

From:

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»Love it or Loathe it«

Audience Responses to Tabloids in the UK and Germany

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Popular newspapers like the British »The Sun« and the German »Bild« regularly invite controversy over their morals and methods, power and responsibility, political and social impact. The papers are able to attract large audiences, and contribute significantly to the daily lives of millions of readers. This book looks at popular newspapers from an audience point of view. Examining the crucial relationship between news and entertainment, it provides timely empirical evidence for the values tabloids really have for readers and modern day Britain and Germany. Contradicting common myths and stereotypes, the book calls for fresh perspectives on the popular media and their audiences.

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Foreword

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The field of media and communication studies is a rather heterogeneous domain of academic endeavour; its profile is rather sprawling, and its disciplinary origins are plural. In practice today researchers will often make use of several of the many areas that the field encompasses, as well as cross established field boundaries, borrowing from and engaging with other intellectual currents. Observers have rightly noted that this “lack of discipline” yields both strengths and weaknesses: on the negative side, it courts all the usual dangers associated with eclectic efforts. On the plus side, it offers the intellectual excitement of prismatic perspectives and a broad theoretical and methodological toolkit for dealing with complex phenomena that are often difficult to adequately grasp within a single, narrow analytic framework.

This book by Mascha K. Brichta happily belongs to the admirable category that is both robustly broad in its efforts to address a multifaceted research question, and eminently successful in mastering the various intellectual building blocks necessary to do so. The result is a comparative study of excellent quality, an entirely thorough analysis of British readers of *The Sun* and German readers of *Bild*. Conceptually well-formulated and adroitly carried out, this innovative cross-national comparison of tabloid reading experiences also addresses the socio-political contexts of the two countries, their respective media landscapes, as well as the character of the two tabloids themselves. In exploring the similarities and differences between the two cases, the author illuminates how readers make sense of and evaluate the two papers – and in the process she highlights many interesting facets of the complex layers of context in which such reading takes place.

The study is founded on a fine command of the previous research on tabloids, as well as on a deep emersion in the theoretical literature and the history of debates that centre on the themes of journalism, democracy, the public sphere, political participation, popular culture and nationhood. In mobilising this broad array of literature, the author never sacrifices depth and precision. Methodologically, the study is

self-aware and well-equipped. With an anchoring in the general horizons of Cultural Studies, which underscores the processes of sense-making in socio-cultural contexts, the author opts for a series of focus group interviews in each country. All methodological choices have their limitations (as she acknowledges), but the strength of this approach is that it allows for meaning to emerge collectively in live talk: it injects a dynamic dimension into the process of how the respondents talk about the respective tabloids.

Moreover – and I think it is really important to underscore this – the book is operating in several theoretical domains where there is considerable controversy: theoretical orientations are contested, conceptual definitions lack consensus, and one finds clashes over competing research approaches. Not least the author straddles what is often a very deep divide within media and communication studies – on the one hand the traditions associated with Cultural Studies, which emphasise such concerns as subjectivity, identity, and meaning-making; on the other hand, the tradition of political science and political communication. The strength of these latter currents is that they deal with politics, obviously enough, and can offer much insight regarding how its structures and dynamics function. They tend, however, not to address the kinds of themes that the Cultural Studies trajectory highlights, often leaving many unanswered questions about the deeper, subjective processes that come into play with regard to the political. Thus, with so many diverse views in circulation, it is to Brichta's credit that she is not only well-versed in these theoretical domains, understanding the issues at stake, but she can also in an elegant and convincing manner synthesise them, navigate her own course through them, and bring the reader along in her arguments and reasoning. The reader feels – and rightly so – that he or she is in good hands.

Studies that go against the grain – or the torrents – of established common sense are generally speaking the more interesting kinds to read. Here we have a prime example; this research shows that the prevailing impressions about tabloids – and their readers – are not accurate, and the author challenges her readers to rethink these matters. Tabloid newspapers, for all the issues associated with them, do in fact play a significant role in the life of democracies. This book demonstrates this in part by underscoring that a viable democracy is not just a formal system, an abstract entity of structures and processes – it also has cultural and subjective pre-conditions.

It may sound as if this is a work that will be difficult to read – that it will be a “heavy” text to deal with. I am delighted to report that Brichta writes in an accessible and engaging style. The discussion is clear and nuanced; she navigates neatly between the various theoretical positions as well as between the analytic horizons and her empirical data. In particular, the citations from the interviews and her analyses of them make for a most animated text. This is a fine piece of academic workmanship and a welcome contribution to the international research in our field.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Studying Tabloid Reading Cross-Nationally

Tickle the public, make 'em grin,
The more you tickle, the more you'll win.
Teach the public, you'll never get rich,
You'll live like a beggar and die in a ditch.

Fleet Street journalists are said to have coined the anonymously-attributed verse above in the nineteenth century (cf. Engel 1996). Emerging at a crucial time in the development of British popular journalism, the rhyme continues to convey a central element of the controversy characterising contemporary debates and discussions about the tabloid press. Today, popular newspapers with a national reach are, indeed, often immensely profitable; they enjoy a very high circulation and wide audience shares. The papers chosen as case studies for this research, the British tabloid *The Sun* and the German popular daily *Bild* (lit: picture)¹, occupy the two top positions amongst Europe's best-selling newspapers. Outnumbering all other papers in their respective countries, they are prominent features in the daily lives of more than 7.8 million readers in Britain, and 12.5 million people in Germany (National Readership Surveys Ltd 2010; Media-Micro-Census GmbH 2010).

The tabloids' evidently huge appeal for a mass audience, consisting, in large parts, of people from social groups of lower incomes and educational levels, ignites and fuels a controversy that surrounds the popular media in both Germany and the UK. *The Sun* and *Bild* regularly exasperate and infuriate the public in both countries, attracting criticism from the academy, the journalistic profession, and other public realms such as politics, finance and law. The papers are frequently attacked

1 The German tabloid is also commonly referred to as *Bild-Zeitung*; also spelled *Bild-zeitung* or *BILD-Zeitung* (lit: picture newspaper). However, I will confine myself to using the term *Bild* throughout this book, for such is the name displayed on the paper's front page.

for their legal and ethical flaws of reporting, their potential impact on readers' political opinion formation, and their general "lack" of democratic functions, amongst other reasons. In line with perceptions of a trend towards a 'tabloidization' of the media, the most notable drift of thinking in the field is channelled towards devaluing popular newspapers in the context of democratic theory. Revolving around a dismissal of tabloid news values and narrative strategies, such approaches regard popular papers and 'tabloidized' content as a threat to the rational public sphere. The wishful thinking implied in this interpretation of the genre may be exemplified by early arguments aired by Klaus Weber (1978: 282), who demanded that society needs to work towards making tabloid newspapers appear 'unnecessary and unwanted throughout' [author's translation]².

Why, then, study tabloid newspapers? And why study their audiences? To begin with, there is a mismatch between the traditionally prominent position of the press in media theory, and the fact that it still represents an under-researched field in comparison to that of television, which has attracted many scholars. Moreover, the wealth of theories and textual analyses of the genre of popular news and journalism exist in inverse proportion to the rather few academic studies foregrounding an audience point of view – albeit a recently more pronounced academic interest in the popular media and its audience can be noted. Yet, while the phenomenon of 'tabloidization' seems to spread, there is a continuous decline in newspaper readership around the world. Empirical evidence regarding what it is that people want from newspapers, therefore, seems imperative, particularly in light of debates about whether or not printed news have a future at all (cf., for instance, the special issue of *Journalism Studies* (2008) on *The Future of Newspapers*). Two classics in the newspaper genre, *The Sun* and *Bild*, shall be recognised as important cultural products, worthy of academic attention by this study. Examining the perspective of the audience appears truly fascinating; such an approach can provide valuable and timely empirical evidence for the social, cultural and personal significance of popular papers in two contemporary Western societies, shedding a little light on some of the reasons for the success, or failure, of modern newspapers.

Hence, this study focuses on exploring, understanding and comparing audience responses and reading experiences of tabloid newspapers in two different countries. In investigating the reception of the *The Sun* and *Bild* cross-nationally, the research builds on findings from a previous small-scale reception study of *Bild* (Brichta 2002), which drew attention to the crucial relationship between the German tabloid's largely unfavourable social reputation and readers' interpretations of the paper. While acknowledging audiences as 'active' producers of meaning, this more recent study has been carried out assuming that public discourses about popular

2 I am translating all German quotes used in this book into English, but will refrain from signalling my authorship of the translation each time, in the interest of readability.

newspapers have some impact on the way they are read. However, as public opinion about tabloids presumably exists in relation to a nation's specific media system, journalistic and, indeed, academic tradition, the diverse social, cultural and historical backgrounds of Britain and Germany provide a tantalising contextual framework for the cross-national comparison of tabloid reading experiences.

BACKGROUND CONTEXTS

Cross-National Framework

The objects of comparison, the two national tabloids *The Sun* and *Bild*, can be regarded as similar phenomena in differing contexts, thus creating a potentially fruitful setting for a cross-national comparative study. Both newspapers share a number of formal characteristics typical of the genre, relating to their style features, content preferences and narrative strategies. The papers each enjoy a comfortable market position, serving a huge readership and claiming large shares of the less-educated lower-income audience sections. Moreover, *The Sun* and *Bild* both look back on a turbulent history, and are equally controversial in their respective countries.

While these aspects establish the 'conceptual equivalence' (Edelstein 1982: 15) of the research objects, the two tabloids exist in diverse social and cultural settings, which determine key dimensions of national variance. Britain and Germany, despite sharing a number of similarities, differ in key aspects relating to their historical development, their media systems and journalistic traditions, and their contemporary tabloid marketplace. For instance, the diverse histories of the press in Britain and Germany are notable, particularly the various developments of popular journalism and tabloid newspapers. Such formats had long been established in the UK before they emerged in Germany for the first time. As a result of these diverse developments, the two contemporary tabloid marketplaces also differ considerably. The British newspaper market overall is dominated by *national* tabloids, with a particular feature being strong competition and concentration in the London area. In contrast, *Bild* is the only national tabloid in Germany and there is far less competition among the national titles, as a result of the country's long-standing tradition favouring local newspapers and home delivery. Adding to these structural differences, the legal conditions of journalism differ in Britain and Germany. UK journalists enjoy more freedom in terms of what, whom and when to publish; German journalists have to abide by stricter legal protections regarding their subjects' privacy. At the same time, journalists in the UK are at a disadvantage compared to their German colleagues when it comes to professional privileges. As a result, the British press has been described as being more 'ruthless' than its German counterpart (Esser

1999: 303). It would seem that such differences are of significance to the way readers in both countries understand and evaluate tabloids. Yet, the similarities between *The Sun* and *Bild*, conversely, suggest that some aspects of the reading experience may, indeed, be comparable. This research therefore aims to generate insights concerning the impact of different social and cultural backgrounds on the way readers interpret popular newspapers.

Theoretical Approach

Studying tabloid newspapers and their audiences involves facing the challenging task of situating the research within a rather polarised debate. Essentially, there are two major interpretations of popular newspapers that scholars have employed in recent years. The first deals with tabloids as a threat to society and democracy, reflecting dominant intellectual and political concerns entailed in classic Frankfurt School positions relating to popular culture. Within this well-rehearsed canon of criticism, the discussions amongst British and German scholars and practitioners show similar agendas. The debate in the US and the UK, in particular, has branched out towards a lament relating to perceived changes in reporting considered to be heading in the direction of a 'tabloidization' of media content. Scholars particularly foreground concerns about a 'dumbing-down' of journalistic standards (cf., for instance, Blumler 1999; Brants 1998; Esser 1999; Marlow 2002, Bromley 1998). Similar issues have been addressed in Germany; however, the tabloid *Bild*, as the country's only national tabloid, is predominantly placed as the centre of attention in these discussions. A wide range of textual analyses, both ancient and more recent, have pronounced *Bild*'s reporting unsatisfactory in the context of journalistic quality (cf., for instance, Droege 1968; Link 1986; Jäger 1993; Büscher 1996; Schirmer 2001; Jogschies 2001; Virchow 2008). Other works have lamented reporters' and editors' ruthless behaviour, claiming they disregard ethical principles and practices, and arguing for a greater responsibility in the making of *Bild* and its treatment of people (cf., for instance, Küchenhoff and Keppler 1972; Wallraff 1977, 1979, 1981; Wende 1990; Ionescu 1996; Minzberg 1999). Further strands of argumentation, in both the UK and Germany, consider the popular press as an instrument for swaying mass opinions. Scholars taking this view have raised serious concerns about the papers' impact on audiences' political opinion-formation, and express massive discomfort with the papers' ideologies (cf., for instance, Bechmann et al. 1979; Albrecht 1982; Rust 1984; Bebbler 1997; Gehrs 2006; *The Sun*'s political influence is covered by Linton 1995; Curtice 1999; Black 2002; and Douglas 2004, 2005).

Some of these notions clearly need to be considered carefully when thinking about the relationship between tabloid newspapers and their readers, and about the papers' role in society. Concerns about perceived changes in and to the media, such

as those addressed in the ‘tabloidization’ argument for instance, highlight crucial issues relating to the structure of media industries along capitalist lines of production and consumption. Likewise, the debate raises valid questions about the power and responsibility of popular red-tops and huge media enterprises, such as the publishing houses *News Corp* and *Axel Springer AG*. Still, common to most of these works are rather pessimistic conclusions about the potentially harmful effects of tabloid reporting on readers and democracy. A strong devaluation of the popular media is implied in these views, showing distinct parallels to Adorno and Horkheimer’s early perspective that condemned the popular media as socially, politically and culturally worthless (1972). In the context of binary oppositions of “high” and “low” culture, a rather passive view of the audience emerges from this approach. Drawing on certain beliefs regarding how information and learning works, and on whom it works, these approaches, indeed, entail a rather ‘disabling perspective’ of the popular media and their audience (Corner and Pels 2003: 4; cf. also Storey 1993; Gauntlett 2008: 22 pp.) However, these conceptions do not account for the potential functions, uses and enjoyments readers may derive from the genre.

Challenging such uniformly depreciative theories about the role of the popular media in society, the polar opposite of these views can be traced back to an intellectual tradition that has come to be called ‘Cultural Studies’. There is some convergence of British media studies and Cultural Studies, as many of the theoretical and methodological approaches within media studies tend to be drawn from, and shared with, Cultural Studies and vice versa. This book is firmly set in an overlap between these two disciplines. Yet, as the study is also situated within the domain of media consumption and media audiences, the readership research primarily draws on the paradigms emerging from the form of qualitative audience studies stemming from the Cultural Studies tradition (cf. Jensen 1991). One of the most important principles worth noting here includes, above all, the notion of the ‘active audience’. This view of audiences as active with regards to their meaning-construction from media texts provides an essential intellectual framework for the research. Likewise, informing my approach is the re-evaluation of popular culture as a form of lived, everyday ‘way of life’, for entertainment and ‘the trivial’ are self-evident elements of culture from a Cultural Studies point of view (cf. Jäckel and Peter 1997; Turner 2003; Storey 1993). These ideas have been drawn on and developed extensively over the past 20 years or so, particularly by British and US-American scholars; they contribute to a considerable body of works on the study of popular culture. In comparison, Cultural Studies’ drifts of thinking have long been neglected by German media researchers, and have only recently been placed on the academic agenda. Yet, as indicated, this book subscribes to the view that the popular media should be granted some social and cultural value, adding to traditional functions of the media (such as informing citizens and providing for participation within the rational public sphere), rather than impeding these purposes. Some of these issues seem particular-

ly worth investigating from the point of view of audiences in Germany and the UK; in particular notions concerning the role of the popular media in the construction of belonging and community, as expressed in citizenship, social participation and collective identity formations.

Questions

This study is guided by the desire to examine the specificities and idiosyncrasies of experiences and understandings of tabloid newspapers in two different countries, taking as case studies the two national tabloids *The Sun* and *Bild*. The research aims to contribute to the on-going debate about tabloid news values; to fill the knowledge gap regarding the reception of tabloid newspapers; to provide an account of different and shared characteristics in the UK and Germany, and to offer explanations for the similarities and differences identified by the study. Hence, the research enquiries comprise two sets of key questions:

I. Exploring the tabloid reading experience

- How do tabloid readers make sense of reading *The Sun* and *Bild*?
- How do audience members evaluate the papers?

II. Comparing tabloid reading cross-nationally

- How do tabloid readers in the UK and Germany differ in the way they make sense of tabloids and evaluate them? How can such differences be explained in relation to the specific social and cultural contexts in either country?
- What aspects of the British and German tabloid reading experience are similar, and how can such similarities be explained?

Issues to consider in relation to the first broad field of enquiry concern various questions relating to how readers approach and make sense of the tabloids and their texts. For instance, then, this text explores how audiences assess tabloid reporting in relation to the journalistic ideal in each country, and what they make of the contradictions embedded in the genre. I was also intrigued to investigate if reading tabloids is ultimately translated into the expression of civic, cultural or other forms of citizenship; and I examine here in what ways the papers fit in with notions of belonging and identity. Moreover, I was guided by the desire to explore if the papers' social reputation "rubs off" on readers' attitudes, and if so, what that means to the reading experience; comments on this also feature in this book.

The second field of enquiry relates to the cross-national comparison. I explore what similarities and differences can be observed between British and German

readers' modes of engagement with tabloids, asking if these relate back to individual traditions in either country. The study seeks to examine the impact of *The Sun* and *Bild*'s similarities on the reading experience, while finding out in what ways the varying media systems and journalistic cultures in Germany and the UK influence readers' views. For instance, I asked if tabloids are more accepted socially in the UK, due to their longer tradition and dominance on the market. Likewise, can stronger ethical judgements be observed among German readers, as a result of the country's detailed press laws and journalists' generally less aggressive approach to researching and reporting? And, what are the implications of the fact that the papers state their political opinions rather differently (explicitly in the UK, implicitly in Germany)?

Method

This book is concerned with examining collective processes of meaning creation, whilst paying particular attention to the way in which this is negotiated in a larger group setting. Aiming to reproduce social reality, focus group discussions were chosen as the method of data collection. In total, 104 adults drawn from diverse backgrounds participated in 18 focus groups spread across the two countries, of which 12 groups were selected for detailed analysis. Participants were asked about their likes and dislikes regarding the chosen papers, and were invited to discuss particular aspects of *The Sun* or *Bild*. Three distinct front pages from the tabloids were introduced to the respondents in either country, in order to direct the discussion towards specific themes, such as notions of nationhood, politics, and scandal. The extensive qualitative data collected allowed a detailed investigation of the research questions, and provided a wealth of fascinating material to draw on in the analysis and interpretation of the results.

BOOK OUTLINE

The book consists of ten chapters, which are divided into three principal sections. I begin by setting the scene for the cross-national comparison in the first section, unfolding the conceptual comparative framework for the research and explaining my argument about *The Sun* and *Bild* as similar phenomena in differing contexts. Chapter 2 establishes the 'conceptual equivalence' of my research objects. Reviewing key facts relating to *The Sun* and *Bild*'s commercial, historic, social and editorial contexts, a range of commonalities between the two papers are highlighted. Chapter 3, then, brings to light key dimensions of variance through the comparison of Britain and Germany, with regard to their historic, legal and economic contexts.

The second section of the book investigates the academic debate relating to tabloids by reviewing dominant approaches to popular newspapers and related media formats in Britain and Germany. Chapter 4 represents the first half of the literature review. It maps existing theoretical approaches to the genre and establishes the epistemological and theoretical beliefs that underpin my investigation of readership responses; traditional and alternative perspectives on popular journalism in Germany and the UK are discussed. The subsequent Chapter 5 represents a detailed résumé of previous studies in the field of qualitative audience research and tabloid newspaper reception, highlighting what has been done and, indeed, what needs to be done.

Section three of this book contains the primary readership research. It considers tabloids from an audience point of view. The first chapter in this section, Chapter 6, marks a detailed explanation of my research methodology; an explanation of the choices made to meet the twin criteria of validity and reliability is offered, as is justification for the value and logic of the study's approach. I discuss the premises, and describe the steps leading to the realisation of the project. The following three chapters deal with a discussion of the research findings. The results have been grouped around key questions and aspects identified in the analysis of the data. Chapter 7 is concerned with the tensions and contradictions surrounding the reception. It maps generic and nationally-variant audience responses to *The Sun* and *Bild*, unfolding four principal modes of engagement with popular newspapers and highlighting similarities and differences surrounding the tabloid reading experience in Germany and the UK. The central theme of the following two chapters is to explore the role of popular newspapers in contemporary Western society. Examining the potential of tabloids to facilitate significant notions of inclusion, sharing, belonging and identification, my arguments are divided into two parts. Chapter 8 attends to important ways in which popular newspapers foster communicative, social, and cultural participation by activating and stimulating their readers. Chapter 9 takes a closer look at tabloids as tools for social belonging, discussing the papers' ability to contribute to notions of community and identity. Finally, the concluding Chapter 10 reflects on the study's key findings and discusses the role of the popular press in contemporary Western society. I consider the papers' potential to stimulate readers through their idiosyncratic style features and narrative strategies; draw attention to the "negotiable space" generated by tabloids; explain the "vision of the good and bad" that readers' develop in response to the papers' reporting, and emphasise popular papers' significance to readers' social and cultural identity formations.