development of radio in the UK affected its tabloids differently. Because radio was established as public service broadcasting, it carried with it a social conscience flavour and was not available to advertisers because of its non-commercial orientation. As a result, it did not displace British tabloids as an advertising medium for reaching mass audiences. This permitted the continuation and survival of the tabloid newspapers until this day (Picard, 1998).

To summarize, two important differences in the understanding of 'tabloidization' between Britain and the US emerge (Bird, 1998):

1. In Britain, tabloid journalism usually refers to the mass circulation daily newspapers like *The Sun*, *Daily Express* and *Mirror*. In the US, the term most commonly refers to the weekly

supermarket tabloids which are different from their British counterparts in that they do not cover any news about politics, the economy or other hard news subjects.

2. In Britain, the press is seen as being clearly divided between quality and tabloid newspapers. This differentiates the popular from other journalism as clearly as heavy metal music is distinguishable from Johann Sebastian Bach's oeuvre. This clear divide between two types of newspapers, journalism styles and readership does not exist in the US. There, weekly tabloid supermarket readers are also likely to be reading a serious regional paper.

Germany

Germany, again, offers a very different, third picture. Human touch, personalization and sensational reporting — in a word: tabloid journalism — does not have a similarly strong tradition in German press history as it has in the Anglo-Saxon countries. This difference between German and British journalistic traditions first became clear when British journalists were sent to Germany during the so-called re-education period after the Second World War. One of the journalists sent to Germany in 1946 in order to educate a new generation of reporters in Anglo-Saxon press rules was Sefton Delmer of the *Daily Express*. He planned nothing less than a 'journalistic revolution' in Germany. The main mistake of the German newspapers was, in his view, that they were 'unreadable'. They were written in such a turgid style and designed in such an indigestible manner, Delmer said, that the masses of the German audience were neither willing nor able to consume them (Delmer, 1963: 642–6).² Even today, 50 years later, British journalists still mock the German press. A former German correspondent of *The Independent*, Steve Crawshaw, finds it funny that German newspapers 'are written like official gazettes, without any human touch' (Becker, 1996: 46).

Both statements are exaggerations but they are not completely wrong. Today, Germany still has far fewer tabloid newspapers and German readers do not go so much for tabloid news values (at least in the press). The German press market is more similar to the US market in that it does not have a clear dichotomy between quality and tabloid newspapers. The second main difference between both countries is that the British press consists of more national (11) and fewer regional dailies

(84) than Germany which — again like the US — has always been characterized by a strong and diverse regional press (375 titles). Until the founding of the German nation-state in 1870/1, the people were split up into 28 separate states and principalities. Each of the countless cities and small states insisted on having its own newspaper. Germans are still used to reading their regional paper. As a result, national newspapers play a much less important role than in Britain. This is true for the quality and the popular press (see Tables 1–3).

Whereas Germany has just one national daily and one national Sunday tabloid, the British press market counts five daily and six Sunday tabloids (down- and mid-market papers grouped together). The lower number of tabloid newspapers in Germany also results in lower tabloid circulation figures and — as a consequence — in fewer tabloid readers in Germany. On a common weekday, 11 million people in Britain buy a tabloid as compared to 4.4 million Germans. This gap is even larger on Sundays (12.1 million vs 2.5 million).

With regard to the national *quality* newspaper market, the differences are less remarkable but still noticeable. Daily and Sunday qualities are fewer and smaller in Germany but weekly print magazines are much more popular. If one calculates daily, Sunday and weekly qualities together, the German circulation totals 5.3 million, the British 6.1 million (see Tables 1–3). Because Sunday newspapers are unpopular and almost non-existent in Germany, many readers of regional dailies buy a political news magazine once a week to inform themselves about national news and opinions.

Preferences of newspaper readers are different as well. The habits and interests of the average German newspaper reader is more similar to the specific audience of *The Times* than to the ordinary British reader (see Table 4). This can be seen as an indication that German readers still tend to value news values of the quality press more than the British. They are significantly more interested in political commentary and business news — aspects usually covered by the quality and neglected by the tabloid press.

These differences find expression in the fact that in Germany tabloidized papers are less successful in circulation than non-tabloid papers. An extensive study of 350 newspapers by Klaus Schoenbach recently demonstrated that 'tabloidization' simply does not sell in Germany. Detailed regression analyses show that papers which decided 'to go tabloid' by using more infotainment and emotion could not increase their circulation at all (Schoenbach, 1997: 75, 90, 117).

Table 1 National daily newspapers (1997)

| <i>German qualities</i> | <i>British qualities</i> | <i>German tabloids</i> | <i>British tabloids</i> |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Sueddeutsche Zeitung</i> | <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> | <i>Bild</i> | <i>The Sun</i> |
| <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Welt</i> | <i>The Times</i> | | <i>Daily Mirror</i> |
| | <i>The Guardian</i> | | <i>Daily Mail</i> |
| <i>Frankfurter Rundschau</i> | <i>The Independent</i> | | <i>Daily Express</i> |
| <i>Tageszeitung</i> | <i>Financial Times</i> | | <i>Daily Star</i> |
| 1.3 million | 2.9 million | 4.4 million | 11 million |

Sources: Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern (IVW).

Table 2 National Sunday newspapers (1997)

| <i>German qualities</i> | <i>British qualities</i> | <i>German tabloids</i> | <i>British tabloids</i> |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Welt am Sonntag</i> | <i>The Sunday Times</i> | <i>Bild am Sonntag</i> | <i>News of the World</i> |
| | <i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> | | <i>Sunday Mirror</i> |
| | <i>The Observer</i> | | <i>The People</i> |
| | <i>The Independent on Sunday</i> | | <i>Mail on Sunday</i> |
| | | | <i>Sunday Express</i> |
| | | | <i>Sunday Sport</i> |
| 381,000 | 3 million | 2.5 million | 12.1 million |

Sources: Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern (IVW).

Table 3 Weekly news and current affairs magazines (1997)

| <i>German political weeklies</i> | <i>British political weeklies</i> |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Stern</i> | <i>The Economist</i> (UK edition) |
| <i>Spiegel</i> | <i>New Statesman</i> |
| <i>Focus</i> | <i>The Spectator</i> |
| <i>Zeit</i> | |
| <i>Woche</i> | |
| 3.6 million | 200,000 |

Sources: Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern (IVW).

Table 4 Items which newspaper readers 'specially choose' to read (Great Britain, 1994)/'usually always' read (Germany, 1996)

| | <i>All British (%)</i> | <i>The Times readers (%)</i> | <i>All Germans (%)</i> |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Domestic politics | 34 | 42 | 57 |
| Editorials | 8 | 21 | 45 |
| European/non-European foreign news | 10/8 | 25/21 | 40 |
| Sport | 21 | 24 | 43 |
| Arts, books, music/film, video | 7/11 | 17/11 | 31 |
| Science, technology | 7 | 17 | 24 |
| Business/personal finance | 4/6 | 14/12 | 30 |

Sources: British data from TGI GB Target Group Index October 1993–September 1994 (cited in Tunstall, 1996: 217); German data from Institut fuer Demoskopie Allensbach (quoted in Noelle-Neumann and Koecher, 1997: 433).

'Tabloidization' put to the test: Britain and Germany in comparison

The discussion earlier of the concept of 'tabloidization' led to the conclusion that it can only be analysed adequately with a long-term, cross-national design focusing on quality newspapers and applying a wide range of tools and measures. Since we are concentrating on the press here, Britain has to be taken as the yardstick. The British press is typical for a free, market-driven press. Nowhere else can a similarly high degree of competition over such a long period of time be found. Since the German and US press markets are similar in many ways, the present study uses Germany as the comparative country. The main benefit for this is that this comparison also reveals many typical differences between the Anglo-Saxon and German (or continental European) journalism.

The following analysis is divided up into three parts based on the three characteristic elements of Howard Kurtz's (1993) definition of 'tabloidization'. In order to fulfil the conditions of multi-dimensionality of the concept, I have collected relevant data from various sources such as journalists' surveys, readers' surveys, public opinion polls, content analyses and press council statistics.

Professional journalistic values in Germany and Britain

The first aspect indicating a process of 'tabloidization' in the press according to Kurtz (1993) is a drop of professional standards, a worsening of journalistic behaviour. Both countries have an institution that keeps

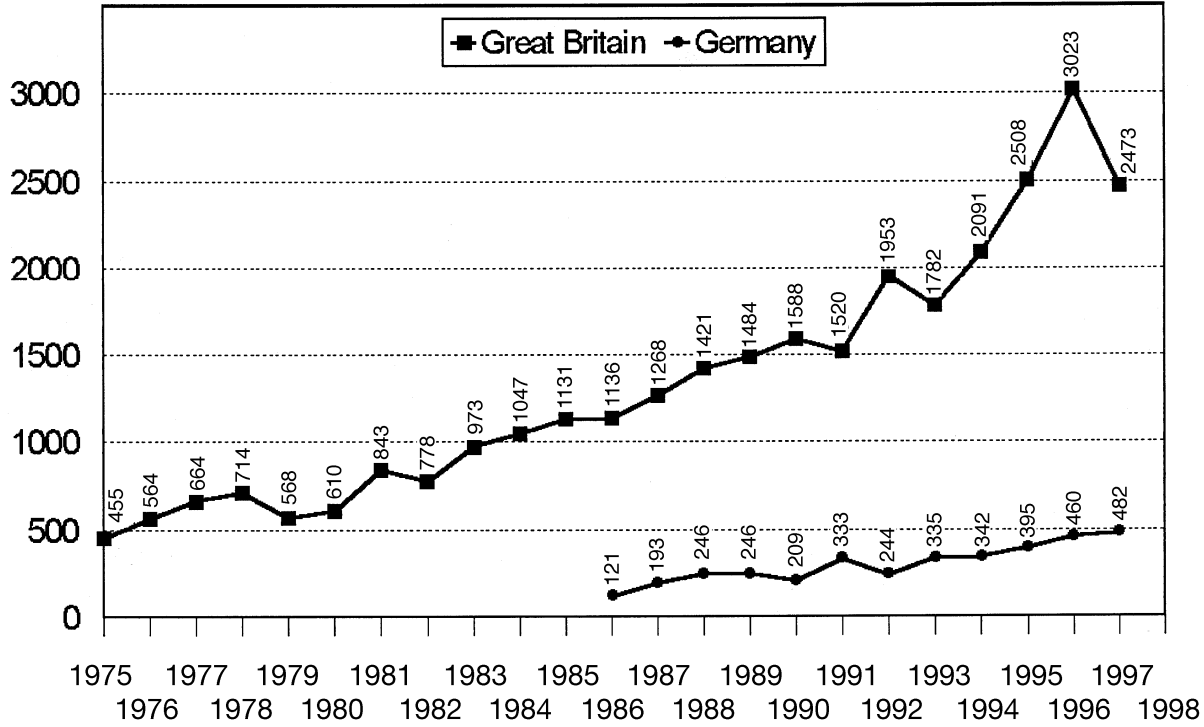


Figure 1 Total number of complaints received by British and German Press Council, 1975–97

Sources: Annual reports of British Press Council (until 1990) and Press Complaints Commission (since 1991) and German Presserat (statistics available only from 1986 onwards).

record of all complaints about wrongdoings of the press raised by the public: the German Press Council and the British Press Complaints Commission. Although both bodies suffer from being considered toothless institutions among journalists (Esser, 1998; Tulloch, 1998), their complaint statistics constitute nonetheless an important source of information. If one looks at the number of readers' complaints received by both institutions (see Figure 1), two points can be noticed immediately: (1) the press of both countries gives growing reason for complaint; both figures are increasing; (2) however, the British and German level of complaints differ dramatically.

Every year, the behaviour of the British press prompts six times as many complaints as the German press. In the last 10 years 1988–97, the British Press Council received an average number of roughly 2000 complaints, the German Council just 330. There are two alternative explanations for this very different picture: either the British press behaves more ruthlessly and unethically than the German press; or the British public is more sensitive and prepared more readily to lodge a complaint against journalistic misbehaviour with the Press Council.

One way of answering that question is by looking at the journalists' responses to ethical questions (see Table 5). British journalists appear to be less ethical in their attitudes than German and American newspeople. Particularly in Germany (where two surveys were carried out recently),³ journalists were less willing to say that 'unusual' reporting methods may be justified. West Germans, though, seem to be more prepared to use questionable research methods. However, the difference from the Anglo-Saxon countries, especially Great Britain, is still striking. On all issues, British journalists were more likely than their colleagues to respond that controversial reporting practices may be justified.

Speculating on possible reasons, Henningham and Delano (1998: 157) write:

The strongly competitive newsgathering environment in the UK, particularly in London, may result in a culture in which ethical constraints are somewhat blurred. The relative recency of professional education in journalism may be another factor, together with the lack of a tradition of associations of journalists organized on purely professional (as opposed to union) lines.

This is a view widely shared. 'Many editors concede that standards, particularly on accuracy, in broadsheet as well as in tabloid newspapers have fallen', writes Raymond Snoddy, media correspondent of the *Financial Times*. 'Competition and the pressure to find stories sensational

Table 5 Journalists' acceptance of various reporting practices

| | <i>Percentage saying 'may be justified'</i> | | | |
|---|---|---|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | <i>West Germany (1992)</i> | <i>West and East Germany (1993)</i> | <i>Great Britain (1995)</i> | <i>USA (1992)</i> |
| Question: 'Journalists have to use various methods to get information. If it was an important story, which of the following methods do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve under any circumstances?' | | | | |
| Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information | 46 | 22 | 80 | 63 |
| Using confidential government documents without authorization | 75 | 27 | 86 | 81 |
| Badgering unwilling informants to get a story | 6 | 2 | 59 | 49 |
| Making use of personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission | 10 | 2 | 49 | 47 |
| Paying people for confidential information | 28 | 19 | 65 | 20 |
| Claiming to be someone else | 28 | 19 | 47 | 22 |
| Agreeing to protect confidentiality and not doing so | 3 | 0 | 9 | 5 |
| Total number of journalists surveyed | 983 | 1498 | 726 | 1156 |

Sources: Schoenbach et al. (1998: 224); Weischenberg et al. (1998: 247); Henningham and Delano (1998: 158); Weaver and Wilhoit (1998: 410).

enough to make papers walk off newsagents' counters encourage invention, exaggerations and the invasion of privacy' (Snoddy, 1992: 141, 142).

The lower German figures are probably a result of the lower number of tabloid newspapers and the lower degree of media competition in Germany. Nonetheless, criticism of declining standards can be heard in Germany as well. There is, however, reason to believe that the Germans apply a stricter standard when judging journalistic behaviour. This can be seen, for example, from the adjudications of the German and British Press Council. Although the British institution receives many more complaints than its German counterpart, it hardly upholds any (see Figure 2, as compared to Figure 1).⁴ The German institution, in contrast, receives far fewer complaints but adjudicates and upholds many more. It seems reasonable to assume that the German Press Council applies a stricter standard, i.e. it condemns incidents the British Press Council would not regard a serious breach of conduct.

Downgrading of hard news and upgrading of soft news in the quality press

The second element of Kurtz's definition refers to an increase of soft news at the expense of hard news. British journalists are considerably more inclined to support entertainment as a legitimate news media role than German journalists (see Table 6). They consider 'providing entertainment' as more important (47 percent) than 'developing intellectual and cultural interests of the public' (30 percent). In Germany it is the other way round. Developing intellectual and cultural interests are regarded as more important (30 percent) than entertainment (19 percent).

On the other hand, British journalists support information-transmitting and investigative roles much more than their German counterparts.⁵ If one just looks at the rank order, though, it emerges that both groups rank 'entertainment' at fifth place. Why are the German percentage figures so much lower? Although both surveys worked with a similar five-point scale, the German respondents were much more hesitant to rate any of the aims as 'very important'. One gets the impression that the German sample tended to be less vivacious and to shy away from strong approval of any of the statements. British journalists may be more impulsive and assertive whereas the Germans are more considered and cautious. This is pure speculation of course. A more convincing reason may lie in the different sample structures. Whereas the British survey only includes full-time news journalists, the German

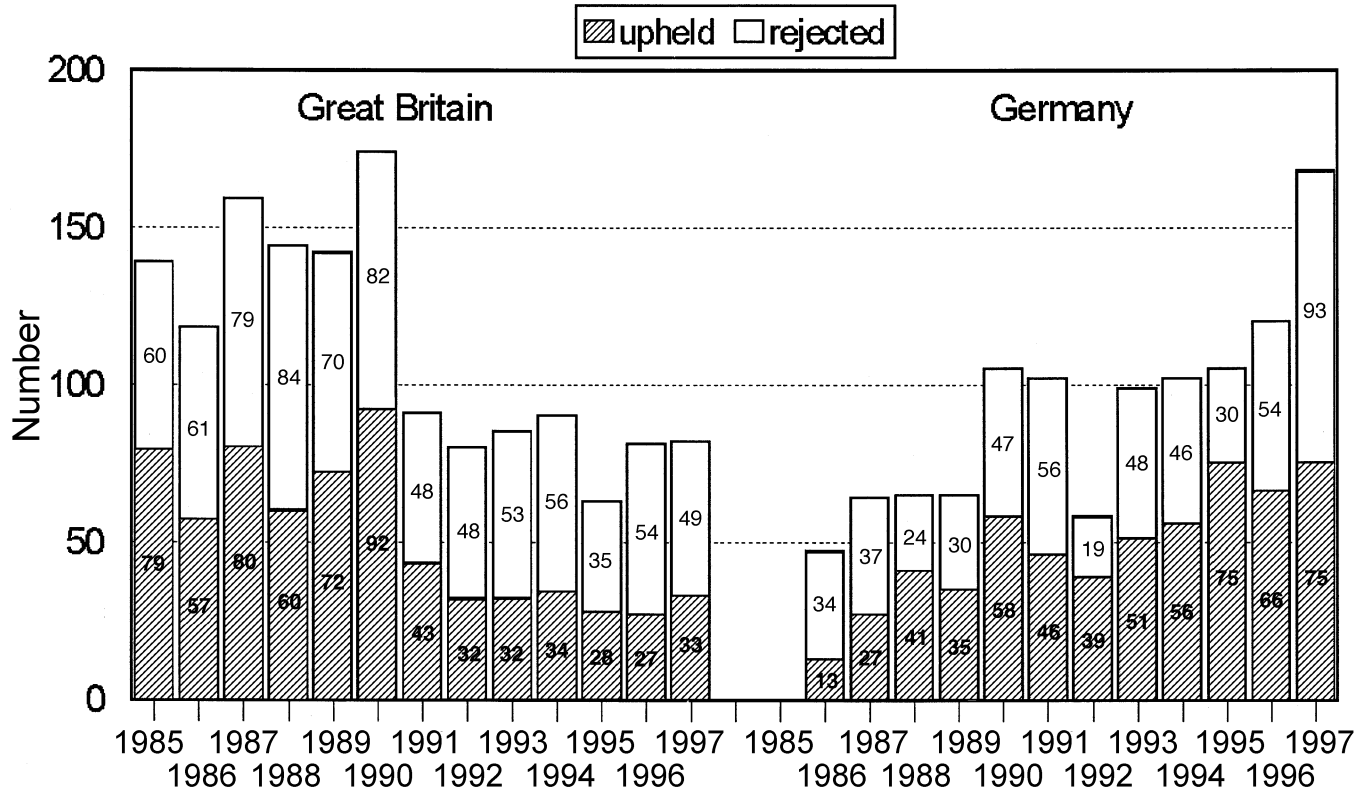


Figure 2 Number of complaints 'upheld' and 'rejected' by British and German Press Council, 1985–97

Sources: Annual reports of British Press Council (until 1990) and Press Complaints Commission (since 1991) and German Presserat (statistics available only from 1986 onwards).

Table 6 Selected media functions rated by British and German journalists

| | Percentage saying 'very important' | |
|---|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| | Great Britain (1995) | Germany (1993) |
| Question: 'I would now like to ask you how important a number of things are that the media do or try to do today'. . . that concern the professional aims a journalist can pursue'. | | |
| Get information to the public quickly | 88 | 40 |
| Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems | 83 | 39 |
| Provide entertainment and relaxation | 47 | 19 |
| Concentrate on news which is of interest to the widest possible public | 45 | 17 |
| Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified | 30 | 37 |
| Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public | 20 | 30 |
| Investigate claims and statements made by the government | 88 | 12 |
| Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly sceptical of their activities | 51 | 14 |
| Be an adversary of business by being constantly sceptical of their actions | 45 | 8 |
| Total number of journalists surveyed | 726 | 1498 |

Sources: Henningham and Delano (1998: 156); Weischenberg et al. (1998: 243 and personal communication). Both surveys used a similar five-point scale but different sample structures (see text).

survey also includes freelancers as well as staff from non-news outlets such as freesheets, special interest and city guide magazines.

Another aspect in the discussion on 'tabloidization' is whether there is a spill-over of tabloid news values — such as entertainment, gossip, sleaze, scandal and sensation — into the prestige press. A good way of studying such effects is by looking at the content of newspapers. Of particular interest is the question whether the pattern of political reporting in the prestige press has changed over time. Hans Mathias Kepplinger (1998) has just completed a content analysis of the German quality press over a period of 45 years (1950–95). His data can be used to test some aspects of 'tabloidization'.

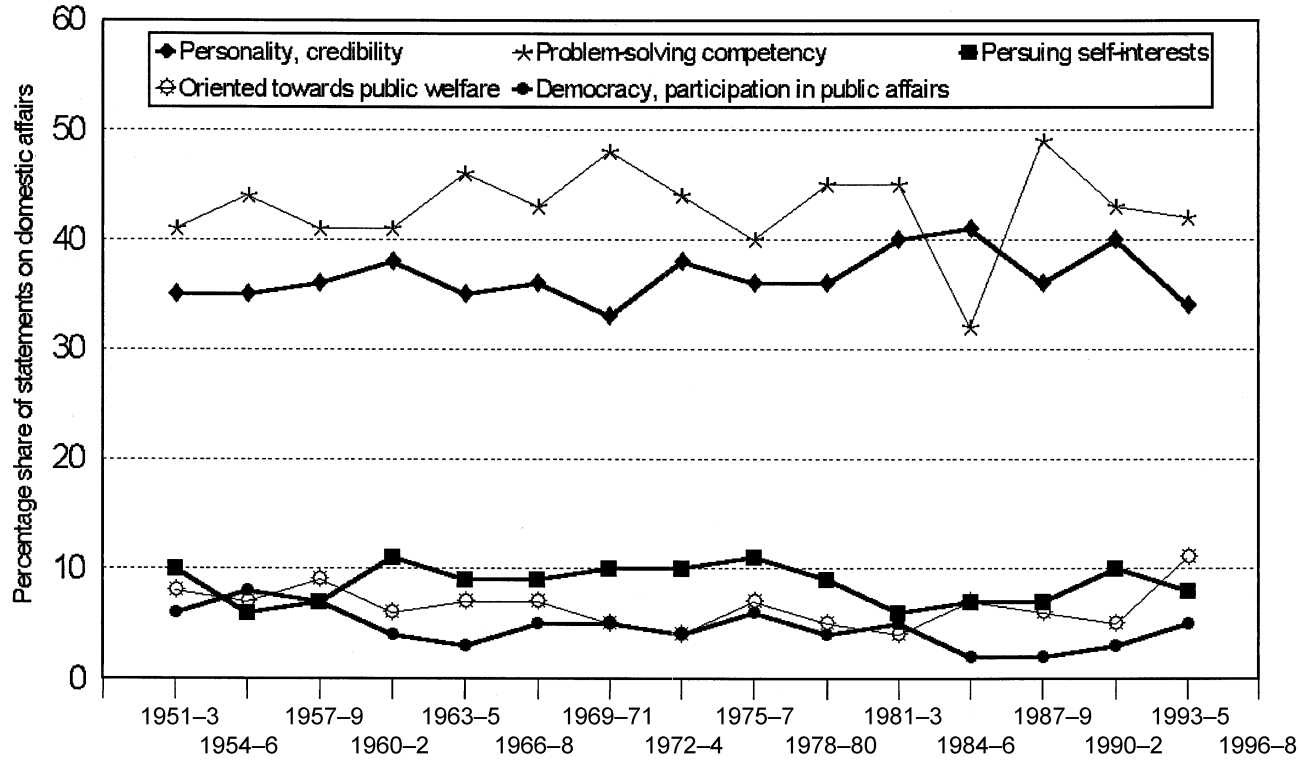


Figure 3 Tabloidization tendencies in the political coverage of German quality newspapers, 1951–95: Statements assessing German politicians ($N = 21,219$)

Source: Kepplinger (1998: 184), my calculations. Content analysis of three national dailies: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Welt*. Structured sample of 18 editions per year of each paper (2430 editions in total). About every second political article in each edition was coded. For details see Kepplinger (1998).

If we assume an increasing tendency towards 'tabloidization', we would expect for example a change in the way politicians are evaluated. Personalization, in particular, is considered a core element of a tabloidized coverage of political affairs. It is therefore of special interest whether the share of statements judging politicians on their *personality/character/credibility* has increased over time. In the political coverage of the German prestige press this is not the case (see Figure 3). The study used a set of five different evaluation criteria and they all show a remarkable constancy (other four lines in Figure 3). Surprisingly, the pattern of how the German prestige media judge the performance of politicians has hardly changed over the last 45 years. This is particularly true for the aspect of *personality/character/credibility*. The *personality* aspect has always been a very important criterion for the press, it is actually the second most important behind *problem-solving competence*. There is no indication that this aspect has won undue prominency in the last couple of years.⁶

The next step is to look at how political affairs in general are reported (Figure 4). Here, we examine the character of political *stories*, the presentational *style* journalists use to communicate politics. Kepplinger's study distinguishes five kinds of story formulas: (1) whether they convey factuality or speculation; (2) optimism or pessimism; (3) bias or balance, (4) rationality or emotion; (5) scandal or no scandal. For the question of 'tabloidization', the last two aspects are the most important. Again, we do not find much evidence for a growth of tabloid tendencies: *emotional* and *scandalizing* stories were the least often used formulas in the German prestige press. They occurred 4500 and 2000 times respectively, whereas the three other story formulas were used more frequently (see footnote in Figure 4).

Did the share of stories that present politics in *emotional* and *scandalizing* terms increase over time? The curves in Figure 4 do not show a clear pattern. The picture becomes clearer when looking at the linear time trend regression of both graphs (not depicted here). The share of *emotionalized stories* on German politics has not changed at all over the 45-year period — the gradient is a flat 1.1 around the mean 15.6 percent level. The share of *scandalizing stories*, however, has increased noticeably — the gradient is 12.4 (min. 8 percent, max. 32 percent, average increase per time period 0.8) and shows a clear upturn over time. The rise of scandalizing stories, as can be seen from Figure 4, is mainly due to an increase of such reports in the 1990s. This is a first moderate indication of a process of 'tabloidization' in the German quality press.

In Britain there is much more discussion — and more empirical evidence — about a trend towards 'tabloidization' in the prestige press.

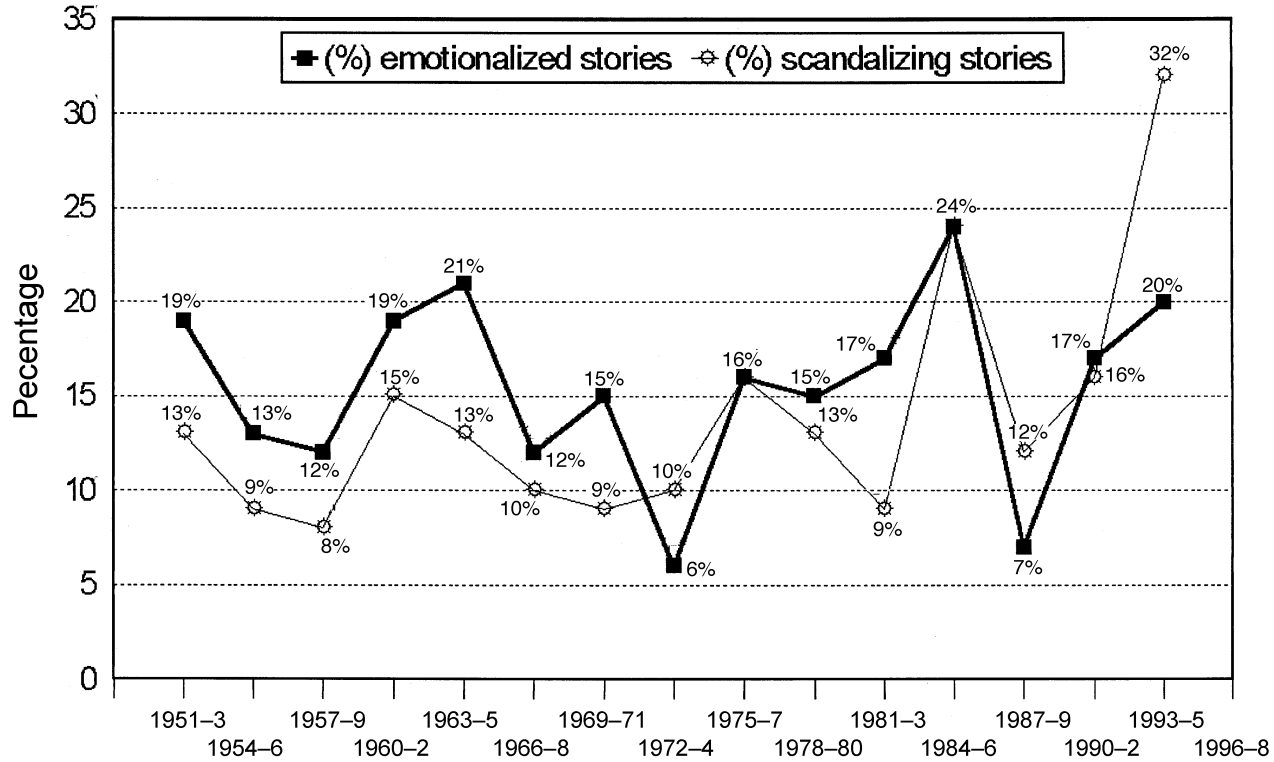


Figure 4 Tabloidization tendencies in the political coverage of German quality newspapers, 1951–95: story character/presentational style of newspaper items on domestic German politics

Source: Kepplinger (1998: 135), my calculations. Story formulas depicted in graph: emotionalized stories ($N = 4504$), scandalized stories ($N = 2043$). Story formulas *not* depicted in graph: biased, one-sided stories ($N = 6924$), pessimistic stories ($N = 6842$), speculative stories ($N = 4812$). Emotionalized and scandalized stories appeared least frequently.

Peter Golding and his colleagues are currently conducting a long-term content analysis of the British press similar to Kepplinger's. Preliminary results show, among other things, that (1) the amount of international news decreased whereas the amount of entertainment and human-interest stories increased and that (2) the number of political news stories and their average length have become more similar between quality and tabloid newspapers (Golding and McLachlan, 1998). A different study by Labour MP Jack Straw, now Home Secretary, revealed in 1993 that the parliamentary reporting of *The Times* and *The Guardian* decreased substantially. Coverage of parliamentary debates, for example, had reduced from an average of between 400 and 800 lines before 1988 to less than 100 lines in each paper in 1992 (Straw, 1993).

In a follow-up study, Bob Franklin conducted a more sophisticated content analysis of the political reporting of *The Guardian* and *The Times*. He analysed how both papers covered activities of MPs inside and outside parliament between 1990 and 1994. His study confirmed fears that the news values of the British quality newspapers have changed and that parliamentary reporting is one of the clear victims of this process. The number of newspaper articles on MPs and their activities in and outside parliament decreased in *The Guardian* and *The Times* from 253 in 1990 to 205 in 1994. Articles positive or laudatory on the British parliament fell by more than half from 66 to 27. The number of newspaper accounts of political scandals, however, multiplied by five, from 7 to 33 (see Table 7).

Franklin (1996: 305) summarizes his empirical findings as follows:

The extent and character of parliamentary reporting has been fundamentally revised during the 1990s. There is a good deal less reporting of parliamentary proceedings in both quality and tabloid press. . . . Journalists' commentary on parliamentary affairs has, moreover, departed from its traditionally balanced character to become increasingly negative and disdainful.

According to Franklin, the focus of news has shifted most in the area of 'scandal and misconduct'. It emerged as the third most popular from a list of 40 identified subject categories. 'Scandal and misconduct now enjoy a greater prominence than significant areas of government policy such as health, education or law and order' (Franklin, 1996: 303). Some of the political journalists interviewed by Franklin perceived the changes as part of a broader decline in journalistic standards prompted by

Table 7 Coverage of parliament in the British and German quality press, 1990–4

| Number of articles | Great Britain ^a | | | Germany ^b | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|------|------|----------------------|------|------|
| | 1990 | 1992 | 1994 | 1990 | 1992 | 1994 |
| On parliament in general | 253 | 250 | 205 | 134 | 180 | 217 |
| On political scandals | 7 | 11 | 33 | 12 | 7 | 4 |

^a Number of newspaper articles on British MPs and their activities in parliament, party and personal matters. Base: 708 items in *The Times* and *The Guardian*.

Source: Franklin (1996).

Structured sample: seven editions of each paper of 1990, 1992, 1994 (56 editions in total). Every article mentioning MPs and parliament was coded.

^b Number of newspaper articles in which German government, opposition, parliament, MPs or party leaders are the 'prominent actor'. Base: 863 items in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Welt*.

Source: Kepplinger (1998), my calculations.

Structured sample: 18 editions of each paper each year (270 editions in total). About every second article mentioning the above actors was coded. Number of German articles on political scandals in 1991 and 1993: 23 and 20 respectively.

deregulation of radio and television and a cut-throat competition in the newspaper market. It is not unusual for Rupert Murdoch's name to be mentioned in this context.⁷

Germany experiences similar competition among television stations but not among national newspapers. As mentioned earlier, German newspapers are much more oriented towards regional markets where the degree of competition is less distinct. I replicated Franklin's study with Kepplinger's German data in order to find out whether a similar process of changing (some would argue declining) standards of political journalism can be seen in Germany as well. Although Kepplinger's study used different coding schemes and applied different selection criteria as to what kind of articles are analysed, a rough comparison seems nonetheless possible. These results revealed that — at least for the period of 1990–4 — no similar trends can be found in the German quality press (see Table 7). The coverage of parliament, government, opposition and party leaders (a somewhat broader selection criteria than Franklin applied) even increased slightly. The coverage of scandals related to these political actors is more or less stable. It has to be stressed that the frequency figures cannot be compared between countries because of methodological differences. What matters here is not the absolute level of coverage but the trend and variation across years.

In Britain many politicians complain about a change in news values, particularly in the prestige press. In 1996, 46 members of parliament signed an 'Early Day Motion' saying,

... that this House deplores the steep decline in serious reporting and analysis of politics and current affairs in the United Kingdom; notes that this decline has gathered pace in recent times, with increasing emphasis on personalities rather than policies, and on trivia rather than substance; notes the growing contrast both with the past in British journalism and with certain high quality newspapers in other countries; and suggests that the editors of those national papers that aim to contribute significantly to opinion-forming should demonstrate a more serious and less personal approach, and seek to achieve a more balanced coverage and comment in relation to public issues and political development. (cited in *The Guardian*, 17 June 1996: 'Seriously Though, Folks')

Whether the motion gives the full picture is debatable though. It is true that British broadsheets now regularly carry celebrity articles that were once the province of the tabloids. It is also true that *The Times* is not sold anymore as 'the top people's paper' and that *The Daily Telegraph* is happy to indulge in prize-winning promotions. Some commentators refer to this as the 'dumbing down' of the British press, though they generally concede that it has encouraged previously non-broadsheet readers to trade up. 'We should view this change with optimism and refer to it as "dumbing up"', writes Roy Greenslade, media correspondent of *The Guardian*. By adopting a more populist agenda, the broadsheets succeed in winning new readers whereas the tabloids are feeling the pinch (see *The Guardian*, 10 February 1997: 'Do the Figures Add Up?'). It is easy to see that the British quality newspapers sell many more copies than the German ones (see Tables 1 and 2). The fact also remains that while the British tabloid market has gradually declined, the quality market has increased in size steadily over the last 40 years (Sparks, 1995; Tunstall, 1996: 31–59). It is now argued, however, that the recent circulation growth of the quality press has only been achieved at the expense of the 'tabloidization' of its coverage (Sparks, 1998; Bromley, 1998).⁸

Most German newspapers work in a market where competition does not exist, at least not on a comparable level. They do not know the pressures of relentless rivalry to win the attention of a declining, and fickle, readership. Britain has 20 national newspapers (dailies and Sundays) and they are all published in London, directly competing with each other. And they dominate the country: 86 percent of all newspaper copies sold on any given day are national titles; in Germany it is just 31 percent. Germany has only eight national newspapers (dailies and

Sundays) and they are published in different cities all over the country (see Tables 1 and 2). The lack of newspaper competition in Germany is an important reason why the process of 'tabloidization' has not yet reached the same degree as it has in other countries.

Political scandals and their possible effects on public life and democracy

Kurtz's third defining aspect of 'tabloidization' is a change in the media's definition of what they think the voters need to know to evaluate a person's fitness for public office. In that regard, publication taboos still accepted by German journalists are no longer recognized in Britain and the US. This applies in particular to the private life of politicians, their marriage problems, extra-marital affairs, and sexual inclinations. There is a tacit agreement in Germany that journalists do not disclose private details (Esser, 1999a). Apart from some rare exceptions, journalists comply with this precept. 'If someone breaks the rules here and reports private matters, one is immediately expelled from the famous background circles [unofficial meetings of politicians and journalists]', a Bonn insider said (cited in Posche, 1996: 40). Even a *New York Times* reporter was astonished: 'For years German journalists have been the most confidential in the Western world. They usually note the public flirtations of their politicians without saying a word. They often know much more than they write' (cited in Esser, 1998: 120).

In one of the rare articles on this topic, the German *Stern* magazine writes:

If an MP is caught with a lady in unambiguous circumstances, one laughs but does not print it. We are not in England after all. There, respected newspapers exclude by no means the private life of their politicians but rather tell their readers confidential details. . . . Nor is the private life of politicians a taboo for the American colleagues either. There, every infidelity of a presidential candidate is investigated, reported, commented on and, if necessary, the candidate is dismantled for that. In order to have this not happen here, we have got the judicial term "privacy"'. (Posche, 1996: 40)

Germany does not only belong to the countries with 'the strongest protection of press freedom' of western democracies, it is also one of the few countries where the right to privacy and personal reputation is explicitly protected in the Constitution (Coliver, 1993: 260, 271). Whereas public figures such as politicians may be photographed without

consent, their private life (e.g. marriage problems or sexual inclinations) is still protected by the law.⁹ In German civil law, a clear distinction is made for three protected spheres (in the rank of growing protection): the individual sphere, the private sphere and the intimate sphere. Sexual behaviour clearly concerns the last mentioned. In general, coverage of this sphere is illegal. Since the German press is very discreet when it comes to the private lives of politicians, communication scholars have argued, 'At all events the private lives of our heroes from the world of politics . . . are safe from the press. From this point of view German journalists give less cause for concern. The German Press Council can be reassured' (Weischenberg, 1995: 22).

The British situation is quite different. Privacy is not a right that the British law recognizes as such. 'The power of the media to damage reputations, invade privacy and conduct partisan campaigns is to a considerable extent unaffected by legal restrictions. . . . There is no direct protection of privacy in British law, and no requirement that inaccuracies that are not defamatory should be corrected' (Robertson and Nicol, 1992: 517). Despite the absence of this comprehensive right, privacy can sometimes be indirectly protected by actions of trespass, copyright and data protection (Robertson and Nicol, 1992: 174, 212).¹⁰

Compared with the German law, the British media enjoy more freedom about what to write. Perhaps as a result, such a gentlemen's agreement on private matters as found in Germany does not exist in Britain (any more). Sally Taylor (1991) makes a clear distinction between British and American tabloids. Sex sells in Britain; in more gory and puritan America it is crime which brings circulation gains. Even Rupert Murdoch, who owns newspapers in many countries, thinks Britain is obsessed with sex: 'When you come here from puritanical America and see the British papers, you think "God!"' (quoted in Snoddy, 1992: 127).

Murdoch's sense of shock has not, however, led him to do very much about the amount of sex in the papers he controls. According to Tunstall (1996: 13) he even 'reinvented contemporary British tabloid journalism'. From the outset, sex was chosen as the terrain on which the circulation war of his papers *The Sun* and *News of the World* against the rival *Daily Mirror* would be fought. *The Sun's* formula would become known as 'bonk journalism' as opposed to the milder 'yellow' variety (McNair, 1994: 145–6). The main constituents of 'bonk journalism' are a focus on sex, preferably with a hint of scandal and involving celebrities such as members of the Royal Family or television stars and starlets.

A MORI poll in 1992 revealed that 53 percent of the public held the view that there is 'too little control' of tabloid newspapers in Britain. Still 40 percent thought this of 'newspapers generally' (Hutton, 1992). At that time, the content of the British tabloids had already become a political issue. The rise of stories pursuing the private indiscretions of public figures prompted the government to set up two committees to examine the possibility of the introduction of legislative measures to curb the excesses of the press.¹¹

By then, another trend had become obvious: the broadsheet papers changed as well. They became increasingly involved in revelations of public figures too. On 26 July 1992, *The Sunday Times* argued that the publication of stories about politicians' private lives was 'a legitimate matter to bring into the public domain, especially in an age when politicians are eager to promote their "happy family" image to curry favour with voters'. Reacting to this trend, Anthony Sampson — a member of the Scott Trust which owns *The Guardian* — claimed that 'the frontier between qualities and popular papers has virtually disappeared' (Sampson, 1996: 44).

In many countries, the mass media seem to look increasingly for 'scandals' and 'crises' in their political coverage, presumably prompted by extended competition. Over decades, the British government carefully cultivated a self-image as a 'clean' country, without the problems of large-scale corruption which plague some other liberal democracies such as Italy. According to Dunleavy et al. (1995: 608), 'it is part of the conventional wisdom that since 1945 there have only been isolated incidents of political misconduct or corruption'. This view is confirmed by empirical data. The number of 'political scandals' as listed in Butler and Butler's compendium *British Political Facts 1900–1994* ranges between three and five per decade (Butler and Butler, 1994). The 1990s, however, showed a dramatic turning point. Within five years the figure rose from four (1980–9) to 15 (1990–4) scandals involving politicians. And this is a conservative estimate: Matthew Parris's (1997) book *Great Parliamentary Scandals* counts more than 20 scandals between 1990 and 1997 and *The Independent on Sunday* even claimed that the five-year period 1990–5 saw a total of 39 political scandals, at least a quarter involving sex ('Sleaze: A Guide to the Scandals of the Major Years', 23 July 1995).

In contrast to Germany, the British popular press in its coverage of political events has increasingly tended to blur the distinction between abuse-of-office scandals and sex scandals in the last couple of years. Roger Mortimore (1995: 582) writes:

A number of high-profile cases, resulting in resignations from government posts after media pressure, have involved only sexual indiscretions but are persistently catalogued as demonstrating a government in deepening crisis and frequently referred to under the catch-all-term of sleaze. . . . A political sex scandal, of course, sells more newspapers than a political corruption story.

How does this affect the relationship between mass media and public life? At their most extreme, critics of 'tabloidization' see a shift towards sensation, emotion and scandal as a major element provoking a crisis of public life and as 'the negation of the kind of journalism that is essential to democracy' (Sparks, 1998: 6). This assertion broadens the perspective considerably and asks for possible political effects. From that point of view, one could argue that the climate being created by a kind of press coverage that mixes serious allegations with disreputable gossip may deepen public mistrust. One could assume that the general public mood may not draw fine distinctions in its impressions between abuse of office and sexual misdemeanours of politicians any more. Although one has to be extremely careful with assertions of causality, a case could be made that an increase of such 'sleaze' stories may have contributed to a declining reputation of politicians (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 shows the frequency of the word 'sleaze' mentioned in British quality and tabloid newspapers. In contemporary British usage, sleaze is a populist word standing for corruption, near-corruption and unconventional behaviour of politicians in terms of sexual mores. The increase of such stories coincides with a sharp drop in public trust of political institutions and system of government. Similar evidence for this assumption can be found in Germany (see Figure 6). Here, an increase in the number of publicized political scandals is paralleled by a drop in public esteem for the work of politicians. It would be wrong, though, to attribute the low public regard for politicians in both countries solely to the media. Rather the contrary is plausible as well. It is not unlikely that a long-established general disdain for politicians has made the public consciousness a fertile ground for more specific suspicions. An increase of 'real world cases' (gratefully taken up by the media) could be seen as confirmation of such very suspicions built up by the public long beforehand. This is by no means to suggest that the media coverage had no effect.

It should be stressed that none of the German political scandals depicted in Figure 6 involved sexual misdemeanours of public figures.¹² This is still a taboo. It is nonetheless noticeable that the number of scandals has increased dramatically over the last 15 years. This suggests

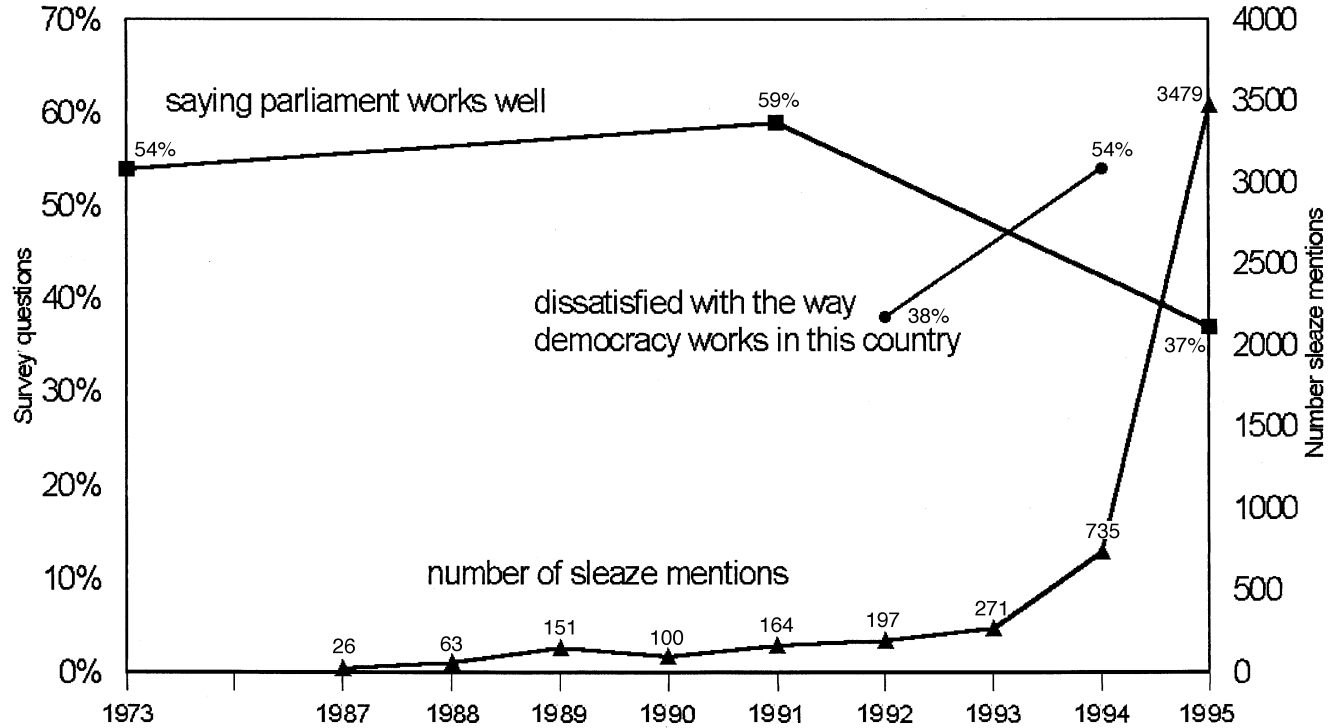


Figure 5 Development of 'sleaze' mentions in UK press vs public trust in parliament

'Sleaze' mentions according to Profile press database (cited in Dunleavy et al., 1995: 605). Survey data from MORI (cited in Mortimore, 1995: 588). Please note: Number of newspapers included in the database increased consistently over the period which is partly responsible for increase of mentions in later years.

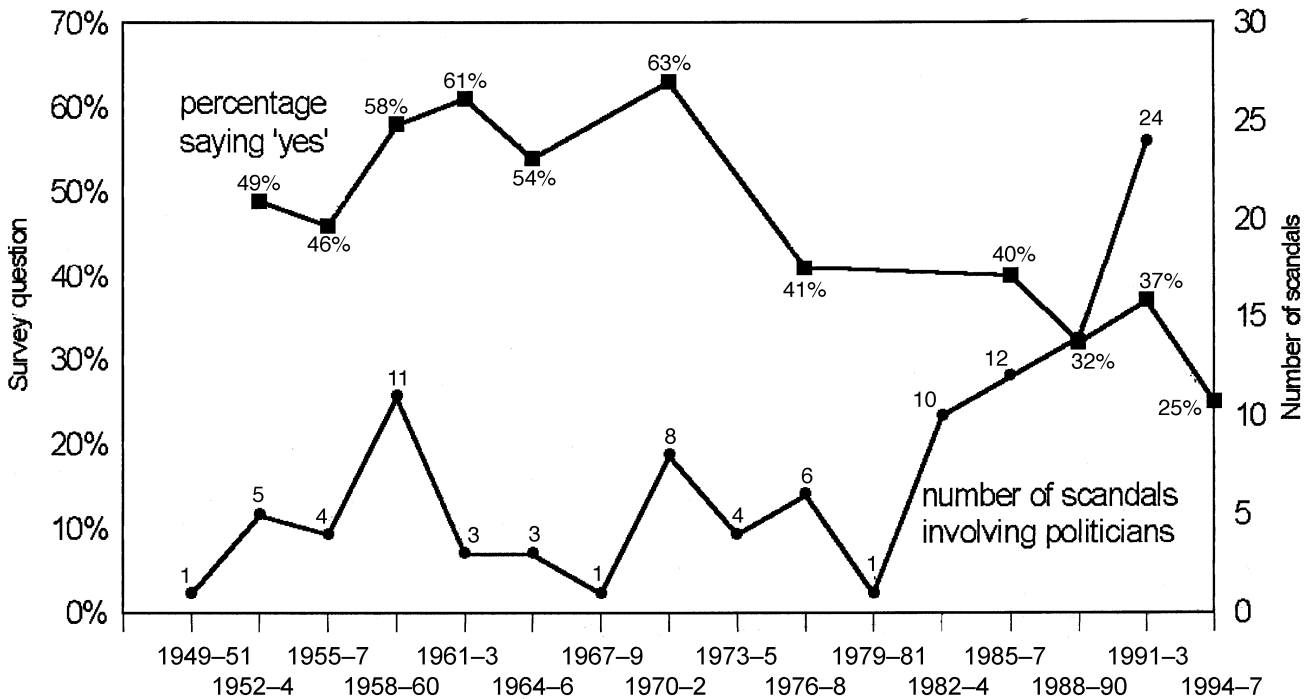


Figure 6 Scandals involving politicians vs public standing of politicians in Germany

Survey question: 'Do you believe one needs to have great abilities to become a member of parliament?' (N = 2000 West Germans)

Survey data from Institut fuer Demoskopie Allensbach (Noelle-Neumann and Koecher, 1997: 822); scandal data from Geiger and Steinbach (1996: 121) who analysed the German 'scandal chronicles' of Liedke (1989) and Hafner and Jacobi (1990, 1994).

that the rules between politicians and journalists are changing in Germany as well. Political mistakes and violations of standards are more likely to be scandalized today than in the past. However, until today the definition of what the media regard as important to evaluate a politician's fitness for office — especially with reference to their private life — has not yet changed substantially in the German press (Esser, 1999a; Klein, 1998).

Consequences

'Tabloidization' is an extremely problematic term since it has different meanings in different societies. It can therefore only be analysed with reference to the respective media cultures and journalistic traditions. The empirical data of the present study demonstrated, for example, (1) that German newspaper readers have never — until today — appreciated tabloid news values to the same degree as the British; (2) that, as a consequence, there are much fewer tabloid newspapers, which are less successful than the British; (3) that professional norms and ethical values are more widely regarded in German than in British journalism; (4) that the political coverage of the German quality press shows fewer signs of a shift towards 'tabloidization'; and (5) that the treatment of political scandals differs significantly between both countries.

The last two points can be explained by two other factors that also have to be considered in this context: economic and legal conditions. In economic terms, it has become clear that the nature and degree of competition present in a particular media market is a decisive factor explaining the progress of 'tabloidization'. Thus, the highly competitive British national newspaper market developed the tabloid form early on and supported the spread of infotainment to all media outlets. In contrast, the relatively monopolistic German and US regional press markets have been able, indeed have been economically obliged by the profile of their advertising markets, to maintain markedly high standards (Sparks, 1998). In this context, an additional factor has to be mentioned. In Germany, home delivery traditionally plays a much bigger role than in Britain. Therefore front pages, headlines and exclusives are much more important for British papers both quality and popular. In Britain home delivery accounts for about one-third of all sales (Tunstall, 1996: 219); in Germany it is between 75 and 90 percent (Puerer and Raabe, 1996: 209). Since British tabloids and qualities are mainly sold at newsagents, the publishers must constantly grab the attention of potential readers to get

them to buy — for example by putting a spin on a lesser story in order to increase buyers' interest.

As regards legal conditions, the present study demonstrated that Germany has a strong privacy law that also protects public figures. This is underpinned by a persisting consensus among newspeople, politicians and the public that private matters ought not to be dwelt on in the media. Political scandals are frequently covered in Germany but the press hardly investigates and publicizes sex scandals involving politicians. This is a significant difference to Britain and the US. Interestingly, German researchers have recently established empirical evidence that the extensive coverage of scandals can increase general disillusionment with public life. A nationwide survey revealed results which the authors regard as a 'clear indication for an overall relationship between coverage or perception of scandals and frustration with politics and parties' (Friedrichsen, 1996: 90). In the context of 'tabloidization' this conclusion could be regarded by some as confirming fears that a shift towards sensation, emotion and scandal may indeed have some negative effects on democracy.

Notes

1. Other definitions are provided in Sparks and Tulloch (in press), which gives a broad, comparative picture on tabloidization. Background and explanations from a British point of view are provided by Stephenson (1998) and Bromley (1998).
2. The main points the allied press officers criticized about the German press after 1945 were (1) a lack of independence from the state, political parties and government, (2) an unwillingness to act as a democratic fourth estate and (3) a tendency to mix factual reportage and editorial comment, to slant news according to one's own political views (see Esser, 1998: 47–52).
3. The 1992 data from Schoenbach et al. come from a telephone survey among West German journalists who were employed full-time by radio, television, newspapers and magazines. The 1993 data from Weischenberg et al. come from face-to-face interviews with journalists of East and West Germany, where freelancers and staff of freesheets, 'alternative' outlets, special interest and city guide magazines and the like were also included.
4. The difference between the complaints received (Figure 1) and complaints adjudicated (Figure 2) can be explained by the large number of complaints regarded as being outside the remit of the commissions or settled informally without an official investigation. It is indeed striking how small a proportion of complaints actually ends up before the Press Complaints Commission, in 1995 it was a tiny 1.12 percent of all complaints. This has raised severe criticism of the way the Press Complaints Commission is organized and working (see Tulloch, 1998).

5. Because of space limitations we cannot discuss the differences in investigative reporting between Britain and Germany here. See Esser (1999b) for an interpretation.
6. It has to be said, however, that the coverage of politicians on balance has grown more and more negative over time. As Kepplinger's (1998: 181–92) detailed analysis demonstrates the German quality newspapers displayed an increasing tendency to present politicians in a negative light, regardless of the evaluation frame.
7. Franklin developed these issues in more detail in his book *Newszak and the News Media* (Franklin, 1997). Quality newspapers have, in his view, adopted the tabloid agenda which he depicts as a wholesale move downmarket to the gutter. It is the changes that have been made to quality papers' content which most exercise Franklin's critical concern. For a critical view on Franklin's claims see Connell (1998).
8. This is a simplified characterization of a highly complex situation. See references for details, e.g. some qualities are losing sales as a result of a savage price war triggered by Rupert Murdoch; whereas some tabloids like *The Sun* and *Mirror* have both made conscious efforts to go upmarket (see 'Shock! Horror! *The Sun* goes Soft and Cuddly', *The Independent*, 2 March 1998).
9. The right to one's own image, to privacy and the right of self-determination as to information and data about oneself (*informationelles Selbstbestimmungsrecht*) are facets of human dignity protected by Article 1 of the Basic Law. The right to free developments of one's personality (self-expression and autonomy) are protected by Article 2. Several criminal laws provide additional protection of the right to private life. Section 201 of the Criminal Code prohibits telephone tapping and the use of bugging devices. Section 202 protects the privacy of correspondence and Section 203 prohibits the disclosure of information told in confidence to such professionals as lawyers and doctors (Karpen, 1993).
10. There are periodic attempts to introduce a statutory right to privacy when Fleet Street's excesses plumb new depths (e.g. Calcutt, 1993). But the problem is to find a satisfactory test for distinguishing unwarranted intrusion on private lives while allowing the investigation of stories of real public interest (The Government's Response, 1995). As a result of the discussion surrounding the death of Lady Diana Spencer, the British Press Complaints Commission introduced in its Code of Practice a special section on privacy. It says: 'Everyone is entitled to respect for his or her private and family life, home, health and correspondence. A publication will be expected to justify intrusions into any individual's private life without consent.' The Press Complaints Commission has no legal powers but its adjudications will usually be published by the paper complained against, and often by rival papers.

11. Both committees — the first was appointed in April 1989, the second in July 1992 — were chaired by David Calcutt QC. In the end, the government decided somewhat surprisingly not to impose new laws and instead called for improvements in self-regulation (Calcutt, 1993; The Government's Response, 1995).
12. Here, the number of scandals involving politicians cannot strictly be compared to the British figures (Butler and Butler, 1994; Parris, 1997) since the authors who recorded the German political scandals used a broader definition and therefore established higher numbers as a result.

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