

## Tabloid Journalism An interview with Colin Sparks<sup>1</sup>

**Colin Sparks**

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<sup>1</sup> A versão original, em inglês, da entrevista.



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Colin Sparks is Professor of the Department of Journalism at the Hong Kong Baptist University. He was Professor of Media Studies and Director of the Communication and Media Research Institute at the University of Westminster between 2004 and 2011. At the beginning of the 1990s, his research on tabloidization was the starting point for a series of lectures on the subject, and is considered as starting point for more recent researches. The main reference to this work is “Tabloid Tales” (2000), edited by Sparks and John Tullock, one of the essential readings for the researcher.

Some time before publishing “Tabloid Tales”, Sparks has edited, with Peter Dalhgren (1992), another anthology of journalism and popular culture studies, following the work of Kurtz (1993) and Fiske (1992).

The inspiration for “Tabloid Tales” came from the Slovenian academic journal *Javnost – The Public*, edited by Sparks (1998), one of the first publications that dealt with tabloidization. With texts by Ian Connell, Elizabeth S. Bird, Kaori Hayashi, Agnes Gulyas, Ulrike Klein, Dick Rooney, Mira MacDonald, and Sparks himself, this publication anticipated the supranational approach and varied disciplinary breadth, including studies reviewing United States, Germany, Japan, UK and Hungary. Some of the articles, as well as never published texts, were published in the book edited by Sparks and Tulloch.

Working on press journalism, the author developed an important theoretical-methodological approach to evaluate tabloidization, establishing elements, which have been identified by different researches until then. This seminal work offers a counterpoint to Fiske on the tabloid culture as a form of popular resistance, as Elizabeth Bird points out in her article from “Tabloid Tales”.

Colin Sparks has no intention of coming back to the theme, even though he keeps an attentive eye on the development of the press in emerging democracies, one of the themes of the following interview that took place in July, at the Hyderabad International Convention Centre (HICC), Hyderabad, India, during the meeting of International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Professor Sparks, you are (co-) responsible, together with Professor John Tulloch, for one of the most important edited books on tabloid studies. How do you see the recent development of the research on this topic? What do you think of the state of the art on the issue of tabloidization, and how is it now developing in a scholar basis? – because much of the literature on this issue is from Europe or United States and almost all from around the nineties early-twenties. We don't have too much recent literature either on Europe or the United States, and for developing countries like Brazil, India, China and South Africa, tabloid journalism is a present issue. So, as your work was a kind of a starting point for this subject, I would like to hear from you how are you accompanying this topic right now.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Before I start I want to make it clear that I haven't worked in this field for fifteen years. So I am not making the most recent report from the research frontier. I also want to ask: are you familiar with the work of Herman Wasserman? He is much more up-to-date than I am and he has much more relevant material to talk to you about. This work is not only more recent than mine but it might well be much more relevant to the Brazilian situation. The problems with tabloidization that I was concerned with appear when newspaper readership is very widespread in a stratified society. As I understand it, Brazil, historically, is a society where newspaper readership was limited in circulation and newspapers were essentially read by the elite. Many of the potential readers of tabloid newspapers were illiterate or they lived in the countryside and had no access to newspaper whatsoever. So I would guess that the problem of tabloidization in Brazil is the result of increasing urbanization and rising living standards. You have now more urban poor, who are literate and therefore are a potential market for tabloid newspapers. That's a parallel with the South Africa, where the end of Apartheid permitted a flourishing of a black oriented press. I don't know if there is a parallel in it at all, but it would be worth investigating.

I don't know if there are tabloid newspapers in India in a classical sense. Although many Indian journalists would say that the elite newspapers have become tabloids.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** There is one newspaper in India that is said to have the biggest circulation rate of all the world, is the Dainik Jagran.

**COLIN SPARKS:** But that is not actually a tabloid [in the strict sense].

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Yes.

**COLIN SPARKS:** That's also the case in China: some of the popular evening newspapers and commercial newspapers have had tabloid elements, so clearly it is a phenomenon that isn't restricted to the advanced countries, but the dynamics might be very different.

I am going to talk about newspaper mostly, not about television tabloidization which is interesting but raises different sorts of questions. I think there are three things to distinguish. One is the U.S. phenomenon where there are tabloids which are not publicly identified as newspapers. The "supermarket tabloids" in the U.S. are not competing with the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times or the Los Angeles Times etc. They are occupying a different market niche. The second type is the European model which is highly developed in the U.K., quite well developed in Germany for, or Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, which is the newspaper market is stratified in different kinds of products, one of which is the tabloid newspaper. And the third issue is the tabloidization of the traditional newspapers.

I don't know which case applies to Brazil's. Most of my work is concentrated in the issue of the stratified newspaper market. That is to say: [1] where in a newspaper market different titles have different core audiences, [2] where there is a competitive newspaper market, [3] where in order to survive it is necessary to occupy a particular niche. Either a niche of huge circulation in order to attract advertisements for fast moving goods or an elite market of advertising for luxury goods. So, most of what I say is going to be based around that problem. What seems to be the case, certainly in the U.K., is that the tabloid press is in a long-term historical decline. It was the case up until the late 1980s that although the total number of newspapers was declining, the balance in the newspaper market between the circulation of tabloids and the circulation of elite newspapers was shifting very, very slowly in the direction of the elite newspaper. And this I think is partially a response to rising education standards. If my parents read the Sun and I read the Financial Times or the Guardian, [that's] because I had many more educational opportunities than they did.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** But quality press is also facing kind of a...

**COLIN SPARKS:** Well this is into the late 1980s. After the late 1980s the situation starts to change, I think. Firstly because total newspaper circulation including quality newspaper circulation begins to decline. The interest of readers declined before the widespread diffusion of the internet. So you cannot say it is because people are now going online for news. I am sure the availability of online news has contributed to this decline in print circulation, but there is a decline in circulation from the late 1980s which affects the whole range of titles. There were some changes due to price wars that took place in Britain in the early 1990s, but the secular trend is that all sectors are declining; not all titles, all sectors. I think the circulation of quality newspaper, all quality newspapers, has declined. In the popular press, the down-market tabloids have declined. In the mid-market sector one of the tabloids has declined and the other has continued to increase. I don't live in the UK any more, so I don't have the most recent figures, but the Daily Mail, which in many ways is the most successful newspaper in Britain in terms of its circulation, has so far held up. So the picture is generally one of decline, certainly one of decline for quality newspapers and an uneven picture for popular newspapers. There is really only one exception. So that suggests to me that the long-term trend of a shift from tabloid to quality newspapers in terms of the balance of circulation needs to be reconsidered. Why might this trend change? I think one possibility, which is rather difficult to formulate precisely, is that the rising overall educational level led for a period of time to increasing readership of quality newspapers. After a certain point increasing educational level has a much less marked effect. Perhaps this is in terms of the well-known phenomenon in many countries of the over-production of graduates. You educate people to be doctors or lawyers or teachers and they end up working at McDonald's or whatever. So it may be that the "natural progression" was through education, from manual working class jobs or lower level white-collar jobs to professional jobs. As a result of that shift you got a shift from the Sun or the Daily Express to the Guardian or the Telegraph. We now have a shift from manual or lower level white-collar jobs perhaps to higher level white-collar jobs but relatively few shift into elite. Maybe the shift is now away from the tabloids towards the mid-market newspapers, towards to the Daily Mail in particular. I am not sure about that but it seems to be a subject which is worth investigating because I think the relationship between newspaper readership and social structure is mysterious, but it

clearly exists. I don't have an answer to what it is but I think it is related to all sorts of questions of cultural capital, life-course, social mobility and so forth.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** But somehow tabloid journalism is always associated with that declining of quality press. We have this classical claim, especially from corporations and some professionals, that they are facing problems because of the popular journals, the popular newspapers. But if you look over the Brazilian political economic scenario, for example, you'll get another figure: most of the media conglomerates there that own quality papers also have a complimentary tabloid to...

**COLIN SPARKS:** These tabloids allow them to reach another readership?

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Yes.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Well I am not sure that is unique. The Sun and the Times are both owned by Murdoch<sup>1</sup> and they sell to all different people...

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** The common claim is always that tabloid journalism is contributing to decrease the level or the quality of the journalism etc. But if you take the case with higher acuity you'll see from another prism. So, how do you think this association is worked up by other scholars? And personally how do you perceive this phenomenon: do you think tabloid journalism is somehow really a menace to journalism or...

**COLIN SPARKS:** I honestly don't think it is a menace to journalism. I would need to know much more about the Brazilian case before I could possibly make any comments. I think again the South African case is of much more use to you than I can ever be. As I understand it, tabloid journalism in South Africa has created a new market for newspapers, amongst the upper levels of the black population, the new middle class and sections of the working class.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Kind of an identity issue post-apartheid.

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<sup>1</sup> The British tabloid The Sun and The Times are both held by News Corp UK & Ireland Limited (formerly News International), a subsidiary of News Corp, owned by the media magnate Rupert Murdoch. Times Newspapers Ltd was purchased by NI in 1981 from the Thomson Corporation. The Sun was acquired by 1969 from International Publishing Corporation.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Yes. The kinds of journalism adopted are the ones that fit very well the cultural norms of that particular social group. Whereas the traditional press fits very well with the cultural norms of, I don't want to say just white people, but also some black people who have joined the elite since the end of Apartheid. In the case of Brazil, I would need to know what kind of audiences are these tabloids creating? Are they speaking to a new audience in the favelas or are they speaking to a layer of the settled urban new middle class? I don't know. The second thing that would I need to know is the business question: what are the business models? In Britain, as you know, the tabloid press have a completely different business model than the quality press. The quality press depends on advertising. The popular press depends on massive circulation for their primary revenues. In the case of Brazil, again, I don't know. I imagine the quality press is also heavily subsidized by advertisement.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Yes.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Is the popular press also subsidized by advertising or not?

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** By another nature of advertisement because they focus mostly on local and regional advertisers. And quality press also receives governmental advertisers.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Yes. So, there isn't any direct economic threat from these new titles. They are writing for different people, with different educational background and different pattern of social lives. Presumably, the Brazilian elite is a little different from the middle class people we are talking about? And the different titles are based on a different economic model. Why should they have any effect on the quality of newspaper?

The only explanation I can think of would be to do with two different issues, and here I am speculating again. If you look for example, at the US newspaper press, it has two important and unique characteristics: [1] an economic characteristic and [2] a journalistic characteristic. Historically fit together very, very well. Firstly they were, in the vast majority of cases, local monopolies. So they were not facing any serious competition either from other news outlets or from other advertising vehicles. And this meant they had huge revenues, which were much above average for industry as a whole. It was also very difficult for any competitor to enter the market and so on. And secondly, they were able to develop on this basis a brand of journalism that stressed,

what one has to say was serious journalism, although actually to the British eye it looked self-indulgent and boring. Starting an article on the front page and then you had to turn to page 4 to read the rest of it. These are things you could do if you were the only game in town. This is a kind of journalism which is very unattractive to a popular readership. You need a very high education level just to actually plow through it. But given that you were the only game in town and given that the people who generated most advertising revenue were the elite. Who were most likely to want to read this kind of stuff, you could get away with it for 50 years. There was a happy coincidence of an advertising model and a journalism model in the U.S. The introduction of the internet, of course, has shattered that advertising model as far as revenues goes. In the case of Brazil, are there competing serious newspapers in the major cities or not?

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Yes.

**COLIN SPARKS:** And how many titles are competing in each city?

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** We have at least three major newspaper titles that compete in a nationwide basis, two from São Paulo and one from Rio de Janeiro.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Three quality papers. Ok, and so they compete in a nationwide basis, basically they are everywhere?

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Yes, but with reduced size or localized editions.

**COLIN SPARKS:** That destroys the argument I was trying to develop, which is the real pressure to tabloidization in serious journalism arises when you have competition in the elite press market because what that means is that you have to be more attuned to the desires of any particular audience or segment you are going to attract. So, a newspaper, let's say the Financial Times, isn't displaying any significant tabloid aspect. Whereas the Guardian much more clearly does. So I think that being in a competitive market will force newspapers to define themselves in niche terms and to adapt their journalism to what a current of readers of a particular niche expect.

So there is a certain degree of market stratification in Brazil but there is competition between these papers, direct competition for readers because the Guardian and the Financial Times aren't really competing for readers.



I would have thought that would drive tabloidization much more clearly. What journalists will do is learn from the success from the lower market. I would guess the lower market papers have bigger circulations?

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** The mid-market is growing its circulations, the tabloids are still rising but they are facing some competition with the mid-market, which I could say is the most successful model now actually, the one that is directed for the emerging C class.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Well, yes, exactly, that's the Daily Mail. That is the newspaper model that is going to take over the world. That is really interesting.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** But let me just turn back to the 90s and 2000s, and the academic literature on tabloids and tabloidization. It seems to me that in those decades we have two different perspectives on tabloids and the tabloidization phenomenon. There is one in which I would say was most, Herman Wasserman also argues that, a most macro level interpretation of tabloidization, which deals mainly with the cultural aspects, with the so-called tabloid culture and with how the tabloids deal with identity formation today, identity representations. And the other is the micro level of, which would focus mostly on the relation between the quality press and the tabloid press and also the relation in between the journalism and the public interest.

**COLIN SPARKS:** Yes, exactly.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** So, we have the first one toward an understanding of tabloidization, say, as a microscopic phenomenon, which seeks to specifically assess the relationship between the tabloid/tabloidized journalism and issues of public interest, and another toward more broadly to the understanding of a so-called "tabloid culture", considered by many authors as an engaged or even populist perspective. How do you see these two aspects? Are they irreconcilable? Because in "Tabloid Tales", you seem to have tried to deal with these two perspectives with...

**COLIN SPARKS:** Balance?

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** Yes.

**COLIN SPARKS:** I think there was a genuine debate in Europe, then probably still there is a genuine debate, but again I think the South African case is very, very interesting. There you can make out the cases that even though these titles are full of witchcraft and horror stories about that traffic accidents, children being abducted, God knows what, nevertheless, what they are doing is extending the public sphere.

You can say that in a sense this is a discovery process where those two positions that you identified don't actually apply in the South African case because at the same time there are these newly enfranchised masses who are entering the official public sphere for the first time and at the same time the tabloids are also rearticulating an African identity.

The tabloids are perhaps combining these issues, both the public interest and the formation of cultural identity. This may not be taking the ideal form: it maybe in a commercialized form; it maybe commercialized; it maybe very often sensationalized, and bastardized and sexualized and so on. But nevertheless they can be seen as combining these things in a way that is impossible for the more established quality titles. So these things become are polarized. There is one debate for the elite and another debate for the masses.

This isn't destroying public life. We agree this is a response to a major shift in the social and political structure of developing countries. We agree that it's kind of a journalism which is appropriate to the cultural capital of a particular social layer. We think, that there is no significant sense in which these mid-market newspapers actually replace elite newspapers. If you are a banker or a lawyer you are still going to read O Globo etc. So these titles aren't eating the audience for the elite press. They may be eating some of the advertising revenue, they may be complementary papers to these in terms of different audience. But there is no reason why journalists in these elite newspapers should feel they need to adopt down market models in order to defend their positions. If they are incorporating tabloid elements, then it is much more likely that it's part of the competition between elite newspapers. There will be some crossovers of readership, of course. If you look at the U.K. there is some crossover. The Daily Mail, the Daily Telegraph have some competition for readers but I don't believe it is the fundamental issue at stake.

There is another important question here, which the Daily Mail brings up: that of gender. The Daily Mail has a majority of female readers, the only newspaper in Britain that does. Because it attempts to speak to women. They do not do it in feminist terms, but compared to other newspapers in Britain they systematically attempt to speak about topics that they believe are of interest to women readers. Other newspapers in Britain don't do that: they are full of football and politics and so on. This is a rational economic strategy which attempts to make the newspaper one which both adult family members are going to want to look at. Then they are both potential purchasers of the newspaper, and both are potentially readers of the newspaper. They both have some disposable income, so both are potentially attractive to advertisers. With this strategy you have a product which sells to more readers and attracts more advertisers. In the case of the Daily Mail, it means a big emphasis on celebrities and so on, which many people would see as one of the key elements in tabloidization, so one could argue that the success of this particular, non-feminist, address to women does contribute to the overall problem we are discussing.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** To conclude, I would like to hear more about your recent research. You have been teaching and researching at Hong Kong Baptist University for about three years and has published a number of articles on the relationship between media and politics in China, as well as comparative research on Latin America, Africa and East Europe Media. Are these works part of a broader set of investigative efforts? In what stage is your current research? And do you have any intention to turn back to more specifically tabloid studies in future years?

**COLIN SPARKS:** First of all I don't have much future left. [Laughing.] I am at the end of my career. So, there is no point in asking me if in 10 years-time I'll go back to tabloidization. The answer is: in 10 years-time I shall be in the geriatric ward, if I am lucky... What my current interests are, as ever, is chaotic... The work on China, the work on Africa, and also the work I did on Eastern Europe, I even wrote an article on Brazil and Mexico, was to do with an interest in transitions. To what extent do these processes towards democracy, and sometimes away from democracy, raise the question of what does democracy mean? What roles does the media play in existing democracies? Does this fit with the normative models of democracy? And how do issues around tabloidization fit in to these processes? Are such developments best

described as a process towards democracy? If not, what is the nature of this process? If I ever find the time I will write a book about transitions. But I live in China, and my current work is mostly on the problems raised by Chinese development, I would not claim to do research on China, because I don't speak Chinese, so I can't. But I can work with people who are capable of doing research on China. In fact I have a number of very good collaborators. We are working on aspects of Chinese journalism. . But that doesn't pose quite the same issues as are raised by tabloidization. There are popular newspapers, which are addressed to the metropolitan reader, and they are much more tabloidized than the more official titles. That doesn't necessarily mean that they are apolitical. The most famous daily newspaper in China is simply called the Southern Metropolitan Daily. It has some characteristics of tabloids: big pictures and headlines on the front page, more emphasis on crime and scandal and so on. In the Chinese context, however, the presentational methods of tabloidization don't necessary involve an evacuation of the political agenda. The political agenda in China means something very different than in Brazil or in Britain. But nevertheless, to the extent, let's say, severe corruption might get exposed, is more likely to get exposed in the tabloid Southern Metropolitan Daily, than is it in the elite Guangming Daily.

**VIKTOR CHAGAS:** So the tabloids also merge with a kind of an alternative media?

**COLIN SPARKS:** Not alternative. The party still controls all titles. Newspapers in China are published by groups of several titles. All have a party title which probably loses money, is dead boring, nobody reads it. And they have other papers, a metropolitan title or an economic title or whatever, which is usually very successful. Sells lots of copy, sells lots of advertising and is subsidized. For example, the People's Daily group, also owns one of the most successful tabloids, and it really is a tabloid in many ways, the Global Times. This is not sensationalist the same way as the Sun and the Star in the UK, in which you have pictures of naked woman and so on, but very much reflects and amplifies the popular mood. So it may not be a weird Chinese parallel to what you were talking about in Brazil, but it clearly speaks to a layer of Chinese popular opinion which feels, not that they themselves are now empowered, but that China is rising. It helps to form a kind of populist-national political identity. That may have some parallels with what you were talking about in Brazil and what Wasserman and others say about Africa. It may well be another example of that sense in which

tabloid newspapers help produce a particular kind of social identity. China was a society where traditionally the newspaper readers were an elite, and over the last 30 years it [the readership] has grown significantly. We are talking about a new readership, living in very different condition from the past. This is a society where people are often at least half attached to the countryside, and where people are experiencing rapid social and geographical mobility. So, maybe I should try to do some work on tabloidization again? What I have told you wasn't very current and it wasn't very useful for you. But it was very useful and interesting to talk to you because it made me think about things that I have not previously considered. It gave me at least a couple of ideas to go away.

A lot of things moved on since I last wrote about tabloids. Other researchers have come with more viable ideas. Certainly from the point of view of a country like Brazil, or for that matter, China, the situation is completely different. What is true in an old industrial country with a relatively static social structure is not necessarily true in a society that is rapidly urbanizing and industrializing. What I always say to Chinese people is "Look, your grandfather was probably a peasant, I have no idea when was the last member of my family a peasant. As far as I can trace back my family they have been urban workers, not peasants." There is a relatively fixed social structure in places like Britain. In developing countries it's a much more fluid social environment, whereas in Britain there is no choice, nothing ever changes. So I think if I was going to return to studying tabloidization in Britain it would be going back to different questions than the ones that interest you in Brazil. The central interest would be in the ways in which the decline of newspapers reshapes the fields, I think the current situation is that the "masculinist" down-market tabloids are in sharp decline. One of the mid-market tabloids, the one that is much more gender neutral, even gender positive, is rising. The elite or quality press are in some financial trouble. The Guardian print edition is in decline but its online circulation is enormous: according to its own figures it is second in the world to the New York Times in terms of online readers. But it can't translate that enormous readership into revenue. It does not charge for access, and no newspaper has managed to sell sufficient advertising online to cover its overall costs. The Guardian probably loses millions of dollars a day, Hong Kong dollars, that is... I think that if I went back to tabloidization in Britain it would be in a different social economic climate. It is a very, very interesting climate but it would imply that. I wouldn't go back to those old debates.

I don't think they are any more relevant in what is a sharply different situation. I don't think they are particularly significant to the situation we are all in now.