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POPULAR NEWS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:

Time for a new critical approach?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a brief review and critique of the main scholarly approaches to thinking about popular forms of news in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly in regards to broadcast television. Rather than advocating the merits of either popular or 'hard' news, it will discuss the possibility of finding (or revisiting) a critical approach to popular news and current affairs¹ journalism that charts a suitable middle-ground: one that can accommodate the emergence of popular informational programs (e.g. The Awful Truth, The Daily Show) and one that moves away from the sometimes too simplistic binary discourses that have tended to become characteristic of recent debates over 'tabloidisation'.

KEY WORDS: Television News, Popular Journalism, Tabloidisation, Infotainment

Journalism is considered 'the most important textual system in the world' (Hartley, 1995: 20), and 'a job that is crucial to society' (Cunningham, 2003: 31). Yet despite such large claims, scholarly discussions of journalism are often centred around loosely-defined terms such as 'tabloid' and 'broadsheet', or 'hard' and 'soft'. As useful as these simplified approaches are, they often fail to recognise the increasingly blurred boundaries of journalism, and the fact that the

profession lacks a tangible, definable group of practitioners or set of practices (Deuze, 2005; Hartley, 1995; Bovée, 1999: 37). Unlike lawyers, for instance, there is 'nothing that unites all the things that may be associated with the term journalism except the term itself' (Hartley, 1995: 20), and anyone with a desire to be a journalist can 'pick up a pen, grab a pad, and go' (Bishop, 2004: 31). Yet although the profession's ubiquity means it is mostly free of a locus for analysis and discussion, much contemporary debate about journalism has nevertheless surrounded the issue of commercialisation and textual notions of tabloidisation (for example, Franklin, 1997; Langer, 1998; Lumby, 1999a), perhaps at the expense of seriously debating its role in facilitating the operation of the public sphere. The competing (and often conflicting) priority of profit and service is the tension within journalism which has underscored so much of the recent enquiry into its social functions. At times this debate over popular news has been quite fierce, and is apparently unlikely to be settled any time soon.

This paper is therefore a review of the key academic approaches to popular journalism from the late twentieth Century to today. It is an attempt to find some common-ground in the theory, and will suggest that we may be able to move on from the currently simplistic debates. This argument will be specifically tied to notions of 'tabloidisation', televisual forms of journalism – as television still remains 'the dominant medium of journalism' (Corner, 1995: 53) – and will adopt, very explicitly, an Australian perspective on these matters. There are a couple of reasons for the use of Australian examples in this paper, though the most

relevant is that the tensions involved in popular news production around much of the western world are actually captured very neatly with Australia's 'dual-broadcasting' system. The ABC, Australia's public broadcaster is now seen (along with the SBS) as the last bastion of quality news and current affairs², and yet it accounts for only a fraction of overall TV viewing. On the other hand, the news services which populate the free-to-air commercial networks are far more successful from a ratings perspective, though are hardly the epitome of exceptional journalistic practices – relying heavily on the quintessentially 'tabloid' stories of the crime and human-interest type. A likely explanation for this contrast is the limited space for news and current affairs *anywhere* in Australian television. Australia's small number of commercial TV networks (just three, with bans on new licences), and still quite low take-up of pay-TV services has limited the potential for varied news services and apparently intensified the forces at play here. Such a scenario contrasts with, for example, the USA where pay-TV accounts for a very large share of total viewership, allowing, consequently, the 'space' for a network such as C-SPAN. So, an Australian perspective, in analysing these matters, is perhaps quite poignant.

Importantly, this paper will attempt to argue that those who chart a so-called 'narrative of decline' in the quality of journalism, and those who have successfully re-thought the merits of popular news – and pointed out that there was never actually a high-point in the first place – have perhaps failed to notice the significant changes in news production over the last two decades. The entire

debate seems to have obscured the foresight of many scholars who have therefore neglected the (misnamed) category of 'new' news – a form of news programming that in fact may satisfy both sides of the debate. Despite the fact that journalism is a diverse field with indefinable boundaries, too much time may have been devoted to a more narrow consideration of news, and not enough attention devoted to the cases where news has been (and is) produced by those who would not traditionally be considered journalists. Ideally, this paper hopes to generate an academic discussion about popular news in the hope that the often cyclical arguments between – broadly – cultural studies and neo-Habermasian scholars cease to dominate considerations about popular forms of news and journalism.

JUST 'AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE...

One of the key tenets of news and journalism is its provision of a service, keeping the world informed, and playing the role of society's 'score-keepers' (Conley, 1997: ix). Journalists should ideally strive to serve the 'vigilant citizen who must be properly informed' (McGuigan, 1998: 98) in order to make 'informed choices' (Winch, 1997: 114). News is considered an indispensable part of society because it is the way in which 'good' citizens facilitate their participation in the political public sphere (Moy et al., 2005: 111). An extension of this thinking would suggest then that the only way a citizen can function is through the

consumption of 'hard' political journalism untainted by the scourge of useless populism. Although this in itself is a problematic assumption, it is certainly a useful starting point. Those who still laud the media as 'the fourth estate' have been particularly pessimistic about the possibility that commercialised TV of any kind can be anything other than self-serving (Beecher, 2000; Herman, 1998; see also McKee, 2002; McKee, 2005). Objective, '[r]ational analysis and thorough, dispassionate investigation' (MacDonald, 2000: 251) – what is still termed 'hard', or 'high-modern', news – have been seen as the normative standards for 'quality' journalism the public *should* engage with. However, over the last two decades – or thereabouts – the public has progressively turned away from these forms of 'quality' news, and we have seen a speedy rise of more popular forms of news and current affairs programming, often labelled as 'tabloid'. Even though the term bears no relation to news media in the world of broadcasting – being derived solely from the realm of newspapers – the word's meaning has shifted to denote any popular form of journalism.

There is some conjecture about where name 'tabloid' began. One dominant theory is that it is a rip-off from a medicine name of the late nineteenth century (a neologism combining tablet and alkaloid), because tabloid newspapers (A3 size), at half the size of broadsheets (A2), were thought of as 'a small, concentrated, effective pill, containing all news needs within one handy package' (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 287). The major selling point of tabloid-sized newspapers was exactly that handiness, which in particular made them far easier to read on

mass public transport systems than the more bulky A2 sized broadsheets³. This change caused a key shift in readership, which – alongside dramatically improving literacy levels – meant that the average working class person had suddenly become a major part of the reading public (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004). Since then, the format and content of tabloids have been continually linked, which accounts for why the term is almost never described as “good” in any traditional sense of the word’ (Dahlgren, 1992: 18) and perhaps why it is also synonymous with journalism’s ‘darker’ side (e.g. the evil paparazzi). Being designed, quite literally, for ‘the masses’ gave rise to the following series of binary distinctions which still persist to this day⁴:

Popular	Quality
Tabloid	Broadsheet
Soft	Hard
Trash	Value
Personal	Political
Private	Public
Popular Culture	High Culture
Emotional	Rational
Lay Knowledge	Expert Knowledge
Celebrity	Intellectual
Consumer	Citizen
Trivial	Serious
Feminine	Masculine
Profit	Service
Micro-politics	Macro-politics
Wants	Needs

Table 1: Popular Vs ‘Quality’ News Binaries

Through these binary discourses, anything on the left is derided (even though such aspects are favoured by the public), and anything on the right is seen as the desirable modality; personalisation is equated with trashiness, and popularity instantly linked to triviality. In the end, anything which overtly attempts to maximise its audience is apparently unworthy of attention, illustrating the persistence of the still lingering distinction that: 'Ultimately, information is judged to provide "good" television and entertainment "bad"' (Fiske, 1989: 185). Nevertheless, due to changing allegiances, and new priorities from serving the public to serving 'the company', many have seen a clear decline in the standards of journalism. Although the generic suggestion that things *used* to be better is all too often rolled out to critique contemporary cultural forms, some theorists have illustrated that the past two decades in particular have seen the phenomenon of 'tabloidisation' take a stranglehold hold far more so than ever before. Whereas news was literally the thing that television networks once gave away out of a sense of service⁵, it has become, like almost everything else in the media, another necessary part of a corporation's desire (and *need*) to pursue revenue. So pervasive has this phenomenon been that even the meaning of the term 'tabloidisation' has moved beyond a mere description of the trend for commercial pressures to "win out" more often in the newsroom, to today become 'a portmanteau description for what is regarded as the trivialisation of media content in general' (Turner, 2004: 76).

One of the most notable analyses of the apparently declining standards of journalism is Bob Franklin's *Newszak*. In his account of the shift in the editorial practices of the contemporary news media, Franklin (1997) sees many of the tabloid characteristics listed above as a major retreat from the kind of journalism which serves society and serves dutiful citizens; that the news media are simply too often 'concerned to report stories which interest the public than stories which are in the public interest' (p. 4). The author looks at the way in which news is presented as just another form of entertainment, examining modern newsroom cultures and ownership patterns along the way for good measure (given they are so closely linked). Franklin (1997) points out that while tabloid news forms were apparently once simply a sideshow to mostly quality journalism, tabloid news values are now almost completely rife in the media. Even though there have been numerous scholars quick to point out on the issue that many newspapers of past centuries treasured a sea monster tale or openly gossiped over the sexual dealings of townspeople (Lumby, 1999b; Glynn, 2000; Winch, 1997: 5-7), Franklin is one of the many who argue that the proliferation of popular news is a particularly recent phenomenon (see also Hallin, 1994: 170-180). It may appear to be a case of romanticising the past, but Franklin (1997: 4) notes that: 'Since the late 1980s the pressures on news media to win viewers and readers in an increasingly competitive market have generated revised editorial ambitions. News media have increasingly become part of the entertainment industry.'

As the concept of being able to simultaneously produce both news and money began to take hold in the domain of television⁶, the pursuit of profit saw media outlets turn away from their original mission of quality journalism (to be a 'loss leader' – which was a badge of honour in many ways), and focus instead on circulation or ratings figures to therefore increase profits for investors who are concerned only with financial imperatives (Meyer, 2003: 12; Hallin, 1994: 176). Rather than competing with rival networks to come up with the best service and therefore satisfy consumers, 'It's all about cutting the cost of production' (Miller, 2007: 16). Fox News is perhaps the ultimate contemporary example of these forces at play: a network that speaks of its 'fair and balanced' approach, yet – as documented by Robert Greenwald's 2004 film *Outfoxed* – one which has taken journalistic ethics to the bottom of the priority list, instead choosing to deliberately promote a right-wing agenda in order to maximise its audience at a time when conservative public opinion seems to be running at an intense high. Most news professionals, in fact, may still claim to be serving the public with 'no fear, no favour'⁷, but for most cases in the 21st century – except perhaps those in a publicly-funded capacity – the most basic instinct must be to win the ratings battle (Turner, 2005: 49-62; Pieper, 2000: 72-74). The key result of this is that rather than holding governments accountable for their actions, or increasing the public's understanding of matters in 'ways that enable citizens to understand and to act' (Schudson, 1998: 30-31), various news programs have often resorted to populist strategies in order to maximize ratings.

Australians are privy to the effects of this situation in brilliant detail at 6:30pm every weeknight when *A Current Affair* (on the Nine Network) and *Today Tonight* (on Seven) square-off for the biggest slice of the audience pie with their staple of neighbourhood disputes, hyper-bureaucratic local councils, celebrity gossip and the ongoing 'generic versus name brands' investigation. These often emotionally-charged (yet arguably very shallow) topics – loaded with the genre's now characteristic sense of self-importance – lead regularly to the conclusion that infotainment trivialises news and current affairs, because these sorts of stories do little to provide education about and engagement with issues of high significance such as politics (Hallin, 1994: 177; Cunningham and Miller, 1994: 44; Machin and Papatheoderou, 2002; McKee, 2002). For instance, the Australian public have been treated to stories about how one can increase their chances of winning the lottery, towns 'held ransom' by gangs of juvenile offenders (and why police are – of course – powerless to stop them), making the most of coupon savings, political correctness gone mad, why heartless politicians have abandoned common sense⁸, and the apparently ongoing investigation, 'Butter Vs Margarine'. On 20 July 2004, *A Current Affair's* host, Ray Martin, could even be heard uttering the phrase, 'coming up next, how your pet can make you rich.'

These populist news programs cherish 'stories such as "Helping Pensioner Pat"' because 'the opportunity to "act" or empathize within the community, and "respond" to a real tragedy provides a cathartic outlet for those who feel helpless, or even disinclined to do anything on a larger social or world scale' (Roberts,

2004: 21). Moving into this extremely personal and overly sensational sphere of information can easily arouse an emotional response (perhaps attracting more viewers), yet it does not demand from its audience a response that goes beyond anger or empathy because ordinary people are given few indications about how they might play a participative role in the issue. Audiences for these programs are therefore too often shown no way of action aside from sitting idly and playing the role of fuming observer. The real problem here then is that the programs which thrive on these stories will regularly tend to mask the deeper and more complex causes of problems – the things that journalists *should* be exposing – instead looking for a simplified narrative in which (all too often) an average Joe is the innocent victim of a powerful person's lack of compassion.

To propagate simple marketing terms, the 'value-added' of tabloid journalism may largely come from a changing set of news-values, often weighted in favour of the dramatic, 'lurid', entertaining and spectacular (Meyer, 2003: 12). This 'cacophony of the glamorous, the trivial and the melodramatic' (Machin and Papatheoderou, 2002: 41) is exactly what critics such as Herman (1998) believe is causing a destruction of the classical public sphere. Like every other part of the media, news has been seen to have since been – as McKee (2005) outlines in his book *The Public Sphere* – trivialised, commercialised, and turned into a spectacle to the detriment of genuine citizenry engagement and empowerment. Whether it is explicit or not, at the core of all such arguments is the simple notion that news and current affairs programs are supposed to be a *cultural* industry, yet

this imperative has been forgotten or ignored in the drive to be another profit-maker for an affiliated network (Turner, 2001: 352). So, by having to now appeal to as many people as possible (rather than be concerned with the quality of the service), news programs are often just giving audiences what they want rather than what they need (Winch, 1997: 21).

The provision of wants over needs is seen to have caused an audience 'dumbing down' and is considered such a tragedy because of the fact that, as mentioned above, journalism is still regarded as a vital cog in the democratic process. In Australia this is an even more intense problem because, as discussed earlier in this paper, 'soft' infotainment has mostly displaced 'hard' news on television, rather than act in a complimentary fashion. Graeme Turner has coined perhaps the most apt term for this moment – 'junk' news: 'like "junk food", it looks like news, is sold like news, but it is an unhealthy component of the news diet' (Turner, 1996a: 41). Perhaps much of the problem may lie in viewers' blind acceptance of the 'noble-newscasting' rhetoric these shows employ, without looking critically behind the façade to see if there is really something meaningful working there. Perhaps, as Morley (1999: 142) notes, '... the distant world of "the news" is so disconnected from popular experience that it [may be] beyond critical judgement for many viewers.'

One of the main problems with the idealised system of 'hard' news, however, is that in the twenty-first century it has become more and more difficult

to sell and find an audience for it (Turner, 2005: 5-10). In many cases, a change towards 'tabloidised' news programming has not been a result of laziness in television newsrooms (effectively a chicken—egg argument), but has been genuinely forced by audience news consumption patterns. The well-charted audience shift away from 'hard' news has therefore put the profession in a very difficult position, being torn between two agendas: on one hand the fruits of its labour will be mostly useless unless they are seen by a significant number of citizens, and on the other, pandering to an audience goes against many core journalistic principals. However, if when these standards are applied to a product that subsequently fails to reach an audience or readership, then it serves little purpose and is unlikely to make a profit at a time of heightened commercial pressures, where many media outlets are effectively at the mercy of short-term investors (Meyer, 2003: 12). We need to remember that TV news needs to reach an audience in order to exist, rather than simply being the charitable loss-making arm of a larger media outlet. This need for survival has been just one consideration that has caused many (particularly cultural studies) academics to re-think the value of 'tabloid' or popular news forms.

THE POPULAR NEWS

On the one hand, attempts to maximise audiences for news programs can be a direct subversion of the role journalism is supposed to serve, and yet, on the

other hand its often massive appeal⁹ has lead to suggestions that popular news forms represent a process of democratisation; putting news back into the hands of 'the people', creating 'a new, more open and more egalitarian public sphere' (Lumby, 1999a: 38). Celebrating the 'ordinary as much as the distinguished' (Machin and Papatheoderou, 2002: 46), and setting up 'personal experience as a legitimate form of knowledge' (p. 47), these often maligned (but nevertheless popular) versions of news have been used by some as proof that 'emotionalism, sensation and simplification are not necessarily opposed to serving the public good' (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 284). Often articulated alongside discourses of femininity (Van Zoonen, 1991; Lumby, 1999a; Hartley, 1996), they have been seen by many as a useful response to the demands of the audience – who apparently no longer want 'hard' news – and the requirement to make money and therefore stay in business. As Chris Masters – one of the most renowned investigative journalists in Australian television – has noted: '[p]eople don't want a lecture when they get home from a day's work' (2002: 4).

One of the key ways in which tabloid news has been re-thought has been in relation to its ability to invert hegemonic paradigms, make obscure topics relevant by linking them to personal perspectives, and its popularisation – rather than simple destruction – of the television genre at the heart of the public sphere (Lumby and O'Neil, 1994; Hartley, 1996; Machin and Papatheoderou, 2002; McKee, 2002; Shattuc, 1997; Bek, 2004). This concern is commonly related to issues of personalisation in tabloid journalism, which involves linking the private

and public spheres or placing private issues in the public arena (Machin and Papatheoderou, 2002: 36; Wark, 1997; Manga, 2003: 144; Lumby and O'Neil, 1994; Turner, 1999; Costera Meijer, 2001). Despite the fact that personal issues are typically seen as inherently trivial (both being linked to discourses of popular news), Machin and Papatheoderou (2002: 47-48), for example, point out that 'abstract claims can become relevant and ring true only if authenticated through an individual's own life experiences'.

Tabloid news' links between the private and public spheres – traditionally feminine and masculine domains respectively (Hartley, 1992; Van Zoonen, 1991) – may instead be seen as a popularising and democratising force, promoting social and cultural inclusion, whereas the idealised public sphere of the Enlightenment was criticised for its *exclusion* of both women and the less-educated (McGuigan, 1998). It has even been suggested that a handful of people watching an in-depth news program is worse than a large number consuming a popular/tabloid text because it will only serve to widen a pre-existing knowledge divide between citizens (Hallin, 1994: 180; Fiske, 1989: 192). On the other hand, if we are to believe Hartley (1992), distinctions between the public and private spheres have become ambiguous to the point of irrelevancy anyway, and the idea of gendering them either way may no longer be a valid exercise. Perhaps it is just that 'individual people are easier to identify – and to identify with – than structures, forces or institutions' (Hartley, 1982: 78), and thus a focus on private issues is essentially a sense-making practice of contextualisation. Popular news'

use of these disparaged elements may simply be a way of engaging viewers' interests more fully and relevantly (Fiske, 1989; Hartley, 1996). In fact, concepts such as femininity, lay knowledge, the 'personal' and the 'popular' may be merely applied from elitist standpoints to 'trash' the worth of tabloid news – in much the same way that almost all popular culture is looked down upon. It is likely too that these stories are simply driven by audience viewing patterns, because a free market will tend to err towards providing for the needs of consumers (Curran, 1996: 91).

Catharine Lumby has thoroughly explored the outdated division between the mythologised 'political man' and 'private woman' – especially in her book *Gotcha* (1999a) – and how this is tied to notions of tabloidisation (Lumby, 1999b, for instance). She, like Langer (1998) and McKee (2005: 47), has suggested that many of the binaries relating to tabloidisation (listed in figure 1, on page 6) – like most distinctions between 'high' and popular cultural forms – are 'terms which are based more in prejudice than in contemporary reality' (Lumby, 1999a: 16-17). She notes in particular that tabloid media have allowed feminised discourses a place in public consciousness, rather than regularly ignoring them or passing them off as unworthy (as is the case with most 'hard'/high-modern news). This would undoubtedly be seen as a democratic strength for the postmodern public sphere and avoids the notion that exposition of private issues is necessarily dealing with the trivial (Turner, 2000; Fiske, 1987). Lumby (1999a: 17) makes the significant assertion that 'apparently banal stories about celebrities and ordinary

people who have extraordinary experiences often intersect with deeper social and political issues and frame these issues in a way many people find easier to digest.’

To further deconstruct the public/private divide, it could be argued that at a basic level the public is a collection of individuals, and using personal issues and information is not necessarily an abandonment of democratic ideals. Electoral participation in the form of voting is perhaps the ultimate democratic act (the ‘political’), but one that is only possible through the actions of individuals (the ‘personal’). But, because journalists have ‘tended to work with rather narrow conceptions of what is political’ (Connell, 1991: 242), any shift of focus away from institutional politics has been seen as a retreat from the weighty. Yet politics, as Van Zoonen (2005: 5) points out, is also ‘a “field” that exists independently from its practitioners, and that accommodates the continuous struggle about power relations in society.’ The phrase made famous by feminism, ‘the personal is political’ (see Heywood, 1998: 243, for instance), certainly rings true here and neatly sums up the changing thoughts about popular news’ more intimate iterations, and its links to femininity.

So, while Lumby and many others have rightly argued that tabloidism is not necessarily bad in itself, this does not mean that commercial pressures in an ever-fragmenting television market have not caused quantifiable decreases in – for instance – editorial independence, funding for investigative reportage, and

attention towards stories which may sit on the wrong side of the maximum audience at minimal cost model. And, without wishing to further polarise current debates, I would argue that academic considerations of journalism must still find some room for concern over the potential negative effects of populist news, and (although not an aspect pursued here) the regular lack of ethics involved in its production. All news programming, no matter what arguments are invoked, should never be allowed escape its requirement to still 'disseminate knowledge that the people may not wish to know and may find little pleasure or relevance in knowing' (Fiske, 1989: 149). Just because something is popular does not excuse it from the role which it was created to serve in the first place especially when that role is still so vital to the health of the public sphere. Although movements in the last twenty years to acknowledge the value of popular forms of news have been a significant step towards genuinely reconsidering the most effective way of undertaking the practice of journalism, the argument that the news agenda 'has been trivialized in [many ways], with more attention to stories like celebrity trials and beached whales' (Hallin, 1994: 177) is a compelling one, and cannot be easily explained away. Hirst et al. (1995: 97) pose this very simple, yet very important question: 'When is entertainment too much?'

There needs to be a point at which we recognise a middle-ground between the overly pessimistic and over celebratory accounts of modern news, and also begin to flesh-out the important differences between genuinely democratic and merely demotic news forms. In fact, this is perhaps the key criticism that can be

levelled at many of those who have celebrated 'tabloidisation' and its prospective benefits for the average consumer: popularity does not necessarily equal democratisation. To return to a previous example, Fox News is the most popular cable news network in the United States, but that does not mean that it should be held up as an ideal model for news broadcasting the world over because of what it does to empower the average American. And, at the other extreme, neither should C-SPAN, given its not unexpected failures in actually *reaching* and appealing to citizens. In all of these arguments though, we also need to recognise the point where other media genres – devoid of what we might recognise as 'traditional journalism' – also offer up something important.

A 'NEW' PARADIGM?

What I have attempted to argue so far in this paper is that there has been a debate going on between those who have conflicting views on the same phenomenon. Now though, I would like to find a meeting point between both approaches, and point out that these debates have in fact been too narrow in their view about what counts as 'the news'. Knowledge, argues Cottle (2001: 76), 'is no longer a gift carefully wrapped by experts', and yet rather than having a more dynamic, inclusive and culturally progressive understanding of the role of the journalist, the prevailing consensus within many academic debates is that the profession is an exclusive one, even in spite of the fact that it is nearly impossible

to define it and account for all its forms (Bishop, 2004; Deuze, 2005; Hartley, 1995). Therefore, I would argue that we should seek out a new critical paradigm (or re-discover an old one) which can take into account the complexities of the news media in the twenty-first century, and the fact that news is now regularly produced by those who would not be traditionally considered journalists. Liz Jacka argues the point almost perfectly:

If we impose an ideal type of communication... one inevitably sees any departure from this also as a crisis. If, however, we see democracy as pluralized, as marked by new kinds of communities of identity, as a system in which the traditional public-private divide does not apply... then we will be able to countenance a plurality of communication media and modes in which such a diverse set of exchanges will occur. We will be open to the notion that ethical discourse can be present in many different kinds and genres of media texts and in many different forms of media organization [sic]. We will no longer privilege “high modern journalism,” but nor will we mindlessly worship populist media. We will need a much more nuanced account of the connection between (various forms of) citizenship and the media... (Jacka, 2003: 183)

If we look, for example, at the introduction to the book *Tabloid Tales*, we see Colin Sparks (2000) spending a great deal of time outlining a hierarchy of popular news forms from ‘The “serious” press’ all the way down to ‘The “supermarket

tabloid” press’. Though such a comprehensive attempt to distinguish between different ‘degrees’ of popularity is definitely useful, it may simply muddy the waters, and makes little attempt to acknowledge the fact that news can be produced by a range of outlets not normally seen as neither ‘valid’ – or indeed news in the traditional sense of the word. This example is a classic case of debating the issues at the expense of noticing new cases emerging in popular culture. A brilliant example that simply does not fit into traditional considerations of popular news would be the work of Michael Moore, who, through the media of film, television and best-selling books, has managed to make critiques of serious political issues entertaining, perhaps because he is *not* a journalist. Turner (2005: 89-90) notes that ‘Moore... uses [tabloid tactics and spectacular stunts] primarily against the strong and the powerful; almost uniformly his targets are big companies or institutions and elite individuals.’ If news is thought of in an overly narrow fashion, cases such as this might not be deemed significant (where I would argue that it definitely *is*), or, more problematically, not be considered at all. Michael Moore aside, Turner (2005), and Jones (2005) among other scholars, have discussed numerous examples of this sort of news production from *Graeme Kennedy’s News Show*¹⁰ through to more prominent programs such as *Politically Incorrect*, pointing out along the way that the tactics these programs employ are not journalism *per se*, but may be a positive response to the demands of audiences and may still hold some sort of cultural (if not political) significance in the public sphere.

New forms of informational programming like Michael Moore's *The Awful Truth*, which are sometimes called 'new' news¹¹ (see Harrington, 2005), do two things that were once considered mutually exclusive – entertain and genuinely inform citizens about politics (giving people what they want *and* need?) – so they have fallen outside (or between) the traditional distinctions of 'tabloid' and 'broadsheet' or indeed 'high' and 'low'. They are therefore not recognised by the too regularly replicated binary divisions listed in figure 1 (page 6), which is, to me, some proof that finding another approach to critiques of journalism is overdue. This is especially so when many researchers have pointed out that 'new' news may offer the potential of a significant re-invigoration of journalistic enquiry. The many critics – notably Lumby (1999a), Hartley (1996), Winch (1997) and Langer (1998) – who have re-thought the high/low, popular/quality binaries in regards to news also rightly point out the similarities between tabloid and broadsheet forms of news, meaning that it may be time to move critiques of journalism into the twenty-first century – a time when, for many people, Stephen Colbert (from Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*) is a more respected commentator on the news and politics than many of the self-styled 'experts' who litter the op-ed columns of newspapers around the world. As Jeff Jones (2005: 4) puts it very concisely: 'The nightly sense-making of events is processed in new ways by new voices, and rarely operates by the previous assumptions that guided televised political discourse.'

Given the massive upheavals in the news media in the past two decades (a few of which have been discussed here), it could be suggested that many of the old debates between cultural studies scholars and journalism academics no longer apply. Or, perhaps just inverting old hierarchies is not enough to account for the 'communication chaos' (McNair, 2003: 552) that has become a notable characteristic of journalism in the last decade. It is important at this point to remember that 'journalistic' undertakings are not the exclusive domain of 'news' programs; that news and *the news* (the genre) are two very distinct entities. Indeed, doing so may actually increase the ability of citizens to examine the news product presented to them in a critical fashion by illustrating that there is often a large gap between what TV news programs claim to do and what they actually offer (or 'do for') their audiences. Indeed, there needs to come a point where we no longer legitimate populist news as worthwhile simply because it is labelled as journalism (see the arguments made by Turner, 1996b).

As a way then of overcoming some of the inadequacies found in the previous critiques of popular news that have been discussed in this paper I would like to return to John Fiske's argument for a slightly different approach to popular forms of news. While it is not *new* as such, in the present media environment it does seem to make a lot of sense: 'We should not criticize [popular news] for "pandering" to entertainment' Fiske notes (1989: 193, original emphasis), 'but rather should evaluate *how* entertaining it is, and *what* information it makes entertaining.' Ultimately, I think, this is the key notion: *what information?* More

generally, considerations of popular journalism may need to start thinking less about who (or what) is producing the information, and think more in terms of the ends that may/may not be achieved as a result. We should not simply pass something off merely because it is popular then – or indeed emotional, feminine, personal, sensational, and so on (including many of those features listed on the left-hand side of table 1) – or because it does not conform to the key textual features of journalism, but gather a critique around *what information* is being used in this way. ‘For what purpose?’ journalism and cultural studies academics should ask, and, perhaps, ‘in who’s interests?’ rather than the less important – and, in fact, far more easily answered – textual question of ‘how...?’. This way we can acknowledge what popular news offers, but not be blind to the pitfalls that can often come with it.

Such a simple change in our approach means that we can, for instance, make a far more significant and useful distinction between *Entertainment Tonight* and *The Daily Show*: both *are* popular, and neither are traditional forms of news, but only one of them actually uses that popularity to deal with the issues which have a significant impact within the public sphere (see, for instance, Baym, 2005), while the other spends its time gossiping with great seriousness over the personal lives of celebrities. It means we should be open to the potential of an *A Current Affair* story about the serious issue of youth unemployment, but be highly sceptical about that same program framing that issue as ‘The Paxtons: Version 2.0’¹². Looking at things in terms of *ends*, rather than *means*, we might be

impressed by the significance of what David Letterman did to Bill O'Reilly on *The Late Show* in early 2006¹³, but be less amazed by what O'Reilly does most days over on Fox – here in Australia we might approach 'shock-jock' talkback radio hosts John Laws and Alan Jones in a similar way. *Today Tonight* might conform (almost perfectly) to the tabloid current affairs archetype, but that does not mean that it does not, or cannot, produce journalism that is rigorous, interesting and politically significant. Weblogs as a potential form of journalism could likewise be seen in this same light: some are noteworthy contributions to the public sphere, many others recount completely irrelevant personal anecdotes, while several expose some of the most extreme forms of prejudice. Thus, broad-scale, simplistic judgement in this case is insufficient.

Looking at popular news in the way Fiske (1989: 193) does still acknowledges the distinction between being democratic (and acting for the public), and simply being demotic in reaching the public. What it may also do though is usefully undermine the hollow arguments made by many newspeople when they invoke the phrase 'in the public interest' to defend unethical practices. If all journalists worked to provide what the public was already interested in, then there would be no place for investigative journalism (of which there is currently little in Australia) which has such a long tradition within the profession. In reality, it should be the role of the media to *both* follow and guide public opinion in a cyclical manner. Commercial pressures in many areas of news broadcasting are real, as are the possibilities that other media forms and genres offer, but that

does not mean that the end result is either necessarily 'democratised' or just mindless entertainment.

Rather than simply argue over what counts as a worthy way of informing the public, we might be better off trying to determine what is popular and what is populist. Looking at journalism in terms of its purpose might mean we instead debate the differences between being genuinely democratic and simply being demotic: which, intellectually, is actually a far more challenging and significant undertaking – and provides us with a more nuanced view of the state of modern journalism. Whether or not this approach is the best mode of critique is a matter for open debate of course, but it may still be a starting point for some useful change. Popularising news is a noble cause in many respects, and we should celebrate the marvellous opportunities provided by it, but we still need to be critical of what news becomes popular, and be wary when such opportunities are used up on thinly disguised advertorials about yet another type of diet pill.

NOTES

¹ From here on, the term 'News' will continue to denote both news and current affairs genres.

² Having said this, the ABC has lurched from one funding crisis to another over the last ten years, and the extent of its news services is severely constrained by its budget limitations. However, the fact that a public service broadcaster such as the ABC is seemingly 'immune' from the supposed 'tabloid infection' is further evidence that this 'virus might be [the] product of commercial ownership, not the creation of the tabloids' (Pieper, 2000: 73).

³ Even today the same still applies – when Brisbane broadsheet *The Courier Mail* (that city's only daily newspaper) announced that it would be changing to a tabloid size in late 2005, editors cited the demands of commuters as the biggest reason behind the change (Lehmann, 2005), and the paper was marketed heavily in these terms ("Go Anywhere").

⁴ Partially derived from Hartley (1996: 27) and Winch (1997: 21). See also Costera Meijer (2001: 190).

⁵ Its importance is still invoked by networks when they wish to point out their relevance to society (see Fiske, 1987: 281).

⁶ 60 Minutes is noted as the program that first destroyed the then-conventional wisdom that news and current affairs could not also be profitable (see Miller, 2007: 19).

⁷ This was *A Current Affair's* slogan for some time in 2005.

⁸ Hypocritically, when a *lack* of so-called 'bureaucratic red-tape' ends up in tragedy or failure, this is also covered in negative tones (e.g. "how the government failed this family").

⁹ *Today Tonight*, a program notorious for its employment of tabloid tactics treatment of news, is presently the highest rating current affairs program in Australia.

¹⁰ A short-lived entertaining Australian program which (perhaps slightly awkwardly) blended news and entertainment to previously unseen levels (Turner, 1996b).

¹¹ Although this term does itself have various problems, it is nevertheless useful in attempting to understand some of the changes being discussed here.

¹² The Paxtons are a family whose teenage children were unfairly demonised briefly in the mid-1990s by *A Current Affair* (and, subsequently, the Australian public) because they turned down (apparently staged) offers to work at an island resort, were subsequently framed as lazy, and therefore seemed to be stereotypical young people cheating the welfare system (see Turner, 1999: 70-71).

¹³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_O%27Reilly_controversies#David_Letterman for a brief summary of the encounter.

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