

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paula E. Morton. *Tabloid Valley: Supermarket News and American Culture*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009. 207 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3364-8.

Reviewed by Maria Siano

Published on Jhistory (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker



Tabloid Editors Challenge Rules, Win Big!

When most people hear the word “tabloid,” they likely think of sensational news based on gossip and unnamed sources, but as Paula E. Morton points out in *Tabloid Valley*, technically it refers to the size of the paper. Some publications are commuter-friendly tabloid size, much smaller than the large broadsheet format of such papers as the *New York Times*. Morton traces the evolution of tabloid publications and also addresses how the connotation of tabloid publications has changed.

As Morton points out, the size of a publication is a factor in how readers—and even other journalists—regard a publication. The perception is that the small tabloids offer short reports and do not rely on credible sources, while the larger broadsheet papers provide long-form articles and are the “respectable” publications. Yet, as Morton stresses, in the past century, that connotation has changed dramatically: “The tabloid format and style imposes strict limitations on story selection, but as in any publication, top priority is assigned to what are deemed the most important stories—a judgment which varies with the personality of the publication” (p. 6).

In *Tabloid Valley*, Morton places contemporary tabloid publications in historical context, as an extension of yellow journalism, signified by bold and sensational headlines that help increase sales by catching the eye of anyone who passes by a newsstand or waits in a supermarket checkout line. Morton reminds us that tabloid journalism is not a new form of reporting, and traces the evolution of the tabloid industry to the penny press in the 1900s (and

cites even earlier similar customs in seventeenth-century folk narratives).

She also focuses on tabloids as an industry, including how editors make decisions about content, very often based on financial concerns. Morton points to an early publisher of the *National Enquirer*, Generoso Pope Jr., who purchased the paper as a broadsheet in 1952 (when it was then the *New York Enquirer*, before he made it a national publication) and converted it to a tabloid size to save on printing costs. Pope originally steered away from sensational stories, only to find circulation decline. He eventually returned to these stories because circulation increased when they were included, she notes.

Morton cites the influence of British tabloids on the American publications, particularly six successful tabloids—the *National Enquirer*, the *Star*, the *Globe*, the *National Examiner*, the *Sun*, and the *Weekly World News*—which were headquartered in Tabloid Valley, a twelve-mile area from West Palm Beach to Boca Raton, Florida, that emerged primarily due to the state’s business-friendly policies. Once competitors, all six were eventually purchased by American Media Incorporated (AMI), enabling the publications to pool resources at a time when they were struggling financially.

By focusing on the process tabloid editors and reporters follow, Morton dispels some widely held myths about tabloids, and Morton’s own process (evident in an extensive bibliographic essay) goes beyond just reviewing archives of the publications. She interviewed current

and former tabloid editors, which adds insight into the decision-making process of these editors that cannot be accurately determined simply by conducting a content or textual analysis of the publications. The interviews reveal that editors and writers at the tabloids are seasoned journalists, many of them Ivy League educated; the publications require multiple sources; and all stories are fact-checked. She also uncovers the techniques employed by tabloid journalists looking for the next scoop, such as taking Henry Kissinger's garbage from his curb to try to discover personal secrets, posing as a priest at Bing Crosby's funeral to get a photograph, and paying a cousin of Elvis Presley eighteen thousand dollars to gain access to the funeral parlor.

Morton contrasts these common practices of tabloid journalists to procedures followed by mainstream media journalists. For example, she writes: "When I was editor," said Mike Foley, University of Florida journalism professor and previously executive editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, "we did not pose to get a story. It was former editor Gene Paterson's belief—and I came to agree—that you couldn't lie to get a story and expect readers to believe you started telling the truth when you sat down to write the story." But undercover reporting is considered a legitimate tactic by the tabloids to access a story, particularly if a celebrity is involved" (p. 65).

Throughout Morton's analysis, she makes it clear that the six publications fall into two separate categories. Two of the publications in particular—the *Sun* and the *Weekly World News*—blatantly concoct stories, depict UFO sightings, and recount stories of bat boys and one-hundred-year-old pregnant women, among other outlandish stories, as she notes. Morton could have probed this point further, to reveal why these tabloid publications continue to publish fabricated stories—particularly after the *National Enquirer* and the *Globe* began receiving accolades. For example, Morton notes, in 1982, *National Enquirer* reporters received national law enforcement awards for their investigation of the woman who administered the lethal injection that led to the overdose death of John Belushi, and for a 1996 report revealing photos with O. J. Simpson wearing Bruno Magli shoes, ultimately attributed with the civil jury's finding that Simpson was liable for the deaths of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman. The *Globe* played an important role in the 1992 presidential campaign, when it obtained the Genifer Flowers audio tapes that confirmed she had a long-

term affair with Bill Clinton, then a presidential candidate. *Time* magazine even named *National Enquirer* editor Steve Coz to its twenty-five Most Influential Americans list in 1997.

After giving detailed descriptions of these contributions to American culture, the only explanation Morton offers about the fabricated stories is that the editors said they needed to fill space: "Basically they made up fictitious stories. It was fun for the staff of the *Weekly World News* and their readers" (p. 87). Given Morton's access to the tabloid editors and their descriptions of a strict journalistic process when writing for the *National Enquirer*, *Globe*, and *Star*, the vague explanation on this point diminishes her argument to some extent. It suggests a journalistic process in the tabloid industry that is random, rather than rigorous.

TabloidValley tracks the rise, and eventual decline, of print tabloids. Morton notes: "The supermarket tabloid in its present form has lost its niche and is slowly passing away—will it move on to a new life?" (p. 182). This is a relevant question today, as Morton states, because online publications are emerging, poised to take the place of print tabloids in popular American culture.

While Morton acknowledges that mainstream media outlets are now competitors to tabloid publications, a development that began with the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Morton could have expanded on this point further as well. For example, she says it remains to be seen whether the print tabloids will be able to eventually convert to an online format, and compete with strong Internet-only sites, such as TMZ. She ultimately concludes: "Do not count them out" (p. 182). But Morton does not address how closely the mainstream media is now collaborating with Web sites, such as TMZ, and entertainment news programs, such as *Access Hollywood* and *Entertainment Tonight*, by using reporters from these outlets to provide analysis and commentary. This is most notable on CNN's program *Larry King Live*, with guests including Harvey Levin, founder of TMZ, among others.

In *Tabloid Valley*, Morton provides a relevant historical account of tabloid publications through 2007 and opens a discussion for further exploration about the decision-making process of tabloid editors and the influence of tabloid publications on contemporary mainstream and online media.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Maria Siano. Review of Morton, Paula E., *Tabloid Valley: Supermarket News and American Culture*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25419>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.