

## Tabloid Journalism: Definition, History & Examples

The tabloids play a larger role in popular culture and in the publishing industry than many people like to admit. In this lesson, we're going to check out the history of this tradition and see how it got to be the sensation it is today.

### Tabloid Journalism

If you've ever been to a grocery store, you've seen them: the tabloids. These are magazines focused on salacious celebrity gossip and sensational news, which you know must be considered with a certain degree of skepticism. Love it or hate it, **tabloid journalism** has a long and enduring history as not only a form of entertainment but also a metric by which to evaluate our devotion to the freedom of speech. Tabloids are over-exaggerated, sensationalized, and often false, but we love them anyway. Want to know more? Well, let's read all about it.

### Origins

Print media has played a very important role in Western history, particularly in places like England and the United States. In American history, for example, the ability to communicate through newspapers helped American colonists form a national identity and spread ideas about revolution. For nearly as long as print media has existed in the hands of private industry, the desire to sell more papers has encouraged a degree of sensationalism. True tabloid journalism, as we know it however, begins in the late 19th century.

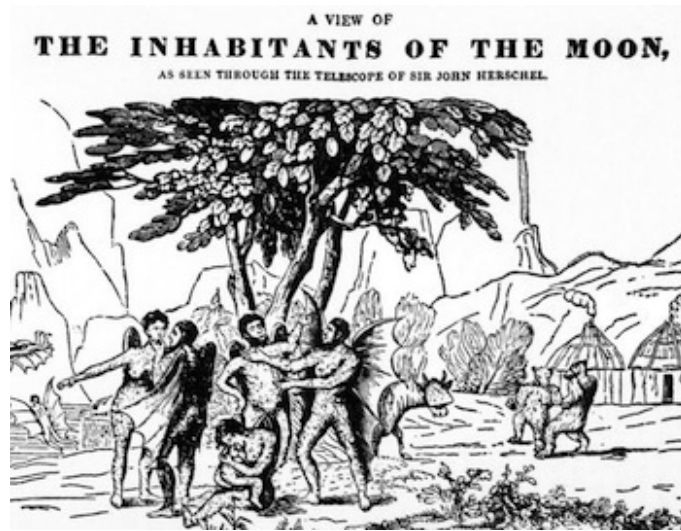
The first registered use of the word "tabloid" came in 1884 from an English pharmaceuticals company named Burroughs Wellcome and Company. They trademarked the term to describe a pill containing compressed powders. Within the next decade or so, the term tabloid had spread, referring to anything that was compressed. It wasn't long until the popular condensed newspapers of England, which only presented compacted articles on popular topics, became known as tabloid papers.

### The First Tabloids

While the term tabloid first described a small and condensed newspaper, it quickly grew to define a style of journalism based around graphic crime stories, gossip, and even astrology. This form of media made its way across the Atlantic and found a new home in the United States, where **yellow journalism** (journalism based on exaggeration or misrepresentation) was already a dominant trend.

Americans had already been consuming tabloids in all but name for almost a century by the time the term arrived from England. In 1833, Benjamin H. Day began printing *The New York Sun*, a cheap publication that he sold for a penny. At the time, newspapers were only sold by subscription, and not

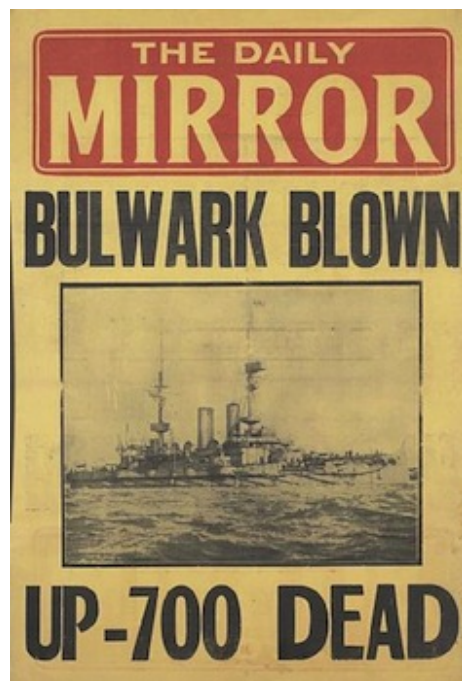
all Americans could afford them. But everybody could afford *The New York Sun*, and Day kept profits high by printing often-outrageous stories, including one in 1835 that claimed life had been discovered on the moon.



*Inhabitants of the Moon, as published by the New York Sun*

Other publications in the United States soon followed suit. James Gordon Bennett ran over-exaggerated crime stories in *The Herald*, William Randolph Hearst published salacious gossip and popular stories in the *San Francisco Examiner*, and Joseph Pulitzer capitalized on the dramas of life in crime-filled New York with the *New York World*. Yes, this is the same Joseph Pulitzer after whom the Pulitzer Prize is named.

British publishers also focused more on tabloids after 1900, with the Viscount Northcliffe Alfred Harmsworth opening *The Daily Mirror* in 1903. Harmsworth reduced the amount of text even further, relying on new technologies in printing photographs to create a newspaper that contained more images than words. This is often seen as the first modern tabloid.



Tabloid editors like Pulitzer, Hearst, Bennett, and Harmsworth took the genre beyond simply reporting the news. They made news. In one famous account, Hearst paid for celebrity French actress Sarah Bernhardt to have a night out on the town, complete with a trip to an opium den. He then had the accounts of the evening written up and published as celebrity gossip. If there was no good gossip to be had, then the tabloid journalists would simply have to create news themselves.



*Sarah Bernhardt in California with journalists from the San Francisco Examiner*

## Tabloids Today

Tabloid journalism rose out of a world where there was little government regulation and the values of competition determined market ethics. This is also the same world that encouraged monopolies and refused to prohibit child labor. As the 20th century continued, tabloids continued to grow in circulation and profit, despite changing social morals. In fact, the development of major supermarkets in the 1970s provided them with a new market: they switched from newsstands to grocery stores as their main distribution points. Today, the top tabloids in Britain are the *Daily Express*, *The Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Mail*, and *The Sun*. They are often called "red-tops" due to the red headlines that adorn the front cover. In the United States, the *National Enquirer*, *Globe*, and *Star* are the dominant tabloids.

Tabloid journalism is a subject of much debate today. These publications are frequently sued for inaccurate or misrepresentative information, but their profits are so high that lawsuits are simply seen as an expected business expenditure. National satirical publications like *The Onion* have built upon this tradition as well, openly touting fictional news stories in gleeful mockery of tabloid culture. For the time, it seems that tabloid journalism is here to stay but if anything happens to this tradition, don't worry, the tabloids will tell you all about it.

## Lesson Summary

**Tabloid journalism** is the publication of news stories that are over-exaggerated, sensationalized, or falsified for the sake of grabbing readers' attentions and generating higher profit. The tradition dates back to the **yellow journalism** of 19th century Britain and the USA, when sensationalized stories were printed in cheap publications like *The New York Sun*. By the end of the century, the term tabloid had been coined and applied to small newspapers with condensed but dramatic articles. Britain's *The Daily Mirror* added a heavy use of photographs and images to this format, and is credited as the first modern tabloid. Tabloid journalism grew with the celebrity culture, printing technologies, and distribution opportunities of the 20th century, and maintains a dominant hold on popular culture to this day. Is it news? Is it gossip? Or is it just the tabloids?