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Popular journalism and professional ideology: tabloid reporters and editors speak out

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Media culture and popular culture are increasingly difficult to classify; the ongoing blurring of boundaries between information and entertainment can be termed 'infotainment' and is generally attributed to market forces, commercialization and commodification of media content (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992; McManus, 1994; McChesney, 1999). Particularly in the realm of journalism, concerns about infotainment or tabloidization have been voiced by scholars and professionals alike throughout elective democracies with shared histories of journalism professionalization.¹ Although there are several ways to study the articulation of popular culture with journalists and journalism, this article specifically interrogates this development by analyzing the perceptions of reporters and editors in the field of popular journalism regarding their work and values. A range of expert interviews with journalists working for the leading tabloids in the Netherlands were conducted in order to further study and understand the relationships between working for an archetypical infotainment genre and the various ways in which practitioners give meaning to their professional identity in contemporary (popular) journalism.

Authors like Hallin (1992) and van Zoonen (1998b) identify the tabloid as the prime example of a popular medium where one cannot draw a meaningful distinction between 'information' and 'entertainment'. Connell (1998) also argues that the news discourse in broadsheet and tabloid media is largely similar. Bird (1992) showed how journalists working for supermarket tabloids in the United States can be considered as the same (kind of) people who work for mainstream newspapers. Tabloid reporters and editors operate in the margins and along the edges of professional journalism, while also located in the middle of this peer group in terms of

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their professional identity as journalists (van Zoonen, 1998a). I am fascinated by the ways in which journalism as a profession with a certain (real or perceived) power position in contemporary society defines and organizes itself over time. Listening carefully to those within the profession who operate in the margins and thus (sometimes) deviate from what the current consensus about what good or real journalism is offers us insight into how journalism organizes and defines itself, how this process of definition is structured, and how, in turn, this influences how journalism functions (Deuze, 2002).

For an operational definition of tabloid, or rather, popular journalists, I have used studies by van Zoonen (1998b) and Sparks (2000), showing a certain consensus within and about journalism on which sections or genres can be considered more 'infotaining' than others. Sparks (2000: 14–15) in particular defines this infotainment field for print media as news-stand tabloid press, typified by a concentration on private life of individuals specifically in terms of scandal, sports and entertainment. Sparks' typology supports a wider selection of news media to be included in the interviewee pool, which is important as the Netherlands does not have such an extreme tabloid press as the United Kingdom or the United States. Thus I analyzed the intersection of popular culture and journalism by looking specifically at those journalists directly involved: the editors of those media in the Netherlands corresponding closest to Sparks' definition of news-stand tabloids.

Through a series of extensive, in-depth expert interviews I explored a wide band of relationships between issues related to popular culture and infotainment on the one hand, and journalism on the other. These relationships – as they can be found in (transcripts of) interviews – are conceptualized here as the different and sometimes inconsistent ways in which journalists give meaning to their work, thereby constantly negotiating their professional identity with elements of structure (the context in which they work, the journalistic field) and subjectivity (what they bring to the job). Loosely based on Giddens (1984), these elements are seen as both enabling as well as constraining the range of actions and choices for individuals. The notion of a more or less shared occupational ideology among journalists across genres and types of news media can be seen as instrumental in this conceptualization, as it functions as an overarching discursive set of ideal-typical values, carried by journalists through common discourse, and functioning as (less than clear) benchmarks in their work (for more detailed explorations of the occupational ideology of journalism see e.g. Golding and Elliott, 1979; Reese, 1990; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Deuze, 2005). Looking at this ideology as discursively constructed by practitioners in the field in order to include and exclude certain journalists and journalisms, it can serve as a tool for analyzing the impact of a particular development (such as popularization of news media)

on the values and professional self-perceptions of journalists. By targeting reporters and editors working within a typical popular journalism genre, these expert interviews additionally shed light on the various articulations under investigation.

By opting for interviews with experts, I consider that what these reporters and editors say effectively constitutes the wide variety of meanings they bring to the phenomena under investigation. This project utilizes the transcribed in-depth interviews with (expert) professionals to explore and analyze the various ways in which they give meaning to their everyday work. The analysis of the interview transcripts to some extent follows the so-called 'Grounded Theory' (GT) coding procedure as offered by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Wester (1987), but can also be located in a more general and common-sensical approach in qualitative analyses of interview data, moving from a *tabula rasa*-based formal text-analysis, structural description of text-content, analytical abstraction, interpretation and comparative analysis of multiple texts to the construction of a (theoretical) model (see for example Heinze, 1995). The open coding sequence was used to select and code each sentence or phrase in the transcript, thus identifying the various topics and issues addressed by the participating journalists. This resulted in a variety of different topics. These were then grouped and labeled. In the axial coding phase, the statements were categorized and tested against the transcripts to verify whether this grouping matched the setting offered in the interviews. These steps allowed me to construct more or less distinct topical categories. The next step was to identify the various ways in which the interviewees discussed these topics, resulting in a series of coherent themes. This thematic analysis follows Potter and Wetherell (1987), whose work on discourse analysis helps us to interpret the inherent inconsistencies of concepts and categories, by regrouping and understanding propositions in terms of possible repertoires used by participants (like theatre actors) to perform certain roles in everyday life and to give meaning to the issues at hand. In the analytical procedure, the topical categories are considered to be an index of what journalists talk about when discussing (issues related to) infotainment. The themes or repertoires are seen as the full range of ways reporters and editors talked about these topics.

Expert interviews

In order to determine who to interview, I used the definitions of tabloid and popular journalism by Sparks (2000: 14–15), where he considers as the 'ultimate' form of popular journalism the supermarket tabloid – a genre non-existent in the Netherlands (apart from a brief and unsuccessful experiment with a magazine called *De Nieuwe* in the early 1990s, and a

second failed magazine called *Prenza*, which appeared for only a few months during 2001–2), but well established in the Anglo-American media sphere. Prime examples of this type of tabloid are the *Weekly World News* and the *National Enquirer* in the US, *Bild* in Germany, and the *News of the World* or *The Sun* in Great Britain. Van Zoonen identifies several in between genres, of which gossip magazines (in terms of Sparks, similar to the news-stand tabloid and serious-popular press) can be singled out as a type of popular journalism present in all media-savvy societies, including the Netherlands. She argues that there are considerable varieties in the gossip press in different countries (1998b: 114). One of the few scholars to have researched and published about journalists working in popular genres, Bird (who studied people working for weekly supermarket tabloid, the *National Enquirer* in the US), offers a more general view on the phenomenon: ‘Although their emphases are different, newspapers and tabloids are located along the same storytelling continuum. Tabloids report on real people and events, and their staff members are journalists’ (1990: 386). Rhoufari additionally found that tabloid editors, just like their colleagues elsewhere in journalism, indeed ‘proclaim their attachment to the professional values that define the journalistic ideal’ (2000: 163). Whereas the Dutch media market has no tabloids, it does have its fair share of weekly celebrity and gossip magazines, breakfast and daytime TV lifestyle talk shows and lifestyle sections in newspapers. For the in-depth interviews all the (chief) editors of the main news-stand tabloids (*Privé*, *Story*, *Weekend*, *Party*, *Talkies*, *Glossy*, *Beau Monde*) and serious-popular press (*Aktueel*, *Nieuwe Revue*, *Panorama*) were selected. These magazines have a long history in the Netherlands (*Story*, for example, was the first gossip magazine and started in 1974; *Panorama* put out its first issue in 1913), and have significant readerships (*Story*, *Weekend*, *Privé* and *Party* together had a total circulation of almost 1 million copies at the time of writing; the six other magazines together have a market share of approximately 600,000 copies). These magazines have also undergone some changes in recent years because of increased competition from other media – notably commercial television and the ‘quality’ press – and from other tabloid titles, most recently *Talkies*, *Glossy* and *Party* entered the market in the 1990s (Meijer, 1999: 42). Broadcast media were deliberately left out at this stage of the project for several reasons, the main one being the consideration found in the literature of the archetypical quality of the gossip press in the long history of popular journalism. The added complexity of working in a broadcasting environment also provided grounds for exclusion. One more pragmatic reason is the aforementioned tradition of the printed popular media in the Netherlands, whereas most of the radio and particularly television talk shows have relatively short life spans.

The editorial departments of the 10 selected magazines were first sent a formal letter (dated late May 2001) describing the research project, and

were then contacted by phone to make an interview appointment. Only the editor of *Talkies* refused to cooperate, claiming he did not have time for 'academic pursuits'. All other editors (some of these magazines have more than one editor; and *Aktueel*, *Glossy* and *Weekend* in fact shared the same editor-in-chief) agreed, resulting in 14 expert interviews. The results section starts with an overview and description of the full range of topical categories the participants talked about, and concludes with an analysis of the interpretative repertoires these journalists used when talking about their work. A characteristic of all interviews: the atmosphere was very informal and pleasant. Almost all of the editors said they enjoyed the fact that academics would spend time on research into popular journalism. The editors seemed to consider our interviews as some kind of intellectual acknowledgement of their work.

Analysis

As a first remark, one must note that on several occasions the interviewed editors of serious-popular magazines *Nieuwe Revue* and *Panorama* expressed different concerns from their colleagues. These are not gossip magazines, and several notions mentioned in the analysis pertain specifically to their views. On the other hand, I found that these editors do talk about more or less the same issues, questions and topics as their counterparts in the gossip press; they use the same yardsticks to evaluate themselves, address similar trends and developments in the market for infotainment media, apply the same repertoires to give meaning to their work (see also Bird, 1990, 1992). All of the interviewed experts addressed a total of seven recurring topical categories when talking about their work. In this analysis the full bandwidth of these categories is first explored; thereafter the ways the journalists give meaning to the various categories are discussed.

Category I: the gossip or popular journalistic attitude

The editors would often describe the way they go about their work as a distinct process of gossip or popular journalism. These accounts were set against experiences most of the interviewees had while working for other (non-gossip) media. In other words: the way they go about their work is instrumental in distinguishing themselves from the 'other' journalists and journalisms. The various ways in which interviewees describe their work indicates that they actively negotiate what is considered to be journalism – revealing their own marginalized or deviant position within the profession. Two colleagues at one magazine felt that these supposed differences are what define gossip journalism – a sort of *raison d'être* even:

Gossip magazines are in a way just magazines like any other. But a gossip magazine should have a kind of 'mean' or 'sneaky' aura, like something you cannot really put your finger on, so if you take that away, you do not have a magazine anymore, right? Yes, it is kind of a forbidden fruit . . .

Several editors went out of their way to position themselves as 'regular' journalists, even though they would readily admit that what they do and the way they do it is not generally considered to be anything like 'regular' journalism.

People should not think we are just making things up here. We don't do that, we just get our news not in an 'everyday-like' fashion. People do not have a clue that we work in a normal office building with regular adult people who are happily married . . . hahaha. . . Sorry I have to laugh . . . haha [Interviewer: What are you laughing about?] No, now you can't come and work here, otherwise you would have asked about that a long time ago, haha.

Sometimes editors would explicitly address this process as their motivation for doing this type of journalism:

We try to visit a lot of educational institutes to explain how fascinating this type of journalism is, how journalistic the work is that gets done, because there are still many people that question that, which really annoys me.

Category II: skills and standards

Indeed, what does a gossip reporter need to know in order to be a real tabloid journalist? An interesting question – and one that features topically in the discussions we had with the interviewees. Several participants lamented the omission of popular journalism from the curricula of journalism schools and training institutes. One question is, what specific skills could or should a journalist learn in the popular press? A selection of statements about this sheds some light what specific skills are expected of a gossip reporter:

You have to be the kind of reporter Dutch celebrities talk about at parties, saying: 'Look, there is that asshole again', you should not be too friendly and positive. . . . I have to write really hard-hitting stories about people, but that does not mean I have something against those people personally – that is just how the story should be.

An important aspect of such remarks is the way these are framed versus what other news people supposedly do, emphasizing what these editors feel makes them and their genre extraordinary:

A normal reporter tends to be very careful, but we have to write an exciting headline and a teasing lead, that makes a story different.

A discussion of skills and standards not only serves to define what tabloid-style journalism is, but also functions for the interviewees as a way to specify a concept of 'quality' in the genre.

What we do is combining information. We protect our sources, but ask them everything to make sure we are accurate, and that is good journalism. Combine everything, use all information at your disposal: call that person, he might have heard this, and you have read that, seen this somewhere, and as you work along this way, you might even decide to put a photographer somewhere for a night on stakeout to see whether that person indeed comes home alone or with someone else, and yes . . . then you did a good job.

The framework of delineating popular journalism's skills extends to specific standards acknowledged throughout the profession, like reporting both sides of a story, or defining oneself in a position of critical acclaim throughout the profession as 'investigative reporter'.

What we do is a kind of investigative journalism. . . . We are searching for the truth. Look, if you are a parliamentary reporter it's easy, just wait for the press conference, do some short corridor interviews, and nobody thinks that is odd. But as a gossip reporter you have to know everything about a person's private life and there are no press conferences for that, there is nothing to help you – except just researching, investigating like a detective.

The various comments on skills and standards of media practitioners in this field reads like a particular description of investigative reporting, with emphasis on (potential) conflicts with the traditional rules of the profession. One of those golden concepts – or, as Kovach and Rosenstiel write, 'the first and most confusing principle' (2001: 36) – is: truth.

Category III: truth versus 'untruth'

Other dualistic category titles could be: fantasy versus reality, lies versus truths, deceit versus honesty, rumors versus facts. The participants used these and other similar binary oppositions throughout the interviews to such an extent that one could analyze them as a topical category. Reality and truth seem to be phenomenological concepts the popular press are quite familiar with, concepts with which they actively negotiate in the daily routines of newsgathering and reporting. One of the editors offered an explanation for this approach, specifically locating truth in the story aesthetic, as in the way it can be written and presented:

Yes, well, if . . . I assume that the gossip magazines also strive for some kind of truth, they have limits as to what they can write, those limits are a bit more stretched with phrases like 'it could be that' or 'we have heard that', but . . . ehh . . . they aim for the kind of truth they feel the public needs to know and it is of course nice to read.

This reflection comes from an editor of one of the serious-popular magazines, and is to some extent mirrored by a colleague in that category, also using a distinction between the gossip press and his own publication, seeing a perceived conflict between true and (potentially) false information as a deliberate strategy:

It's the journalistic approach we choose, we do not exaggerate beyond all proportions. It must be something concrete, but if that is so we move in full-steam! That is what we do. The moment such a story turns into a lawsuit all kind of extra publicity follows, our sales increase, so that is good.

Several of the gossip editors declared that what they do, is in their view part of the journalistic task of truth-finding. A complex concept of truth is common to all participants, and it is strategically used to distinguish one's own product from the competition. In this last quote, explicit reference is made to publicity and sales as aspects of evaluation and a perception of the audience as customers (rather than, for example, citizens).

Category IV: the public/ readers/ people

Several editors consider the weekly sales figures 'holy'. In making decisions about content or laying down cover policy, considerations of audience are core. Throughout the interviews the participants would also refer to certain characteristics of the people who buy their magazine. Such references varied from general comments ('Our readers are mostly men, their wives buy our magazine at the grocery store') to very specific ones ('Our reader eats microwave food'). Doing audience research – several journalists mentioned qualitative research like focus group discussions in particular – also seems to be part of the whole 'popular journalism experience' for these editors.

Looking more specifically at the comments made about (members of) the audience, it seems that such statements are used specifically when making editorial decisions on the visualization of content (writing style, choice of illustration or pictures, cover policy), not on newsgathering processes (like whether or not harass people to get information, or which news to print). Examples of such statements on visualization (as it relates to status):

We are making a much more respectable magazines than a couple of years ago. Now we also have covers that you can put on the table, covers you don't have to feel ashamed about. Sometimes covers are a bit more explicit, but that does not matter.

And on style (as it relates to know-how and attitude):

We write for the big masses, so we cannot go too far . . . you have to be carried away by the story, you should be teased to read on, like 'Hey I did not

know that, wow'. That is the tone of voice of your magazine, we take a certain position, a bit tongue-in-cheek, sometimes with humor, now and then really sharp.

When it comes to the role of the audience in editorial decision-making processes, it seems that editors attribute people in the Netherlands with a certain 'Dutchness':

Yes, sure I like the big scoops, but the larger audience will not like that. And then you should not do it, which is obvious. That is the weird thing about the Netherlands, compared to, for example, England. We have the same target group as the British tabloids, but Dutch people do not want to read about hard-hitting scandals involving the big celebrities. If it goes too far, nobody wants to read about it. Dutch people don't want to know about the fallacies and wrongdoings of their favorite stars.

Dutch tabloids are described by van Zoonen (1998b) and Meijer (1999) as relatively 'decent' forms of popular journalism – especially when compared to their British, German or American counterparts. The statements on the audience suggest this has more to do with images of audience than a specific journalistic attitude or style of newsgathering. This is also reflected in the various audience-related goals the editors talk about:

We want to offer people a bit of distraction, entertainment. People do not have to learn from what we write, no . . . a bit of gossip, which is also enough. What is nice is that you notice how people talk about what you've published at parties.

Images of audience are also evoked when commenting on perceptions of the added value of popular journalism as compared to the mainstream news media.

Just negative news does not work, people want to have a bit of fun reading as well. The popular magazine has a function of entertaining. Like when someone has worked hard all day and just wants to lie down at night and relax, he or she can read the magazine.

Category V: ethics

The ethical perceptions of infotainment journalists have been used as sensitizing concepts in the interviews, both by interviewers and interviewees (following Silverman, 2000: 65). The participants would address ethical issues and dilemmas when discussing the daily practices of working as a gossip journalist:

We always say: we want to know everything, but that does not mean we publish everything. This has to do with ethical rules. We know much more about

celebrities than the people know, but if we published that it would ruin careers . . . but it is becoming more acceptable now. If you knew who is calling us, tipping us off. . . . Sometimes I think people are not born good but evil.

Other editors would position themselves more modestly regarding ethical rules or norms, and refer to themselves as the yardstick for measuring ethical decisions without making generalizing normative claims, linking ethics with (perceptions about) the audience:

No, of course not, I am not here to change the world. The ultimate goal is to sell a lot of magazines, whereby you have to be able to look in the mirror each night and say: 'I have not hurt anybody today.'

The emphasis put on selling magazines has to do with the week-to-week battle for the reader, as editors explain. According to them, most readers buy these magazines impulsively, and readership diversifies across the different titles (one week buying *Aktueel*, next week *Story* or *Privé*, and so on). Interviewees furthermore added third-person comments on the ethics and trustworthiness of 'serious' journalists, now that those media are considered to be moving into 'their' terrain of news:

Daily newspapers are writing about human interest and personal stuff more and more, but that is not bad for us. The more they talk about it, the better, because people think of the gossip press as the place to really find this news. The gossip magazines are increasingly used as an 'alibi' for the good papers to write about celebrities for example. If such a celebrity makes it onto the front page of *De Volkskrant* [national quality newspaper], which causes trials and the destruction of that person's career, then the editor of *De Volkskrant* says: 'Yes, but what he said is written in my notebook.' Well, I can show you notebooks full of quotes by people, but we can never use them, no judge will allow us to use that argument. This shows you how rocky the credibility of mainstream newspaper journalism is.

This kind of distinction regarding ethics, norms and values further contributes to the strategy mentioned earlier, of participating editors distinguishing their own particular field of journalism from 'other' journalisms in the Netherlands: discerning the popular from the serious.

The most interesting thing about what we do is the combination of creativity and management. The development of new initiatives . . . and the ability to do things, that normal journalists – put 'normal' in brackets here – consider impossible, that you can make those things happen. . . . You constantly look for those borders, yes. And sometimes you can only say with hindsight whether what you did was crossing the line too much . . . but, oh well.

What this topical category also shows is heightened awareness of continuously working on the edges of what is considered 'appropriate' in (popular) journalism. This awareness does not seem to reflect a need for a

code, nor an attitude attuned to prescriptions as to how to do popular journalism, and can therefore be seen as a plea for a contextualized and situational ethics, offering ways of interpreting specific ethical dilemmas. This does not mean that these journalists are not ethical, or do not share a sense of ethics; on the contrary, the interviews suggest that ethical perceptions are actively negotiated as a means of distinguishing oneself from competitor-colleagues and 'other' journalisms. Ethical sensibility seems to function as an instrument for drawing a boundary between mainstream and popular journalism. But it is also used (together with notions of true versus false information) to discern 'good' from 'bad' tabloid-style media:

You know what we do, that is really different than for example what *Party* does. *Party* is the youngest. That is real 'thumb suck journalism'. The weirdest thing is that it's rebellious and it's popular with a younger audience. But listen: 'thumb suck journalism' is the lowest when it comes to quality, it is not even journalism anymore.

Category VI: the magazine Party

Journalists seem to share very specific views on certain benchmarks in their profession. Whether this is to do with the absence of a consensual, theoretical or academic concept of quality in journalism or not is beyond the scope of this particular analysis (see Costera Meijer, 2001). But it is striking to notice that the relatively 'young' gossip magazine *Party* serves as a shared reference of 'how not to do popular journalism' for most of the participants. The notions of age, of being younger, as well as a concept of telling the truth seem to be tied in with the criticism of *Party*:²

There is also a . . . a group of young people or students, but those people read magazines like *Party* . . . magazines which are completely . . . well not completely, but it is a magazine which goes too far in our line of work, they do not hesitate to, ehh . . . to write complete nonsense.

Other comments also explicitly address this issue: 'Where they really lie about everything, that is at *Party*, hahaha . . . the real dirt among the gossip press', or for example: 'I do not consider *Party* gossip journalism. . . No, it belongs to an outside category, it is really nothing, I cannot understand that it has already existed for five or six years.'³ When we put these comments to the editors of *Party*, they responded with an acknowledgement of the arguments about telling the truth: 'There does not have to be a core of truth in a story.' About the critical comments about the magazine: 'We make *Party* for our readers, for no one else. . . After all these years you develop an elephant skin, whatever, it is just all about selling magazines, the salary and having a good time.'

But whether working for *Party* or any other magazine in this genre, all editors expressed to some extent a sense of unease among journalists and editors working in different genres of the Netherlands media – addressing a particular awareness of professional (informal) hierarchy.

Category VII: (low) status in journalism

The status (or lack thereof) of gossip and popular journalism is a topic of concern for most interviewees (see also Bird, 1990 and Rhoufari, 2000 on similar notions of unequal status of the gossip press in American and British journalism). Although this has been noted in the literature as well (see in particular the volume on tabloid journalism edited by Sparks, 2000), some of the editors indicated recent changes with regard to the status issue.

I am getting more and more interview requests, so yes I am also in *Netwerk* and *Nova* [two quality newscasts on Dutch public television]. They consider us experts, as extraordinarily well-informed people, for example, when it comes to royalty. Which we are. . . . I think that they will still look down upon us, even though they also know that it is not a kind of ‘thumb suck journalism’, but that it is really investigative journalism. Then it is just a question of whether or not you are interested in topics like celebrity divorces.

Yet, on the other hand, several interviewees still feel they have to fight their lower status in journalism – which defense affirms that there does seem to exist a shared perception of professional hierarchy in journalism.

What we really have to get rid of is the misconception that it is not journalism what we do around here, or that it is not ethical. It should not be so, that we are not taken seriously by our colleagues – colleagues in newspapers and so on – that is a kind of ‘illusory supremacy’, thinking that you are better. It irritates me.

This hierarchical notion is echoed in a somewhat frustrated discussion of the internship policies of the Dutch schools for journalism (a discussion particular to the gossip press editors):

Coincidentally, yesterday two girls called for an internship, they were students of the journalism school in Zwolle. Normally these students are not allowed to do an internship at a gossip magazine, I hate that attitude. That is ridiculous, it should not be that way. Also at the Utrecht school for journalism and the universities: gossip magazines are not taken seriously in journalism.

Such a thirst for acknowledgement is generally ratified by pointing to similar reporting practices, sales figures (‘We make money for all the other magazines of our publisher’), and a suggested ‘complacency’ of colleagues at other news media. The way tabloid editors are held accountable each

week for the number of copies sold is something that keeps them more alert than their colleagues at the newspapers for example, editors would argue:

A lot of those colleagues do not have that, I think if you work at a newspaper you stop worrying about whether or not people like to read what you write, you think 'Well, now I am intelligent and intellectual', you think you have made it. But you have never made it; every day is a new day to prove yourself. Yes, satisfaction kills creativity.

This last comment links status with intellectualism and may be seen as an element of a 'high-brow' versus 'low-brow' culture debate. Apparently the popular press uses the same discourse to defend itself, as the 'quality' media who use this discourse to distinguish themselves (as argued by Winch, 1997). In this overview of topical categories, that must be the overarching conclusion indeed.

Themes

From the various propositions applied by the participants when discussing the topics mentioned above, four more or less distinct themes (or repertoires) were distilled. These can be summarized as irony, morality, commercialism and popular journalism.

Irony

Popular journalism is all about having fun, according to our interviewees. This not only reflects the relaxed and open atmosphere in most of the interviews, it also serves as a strategy for these journalists to give meaning to a wide range of issues facing them in their work. Questions about competences, about ethics, about competition from other media or about taste, were sooner or later all answered by referring to 'having fun':

Well, hahaha, personally . . . I think that is the fun part, to put a bit of humor in stories, like 'Look at that!'. . . In a way you work in a schizophrenic way because most of the time you do these really serious in-depth interviews with celebrities, but you write these funny stories so it is a kind of role you're playing, which is good fun. That is what is really fun every day, yes.

Fun is also used to determine quality in this genre of journalism, or even to distinguish gossip from journalism altogether:

I think what we do is sometimes more like 'fun journalism', it is something you should really want to do as a journalist, but is a real difference with. . . I

sometimes write a column on gossip, then it is okay to skip the news like, ehh . . . just your own ideas.

The references made to having fun and the good laughs from time to time when responding to (critical) questions seem to serve as a somewhat ironic step away from the issues at hand for these editors. Instead of directly confronting issues like the objectivity or ethics of certain news-gathering and storytelling practices, participants would sometimes retreat into an ironic repertoire with which they avoid clear answers or specific statements regarding their work.

A story should be exciting, it should have some kind of emotion to it . . . hahaha [Interviewer: You really seem to enjoy talking about this?] . . . haha, yes. . . It should have emotion, there must be something to it, it should not be some boring story which just goes on and on about nothing, about 'Oh, he is so happy with his children, blah blah blah', that is not what I am waiting for.

Irony further contributes to judgments about mainstream news journalism as being too repressed – a comment also made frequently by the *National Enquirer* reporters interviewed by Bird (1990, 1992).

It is just a really fun business to be in, and it is different every week. It is wild, things happen all of the time and the journalists working here are not so boring. . . . There are crazy photographers, crazy reporters. . . . Everyone is much more loose, it is like working for a newspaper but also making a magazine. . . . We are really a newspaper in magazine format, which is funny, it is good fun to work this way.

Bird showed that many weekly tabloid reporters expressed frustration about the 'seriousness' of mainstream newspapers, especially regarding restrictions on their creativity. According to these journalists, working in popular genres of their profession allows them more freedom to tell stories – whether 'true' or 'untrue' – and to have fun in doing so. Irony functions as a way to put some distance between 'them' and 'us' in popular journalism. The interviewees indicated that dominant topics they work with – lifestyles, celebrities, royalty, sex – are not exclusive to popular journalism anymore, which suggests that what distinguishes them from other journalisms, in their view, has to do with certain ways of reporting and storytelling, and with not being too strict (or serious) about certain traditional journalistic values. Editorial autonomy, for the tabloid editor, seems to mean not being too restricted by conventions. It almost seems a bit like a pubescent preoccupation with 'breaking the rules': seeing how far you can stretch rules laid down by parents, without actually inventing new rules.⁴

Morality

Douglas Coupland defined in his account of the 30-something generation in the early 1990s (the so-called 'Generation X') the concept of celebrity *Schadenfreude* as: 'lurid thrills derived from talking about celebrity deaths' (1991: 78). This term can perhaps be applied – in a less morbid fashion, that is – to the connection between morality and irony in popular journalism: having fun with calamities involving celebrities. As celebrities have increasingly made it to the headlines of the mainstream news media in recent years, the interviewees consciously add an element of *Schadenfreude* when covering celebrities. Celebrity is a diversified category, though. For the tabloid editors, a celebrity is someone successful, rich, living their private life in the public eye, while the serious-popular journalists also consider the 'normal' individual as a celebrity the moment he or she becomes an actor on the pages of their magazine (such as a popular *Big Brother* or *Idols* candidate, for example). The question is, why these celebrities – rich or poor, luxurious or normal-looking, jobless or movie star – enter the popular news story at all? The answer: when they breach the (fine) lines of civil morality, particularly regarding how we ought to behave in society regarding sexuality, religious practices and life politics. Examples interviewees offer are all set against a conflict of morality.

You know, the story I am still most proud of is . . . I was working at the *Privé* at the time when we got a lead on an extramarital affair a well-known politician supposedly had. And then I went out and staked out his house one Sunday morning. When he came out in his car I followed him, and a bit down the road a woman and two children got in – turns out this was his mistress, and she was married too! And his own wife was back home, she was sick, yes, I mean, really . . .

The ranges of topics that are mentioned with moral indignation generally fall in the category of 'love life', ranging from marital affairs (divorce, cheating, death in the family, a baby when it is unclear who the father is), and relationships (emphasizing breaking up and getting together again, breaches of monogamy) to sexuality (extraordinary sex, extreme sexual preferences, physical beauty, promiscuity). I have to note that, within this range of potential breaches of morality, little or no mention is made of specific topics or issues outside the dominant, heterosexual and family-oriented view of civil life. Editors also indicated they deliberately keep certain information out of their magazines to protect certain celebrities, thus making them more willing to cooperate as sources. The readers are fitted into their moral iconic framework of 'good' versus 'bad' as a mass, regardless of how reader characteristics are addressed specifically (as a topic). This seemingly (moral and professional) superior attitude or 'higher ground' serves as a further delineation for the interviewees – another way

to draw a line in the sand between popular and 'other' journalism: between one's own morality and somebody else's, whereby popular journalism seems to serve as the guardian of civic morality.

Commercialism

The weekly hardship of putting attractive magazines out, making decisions based on sales figures, addressing perceived preferences of a fickle audience, were frequently mentioned in the interviews. The morality repertoire indeed reflects a specific view on the audience as a rather homogeneous, heterosexual civil 'mass' of middle-class people wanting to be entertained and informed about celebrities (overstepping the bounds of the dominant morality). This development contributes to a shared perception of the interviewees regarding their market position in today's mediasphere. Now that the topics concerning life politics – notably the forming and dissolving of social relationships – have entered the mainstream news media, archetypical popular journalism genres like the tabloids are redefining their approach, especially their style:

Newspapers cover the topics that originally come from the gossip magazines, I guess they like that as well, they are doing that now as well. . . . So we are becoming much harder. You move up a bit in gossip journalism from being nice to a bit harder, another bit harder, harder still. . . . Then there is a chance that a newspaper cannot do that anymore.

Editors did not suggest new or different topics, but emphasized a genre-wide 'hardening' of tone of voice and newsgathering methods, coupled with previously signaled moral indignation. I found a striking consensus among participants about the increasingly blurred lines so easily drawn between gossip or popular journalism and other journalism. This poses a clear challenge to the tabloid editors, as another participant remarked (see below).

It is kind of a problem, yes I think it is a problem. If you now hear about a royal wedding or whatever you have to fight regular newspapers which appear daily, and everywhere, who also cover this with 8 to 10 pages full-color. Until four years ago you had, as a weekly gossip magazine, the sole rights to these kinds of things. The mainstream media are taking over the topics that used to be restricted to the gossip press. . . . So we are getting harder, you have to move up a bit in gossip journalism, become tougher, because a newspaper cannot allow itself to print rumors – at least, not until now . . .

Commercial considerations indeed seem to prevail any discussions regarding ethics (or moral reflections for that matter):

How far can you go? . . . you cannot cause any real damage, that is something you learn over the years . . . and there is also the role of commercialism, that is

also important. So all those elements together determine whether it is right or wrong. It is never just one aspect; there are always more aspects involved . . . such a decision also depends on the way they ['they': i.e. celebrities trying to prevent a potentially damaging publication] approach you, about what is explained. If someone asks very nicely, please, yes, and explains why. Then you can sometimes. . . . But it is still a matter of debate. Yes, if the other magazines are running the story and selling well, then it is just commercial.

An explicitly commercial attitude is clearly held by some as the be-all-end-all of their work, indeed adding to the perception of the audience as a 'mass':

We respond to the sentiments of the day, each day begins with checking ratings for television programs to see what is a hot topic in the Netherlands as a whole.

Commercialism for these editors also means day-to-day decision-making about news selection, gathering of information, telling stories, choosing a format and sticking to a certain all-encompassing (and ideological) popular journalism formula.

(Popular) journalism ideology

Working in popular journalism was described as working holistically – making a popular magazine means being a jack of all trades. When describing the attitude of tabloid journalists, the participants would refer to being an all-rounder as a defining quality of their trade:

We all have our own specialties, but people need to be multifunctional here, they have to be able to do everything: reporting, writing, editing, lay-out, cover policy. . . . It is more fun for those people as well, otherwise it just is the same all the time.

The explicit use of this argument by the interviewed tabloid editors may have to do with their particular position, or can be attributed to the line of questioning pursued in our interviews, following up on issues of perceived difference between popular journalism and other journalisms. Although skills and standards are a topic journalists would talk about, a more general notion of what this genre of journalism is and how it should be understood in the context of journalism in the Netherlands serves as a system of meaning for the participating editors.

You should learn to look differently at journalism, gossip journalism. . . . You know, what we do is a lot more creative and hard to do than the rest of journalism in the Netherlands.

Popular journalism, 'the gossip world' and the popular press are some of the terms used by the editors to describe their corner of the Dutch

mediasphere. This varies from detailed descriptions of how the making of a magazine works, via elaborate definitions of what gossip ‘really’ means, to profiles of what a ‘typical’ reporter in this genre is made of. Working for a tabloid-style magazine not only requires a certain mindset, according to some it is also a choice one makes for a lifetime, which connects this career to the perceived status it has in the profession as a whole:

After you worked for a well-known gossip magazine, it makes you a tainted person, it becomes much harder to work elsewhere if they see that on your resume. So generally people are sticking to these magazines for 20 years or more.

Indeed we found that all of the interviewees at some point worked for either *Privé* or *Story*, and several of them had connections with one or more other magazines in the field. For the participants, this clearly has to do with the ‘uniqueness’ of their field, the specifics defining what popular journalism is – as opposed to the rest of Dutch journalism. The sense of being a necessary all-rounder, of ‘doing everything yourself’ as one editor explains, may serve the same purpose as, for example, irony: it is a way for the participants to distinguish their work from other journalisms. One must note that the perceived multiplicity of tasks is further affected by the fact that the interviewed experts are magazine editors – people who can be considered to have more than one responsibility on their hands (managerial as well as journalistic responsibilities).

Discussion

The analysis of these interviews sheds light on the ways in which the tabloid editors and reporters construct their professional identity – both as Dutch journalists as well as distinctive popular journalists. In doing so, these journalists use the same discourse of journalism’s professional ideology as their colleagues elsewhere (Dahlgren, 1992; Winch, 1997). Journalists in the more entertaining sector of the media share notions of ethical sensibilities, servicing the public, editorial autonomy and public credibility in order to position themselves as a distinctive genre. The differences between the applications of journalism’s ideological values are embedded in the respective meanings these concepts have in popular or infotainment journalism. The ideal of servicing the public is strongly connected to commercial interests in the sense of evaluating weekly sales figures against editorial content and the cover policy of the magazine. This suggests a strict awareness of shifting wants and needs of the readership (rather than the advertiser). It also reveals the domination of the many over the few, as public awareness in this respect exclusively relates to a common or ‘mass’ denominator.

The preoccupation with reader statistics does not seem to infringe upon the popular journalists' perception of professional autonomy. In fact, editorial autonomy – as in the freedom to write creatively without the constraints of mainstream newspaper conventions – is cited self-reflectively as the motivation for being in the tabloid business. On the other hand, editors clearly indicate a strict adherence to a certain formula. One participant indicated he could not explain what exactly this formula is, as: 'you just know after a while'. Whereas autonomy in mainstream news media is often articulated to commercialism and perceived inroads on editorial policy made by marketers and advertisers, this is considered not to be of any relevance to the daily work at a popular magazine by our interviewees. Weaver and Wilhoit (1996: 61–2) consider autonomy to be articulated to the freedom journalists have in selecting and writing about particular subjects and stories, and, according to the participants, it is exactly this lack of freedom in the mainstream news media that prompted them to opt for popular journalism. The tabloid story may be based on similar newsgathering methods and investigative reporting practices; a paradoxical notion of freedom to write creatively around the retrieved information is central to the interviewees' understanding of autonomy.

Ethics, credibility and trustworthiness feature prominently in the way tabloid editors talk about their work and the various ways in which they give meaning to what they do. Yet, perhaps a bit unlike their colleagues elsewhere in journalism, ethical issues are continuously under critical discussion. Ethical considerations have to do with competitor-colleague relations, to autonomy ('we can do things the others cannot do') and especially to morality – sometimes assuming a higher moral ground ('we decide when to publish or not'). This particular conception of ethics is contextual: ethical decision-making is dependent on morality (considering the publication of details on an 'extreme' sex-life for example), on competition and on personal norms and values ('Have I hurt somebody today or not?'). As in earlier research in the United Kingdom, the bottom line in any kind of editorial (and thus moral-ethical) decision-making is outright audience-revenue commercialism: if the competitor-colleague is running the story, they print it as well (Rhoufari, 2000: 172).

The topics and themes all reveal an active construction of distinction: of finding new ground in a profession that is fast becoming a hybrid between different genres and formats in the perception of its professional practitioners (and academics as well). What is both interesting and perhaps troubling is the emphasis put on 'toughening up' in this process of distinguishing oneself in popular journalism: editors seem to think they have to push the limits of what is possible or 'moral-ethical' in journalism in order to survive the competition of other, notably mainstream news media. As they consider *Weekend* the best gossip magazine because it is 'the hardest' and *Party* the worst because it does not tell 'the truth', this

makes for an interesting future perspective, featuring a journalistic attitude that reads like hard-hitting investigative (and creative) popular journalism.

A second and final conclusion to this article considers the various repertoires in particular. What I would like to suggest is an overarching concept of utilitarianism with regard to the function of irony, being all-round, a strict focus on weekly sales and the assumption of a moral-ethical higher ground. This utilitarian attitude seems to function as a strategic ritual to explain why and how one does his or her work in popular journalism.⁵ The evaluation of this kind of utilitarianism, of tabloid editors being right or wrong solely based on the consequences of their own actions (in the opinion of the participants, reflected predominantly in number of copies sold), the distinct emphasis on pleasure (be it ironical), including a moral notion of (preventing) pain or unhappiness (in relation to both celebrities and publics) can be seen as encompassing the core defining characteristics of Bentham's moral theory of utilitarianism. An important note to be made here regards the highly personal and contextual application of the theory to the lifeworld of the tabloid editors: they talk about their own happiness, not necessarily the happiness of their (mass) audience. And one can argue that popular journalism's happiness is interdependent with the 'unhappiness' of celebrities. The ideology of journalism can therefore be seen as being actively constructed by professionals working in popular journalism genres, using a similar discourse from a different theoretical perspective: instead of professional ideology, a kind of personalized utilitarian ideological framework is applied to give meaning to being a journalist – and in particular to being a (popular) journalist other than the ones working elsewhere in the Dutch news media.

Notes

1. 'Tabloidization' is a term generally related to processes in the print media sector, 'infotainment' is a term coined to describe broadcast media developments. In this project, 'infotainment' is considered to be an overarching concept, in which the blurring of information and entertainment can be located (see also Brants, 1998). Gripsrud (2000: 290–2) argues that tabloidization can be seen as a subcategory of popular journalism, and remarks that 'infotainment' is in fact a new term for a much older development of quality popular journalism such as, for example, family-oriented variety shows on television. Infotainment is used as the overarching (contemporary) concept in the context of the project at hand.

2. One of the serious-popular magazine editors offered us a different explanation for the widespread dissatisfaction regarding *Party*. He suggested that all editors have had (verbal) fights with the current chief editor of *Party*, Ton de Wit, which has led to their disenchantment with the performance of the magazine, according to this source. A colleague of this particular editor also suggested that the editors of the other three magazines of the 'big four' (*Story*, *Privé*, *Weekend*, *Party*) did not like *Party* because it has invaded their market a couple of years ago and is taking

away their (younger) readership. Interesting, but largely unsubstantiated, suggestions. What is also interesting is that most journalists in this field at some point worked for 'the competition': almost all tabloid editors at some time in the past worked for *Story* and/or *Privé*.

3. *Party* entered the market in 1994, and had been around for seven years at the time of these interviews.

4. One could almost claim that this reads like typical 'boyish-rebellious' behavior; here I would like to note that of the 14 interviewed editors, five were women. *Weekend*, described by competitor-colleagues as the 'hardest' gossip magazine in the Netherlands, exclusively employs male journalists and editors.

5. Compare this utilitarianism to the use of objectivity as a strategic ritual in 'hard' news journalism, as argued by Tuchman (1971).

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