

In praise of the tabs (sort of)

James Geary

A couple of years ago, I was asked to judge several categories in the British Press Awards. I was glad to be assigned to the “Best front page” and “Best cartoonist” categories since that meant I didn’t have to read a lot – or anything, really, apart from the captions to the cartoons. And the judging process itself, an afternoon of provocative debate and discussion with the other judges, was fun. When I attended the awards ceremony itself, though, I realised that despite living and working as a journalist in London for almost 10 years I still felt very much like a stranger in a strange land.

I came to London in 1996 to work for *Time* magazine’s European edition, first as a writer and then as an editor. During that time, I’ve always felt a bit like I was in the London media scene but not of it. There are a number of reasons for that, I think. I am not by nature much of a networker, and as an American working for an American publication my professional orbit was almost by definition slightly out of sync with that of my British counterparts. Plus, the UK was never my beat (that’s the job of the London bureau chief), so I was hardly ever out and about attending press conferences or government briefings. My focus was on European stories, not necessarily British ones.

In fact, as an editor I deliberately tried to keep a certain distance from British coverage. The European edition of *Time* is read not just in the UK but across Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and I was wary of having my news judgment too heavily filtered through, or influenced by, what I was reading in the British press. But at the Press Awards ceremony, I realised there was another reason for feeling slightly out of place: It’s the tabs wot done it.

There are a lot of fascinating and well-analysed differences between the American and the British press. In the U.S., the major newspapers maintain a

strict separation between editorial comment and news coverage even as television news is tending more and more toward partisanship. In the UK, the situation is reversed: television news is remarkably balanced while the distinction between comment and reporting is so often and so dramatically blurred in print. On the radio, the BBC – both domestically, with stations like Radio 4, and internationally, with the World Service – is still unparalleled in the breadth and the depth of its coverage.

Since 9/11, both countries have seen major clashes between Government and the media: in the UK over the BBC/Andrew Gilligan reports on intelligence about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and in the U.S. over the outing of CIA operative Valerie Plame. But Britain hasn't had a recent scandal on the scale of Jayson Blair, who fabricated quotes, interviews and expense accounts while working as a reporter for *The New York Times*. Yes, America has its tabloid press but it is largely confined to reporting alien abductions, Elvis sightings and celebrity gossip. There is simply no American equivalent of *The Sun*, the *Mirror* or the *Daily Mail*.

Blow-up sex dolls

This was brought home to me at the British Press Awards ceremony that night, which I can compare only in its raucous laddishness to a strange mix of a wedding reception and a fraternity party. Everyone was dressed in evening gowns or black tie, of course, but catcalls regularly erupted from the tables and at one point the master of ceremonies resorted to making jokes about blow-up sex dolls in an attempt to restore order. It was hilarious and also strangely incongruous, and became progressively more unruly as the night wore on and the alcohol continued to flow. I expected at any moment to see bread rolls or fists start flying between tables. My delicate American sensibilities were not offended; it just seemed odd to me that this level of discourse could prevail at such a prestigious event. (The awards ceremonies for the Foreign Press Association, hardly a shy and retiring bunch, are models of decorum by comparison.) Here were gathered Britain's media and political elite, but the dominant tone of the evening was bawdy and more than vaguely malicious. There was a real sense of rivalry, even animosity, in the air. The loudest of the entire bunch were the tabloid journalists.

This was the year that Ryan Parry worked as a footman in Buckingham Palace and published in the *Mirror* his account of his employment there. Parry won an award that night. I was not, and still am not, a regular reader of

the tabs, but his story got my attention and made me rethink my views on tabloid journalism. I was fascinated by Parry's description of the royal breakfast table: the cornflakes and porridge oats in their Tupperware containers; the precise locations of the honey, maple syrup and silver spoons for the marmalade; Prince Philip's radio and his copy of the *Racing Post*; how the Queen feeds most of her toast to the corgis under the table. Before reading this story, I never really thought the tabs had much relevance either to my life or to my work. Maybe they still don't. But thanks to the exploits of Parry and co – and, more recently, Mazher Mahmood's encounter with Sven-Göran Eriksson as described in the *News of the World* – I gained a new appreciation (and occasionally, a grudging admiration) for what the tabs do.

There is a certain gaudy brilliance to stunts like these. A weird hybrid of investigative journalism and the print equivalent of reality TV, these elaborate sting operations have a brashness that seems to me quintessentially British. There's certainly nothing like them in the American press. At their best, they still have a whiff of old-fashioned muckraking about them, especially when a paper takes on some prominent public figure it feels needs toppling. The way the tabs appoint themselves the official voice of the people, and the unofficial political opposition, distinguishes them from any of their counterparts in any other country. Reality tabloidism is bold, enterprising, lively and fun. But is it good journalism?

There's no reason why it can't be. The usual justification the papers invoke when they pull off something like this is that the story is in the public interest. Strictly speaking, that's probably often true. Parry, for example, made much of how he could have poisoned the Queen's cornflakes at any moment. President Bush was due at Buckingham Palace just days after Parry quit – the story appeared the day the President arrived in Britain – so the article did raise serious security issues, especially since Parry seemed to have got the job based on little more than a character reference from a regular at his local pub. When properly targeted and executed, exposés like this can reveal security lapses or the venality of important public figures.

But the line between what grabs the public's interest and what's in the public interest can be easily bent out of shape. I suspect that most people, like me, were just as, or even more, interested in knowing that Prince Andrew had a pillow embroidered with the words "Eat, Drink and Remarry" as they were about the gaps in the Palace's vetting system for new employees. The security of the Royal Family is an important issue, but pictures of the Queen's Tupperware sell more newspapers.

I'm a big fan of Prime Minister's Question Time, and used periodically to attend the sessions in the House of Commons – not because I needed to in order to do my job, but simply because I enjoyed the political theatre so much. It's one of the traditions of British parliamentary democracy that appeals to me most. Once a week, politicians are forced to stand and deliver. You have to know your brief and be able to think on your feet or risk being exposed on national television. The shouting, gesticulating and jokes don't take away from the fact that real issues are being debated and real work is being done. On the contrary, the verbal rough-housing only adds to the enjoyment. There's absolutely nothing like it in American politics, where so much of what passes for debate consists of set-piece speeches given from the floor of the Senate. American politicians prefer monologues; British politicians work better as part of an ensemble cast.

The rhetorical rowdiness in the Commons during Question Time is not a million miles away from the raucousness of the British Press Awards that night. And the tabloid sting operations have that same air of spectacle and theatre. The outlandishness of the stunts, and the rhetorical shouts with which the stories are delivered, don't necessarily have to mean there isn't real substance there. That is not to say, of course, that tabloid stories are invariably benign. Stings often go wrong and too far. Not everything about someone's personal life is fair game. And if the tabs are really interested in serving the public interest, many of them should change the irresponsible and ill-informed way they handle issues such as immigration, asylum seekers, and the European Union. But love them or loathe them, the tabloids have got gumption – an impudence and impertinence toward power that is for me one of the defining characteristics of the British press. For good and for ill, nowhere else does this attitude exist with such vibrancy and virulence.

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