

# Succulent Sins, Personalized Politics, and Mainstream Media's Tabloidization Temptation

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## ABSTRACT

*This study uses an experiment to analyze how mainstream journalism's use of tabloid writing techniques affects online credibility. Participants read four news stories and rated their credibility using McCroskey's Source Credibility Scale. Participants found stories written with a tabloid style less credible than more traditional stories. Tabloidized soft news stories were more credible than tabloidized hard news stories. Results suggest that online news media may damage their credibility by using tabloidized writing techniques to increase readership. Furthermore, participants were less likely to enjoy stories written in a tabloidized style. An application of act utilitarianism suggests that tabloidization is an unethical method for increasing news readership.*

*Keywords:* Credibility, Ethics, Journalism, Media, Online News Tabloidization, Utilitarianism

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## INTRODUCTION

There's a journalistic world where old-school objectivity fights for existence against dramatic disasters and fuzzy features. It is a place where journalistic ethics might take a backseat, while reporters or editors douse newspapers with sleaze and entertainment. With little more than a creative selection of verbs and a thirst for a sizzling story, American journalists can venture into tabloid territory.

This technique of spicing up mainstream media news often is called tabloidization. The exact definition of the term varies from

one scholar to the next, but it is viewed as a method for attaining audiences in an ever-competitive media environment. Tabloidization has been described as dumbing down the news by giving consumers the stories that they want rather than providing useful public service information (Nice, 2007). The writing tone in these tabloidized stories is designed to be stimulating and exciting (McLachlan & Golding, 2000). Tabloidization results in lower journalistic standards, less hard news, and more soft, sensational or entertaining stories (Kurtz, 1993). It is far too simplistic a notion to assume that tabloidization is a completely negative

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practice, however. The method also might be utilized to increase the audience of the media and to increase their knowledge of news and information (Gans, 2009).

This paper is an effort to understand the effects of online news tabloidization on credibility. The study will look at how readers evaluate the credibility of stories written with the tabloidized format compared to how they rate stories written with a more traditional journalistic style. A more traditional reporter's story would stick to the facts and get to the point of the story, whereas a tabloidized story might include sleazy wording or unnecessary intimate details designed to grab the reader's attention rather than inform him or her. In addition, the researchers will consider whether tabloidization is more accepted in certain types of stories, such as feature pieces, as compared to hard news stories.

The study also asks how the media should respond to tabloidization pressures. In addition to studying participant responses to tabloidized content, this study will apply normative ethical theory to the tabloidization of online media, thus applying philosophical theory to the field of technoethics. Journalism ethics is concerned with how journalists make decisions that force them to weigh multiple values against one another (Plasiance, 2009). Ethics is concerned with the process that is utilized as decisions are made (Walker, 2000). Technoethics, on the other hand, focuses on ethics as it relates to technology throughout society (Luppardini, 2008). By using act utilitarianism, the researchers will examine how online journalists should address the challenges of technoethics and whether utilizing tabloidization for media survival is an acceptable ethical practice.

## Tabloidization of the Media

Tabloidization can result from competition, technology, and the desire for circulation. News organizations have essentially restructured, redesigned, and degraded their content in an effort to survive. Tabloidization can be viewed as a way of appealing to advertisers above other competing interests (Conboy, 2006).

The deregulation of the media has been cited as one reason that current affairs programs in multiple countries have become increasingly commercialized. The programs have reverted to a hybrid format that is a combination of news and reality television (Baker, 2006). Not all countries are experiencing the same level of tabloidization, however. Research suggests that the increase of democracy in Brazil resulted in a less tabloidized, and less politically affiliated media (Porto, 2007). An increase in media privatization and deregulation in India, on the other hand, has led to more entertainment news and fewer public service-oriented stories (Rao & Johal, 2006).

Signs of tabloidization can be found in some of the earliest mass media (Tulloch, 2000). Scholars have cited several characteristics as signs of tabloidization. It has been described as an increase in entertainment coverage, a decrease in long stories, an increase in shorter stories with illustrations, and an increase in informal language within news stories. The concept "implies a 'contamination' of the so-called serious media by adopting the 'tabloid agenda'" (Esser, 1999, p. 293). Tabloidization results in lower journalistic standards, an increase in sleazy tales in place of thoughtful political pieces, and a transition as to what journalists feel audiences need to know about a politician's capabilities for office (Kurtz, 1993). An overall increase in visual elements such as photographs and large headlines are another sign of the tabloidization process (Rooney, 2000).

While many news organizations are developing a tabloid style, mainstream news organizations tend to avoid using the term "tabloid." Journalists have cited the complexities of trying to maintain a serious journalism tradition while reverting to shorter, less complex news stories (Rowe, 2011). Although males and females do not acknowledge it to the same degree, audiences say they enjoy reading tabloid stories. Both sports and celebrity gossip pieces are considered particularly entertaining (Johansson, 2008).

Some scholars argue that those decrying the tabloidization of the media should consider

that the media is a complex entity featuring multiple types of journalism. One should not try to distinguish merely between tabloid media and traditional media (Harrington, 2008; Peters, 2011). Furthermore, traditional news stories share some of the same characteristics as tabloid stories. For example, both types of media embrace emotion (Peters, 2011). Tabloidized stories also do not necessarily contain more emotional elements than more traditional news stories (Uribe & Gumter, 2007). While much scholarship criticizes the tabloidization of the media, there is some indication that tabloidization may have positive effects, such as giving the media a way to reach the readers of teen magazines (Nice, 2007). Using journalistic methods to reach large groups of people may not be at the heart of the journalist's professional interest, but in a sense tabloidization or "popularization" could, and perhaps should, be used to increase the audience for news (Gans, 2000, p. 21). Ensuring that the public consumes plenty of news is increasingly important as we operate in an increasingly global society. As Gans (2000) explains: "Although the news media cannot chase away real and imagined demons, and there are other limits to what they can do and whom they can reach, they can try harder to get the news out to the people who may unknowingly need it most" (p. 27).

## Credibility

Information is more believable when it comes from a highly credible source. People are more likely to experience a greater belief change when they receive a message from a highly credible source than when they receive a message from a less credible source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Credibility is important to readers. Articles from more traditional newspapers such as the *Washington Post* are perceived as more credible than articles from tabloid publications, such as the *National Enquirer*. Highly credible sources also are judged as more believable and accurate than less credible sources (Kaufman, Stasson, & Hart, 1999). Audience judgment of credibility may depend on the situation to which

credibility is accessed (Kim & Pasadeos, 2007). Media consumers who are liberal and trust the government are more likely to trust the media than those who are less liberal and less trusting of the government (Lee, 2010).

Credibility often is measured in terms of either the source or the medium. Source credibility emphasizes the reputation of a specific individual who relays a media message (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Medium credibility emphasizes the reputation of the medium as a whole (Gaziano & McGrath, 1996). This article focuses primarily on source credibility. Source credibility can be measured in terms of multiple dimensions: competence, care, and trustworthiness (McCroskey & Teven, 1999).

## Online Credibility

Criteria such as credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy are among the most important content criteria for online news editors (Gladney, Shapiro, & Castalodo, 2007). Internet credibility research often compares online publications to traditional media outlets. People who trust mainstream media are more likely to use mainstream media websites. Those who are more skeptical of the media are more likely to visit nonmainstream media websites (Tsfati, 2007). Some research suggests that the Internet is as credible as most or all other media (Flanagan & Metzger, 2000; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007). The credibility of online news websites has dropped during the past decade. One possible explanation for that drop is that audiences are becoming more web savvy (Johnson & Kaye, 2010).

Several factors have been connected to credibility. A higher level of religiosity is associated with a greater trust in the news media than a lower religiosity (Golan & Kioussis, 2010). Age also affects how credibility is rated. College students rated television news more credible than online sources, whereas older participants found online news more credible than television formats (Bucy, 2003). Research also has suggested that those who attain a higher racism score also tend to rate nontraditional Internet

media as more credible than those with a lower racism score (Melican & Dixon, 2008).

Credibility is important to bloggers (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007). Heavy blog users find blogs more credible than those who rely less on the medium and individuals interested in politics find blogs somewhat credible (Johnson et al., 2007; Trammell, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2006). Blogs are not considered to be fair, but blog users view bias as a strength of the medium (Johnson et al., 2007).

## News Type

Research frequently refers to the differences in hard and soft news, but scholarship presents multiple definitions for the terms. Hard news has been defined as news that needs to be reported immediately, whereas soft news refers to news that does not require such timely publication (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). Hard news also has been defined as stories that are important to the audience's understanding of public affairs, while soft news has been classified as "news that typically is more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news" (Patterson, 2000, pp. 3-4).

Research indicates that the media are increasing their soft news coverage and decreasing hard news coverage. This increase in soft, entertaining coverage often is associated with newspaper conglomerate and *USA Today* owner Gannett. The *Arkansas Gazette's* feature coverage expanded after Gannett purchased the paper (Plopper, 1991). *USA Today's* style includes an over-emphasis on unimportant soft news stories (Logan, 1985-1996). Media practitioners may rely on this soft news coverage to appeal to larger audiences (Scott & Gobertz, 1992). Soft news attracts viewers who might not otherwise watch the news (Baum, 2002). Individuals who prefer hard news to soft news are better informed about several news issues (Prior, 2003). Some research has suggested that audiences can learn from soft news, but that learning might be limited (Baum, 2002).

## Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory that proposes "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Mill, 2009, p. 55). There are two types of utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism is considered a direct moral theory that emphasizes analyzing actions on the basis of each individual act or situation (Crisp, 1997, p. 102). Rule utilitarianism is an indirect moral theory in that actions are judged on how they conform to something else, namely a rule or norm. The two approaches resolve ethical issues differently. For example, consider a situation in which a journalist has promised a source – a drug dealer who sells cocaine to youth – confidentiality in exchange for information about the city's drug crisis. In terms of act utilitarianism, breaking that promise might yield the most utility because it allows the authorities to arrest someone who is hurting the city's youth. Act utilitarianism, however, would not suggest that the journalist always should reveal the name of the source. The decision would be based on the circumstances of each act. The act utilitarian approach asks about the balance of harm versus good that will result from a specific action. It endorses the action from which the most utility will result. Rule utilitarianism would consider what would happen if the decision to break a promise to the source became a rule that was consistently followed every time the journalist faced the same set of circumstances. Typically, breaking promises is thought to be morally impermissible. Rule utilitarianism requires the journalist to abide by that rule and keep that promise. Therefore, rule utilitarianism would suggest that the journalists should not break the promise of confidentiality to the source.

For this study, act utilitarianism, rather than rule utilitarianism, is used as a guide for evaluating study results, as ethical decisions in journalism are seldom answered by simply adhering to a rule. The complexities of practicing journalism require each situation to be evaluated by its specific circumstances.

Utilitarianism requires behavior that promotes happiness. When measuring what action will yield maximum utility, everyone's pleasure is of equal value, including the one doing the act. This begs the question of what is to be considered pleasurable. According to Mill, "pleasures of the intellect, of the feeling and imagination, and of the moral sentiments," should be given "a much higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensation" (Mill, 2009, p. 56). Put another way, "it is better to be a dissatisfied Einstein than a blissfully happy ignoramus" (Christians, 2007, p. 114). This clarification of what is pleasurable makes it easy to see how utilitarianism is applicable to journalism studies as the aim of journalists is to disseminate information in order to educate the public about important matters.

In journalism ethics research, some scholars argue that utilitarianism is not an adequate method for evaluating ethical decisions in media studies. They argue that other ethical schools of thought are better suited for studying the complexity of media and journalism ethics (Christians, 2007; Quinn, 2007; Ward, 2007). However, others argue that utilitarianism often is simplified and therefore misunderstood (Elliot, 2007; Peck, 2006). Nevertheless, utilitarianism is commonly used in journalism ethics research (Christians, 2007; Elliot, 2007; Peck, 2006; Ward, 2007).

Utilitarianism has been used to examine the practice of unnamed sourcing in journalism. Utilitarianism supports the use of unnamed sourcing in particular instances where a greater aggregate good would be achieved. The journalist is required to evaluate whether using the unnamed source is more of a benefit than a harm (Duffy & Freeman, 2011). Utilitarianism has been used to justify the documentary filmmakers' responsibility to prevent harm to his or her subjects. Since documentary filmmaking involves human interaction and is a practice of social institution, filmmakers have a moral obligation to avoid harming subjects (Maccarone, 2010). Some scholars also have argued that utilitarianism actually is practiced in newsrooms. Editors can justify using gory and

controversial images in the news with editors and journalists arguing that gruesome images from car accidents will encourage most people to drive more carefully (Lester, 1999).

## Research Questions

The media value their own credibility (Gladney et al., 2007). People are more likely to believe information that comes from a credible source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Furthermore, audiences find traditional news media more credible than tabloid media (Kaufman, Stasson, & Hart, 1999). Scholarship has not explained what relationship credibility may have to tabloidization.

There also is some question as to whether the news media's use of tabloidization techniques has a positive or negative effect on audiences. On one hand, the increase in personalization and sleaze can be viewed as corruption of professional journalism (Esser, 1999; Kurtz, 1993). On the other hand, tabloidization may encourage audiences to consume news (Gans, 2000; Nice, 2007).

To explore the relationship between the growing use of tabloidization in the media and credibility, the following research question was proposed:

**RQ1:** Will participants exposed to tabloidized stories rate the sources of those stories as having lower levels of credibility than participants exposed to traditional news stories?

The media appears to be shifting emphasis from hard news to soft news, which is a characteristic of tabloidization (Esser, 1999). Some scholars believe that the use of soft news lowers the quality of information (Logan, 1985-1986). This type of news, however, may help the media to attract new audiences (Baum, 2002). If credibility is important to audiences and both tabloidization and the increase of soft news are attempts to garner audiences, then the news media would want audiences to find those soft news stories credible. Yet, the relationship between credibility and different types of news

has not been adequately explored. Thus, the following research question was posed:

**RQ2:** Will readers perceive tabloidized hard news stories as more or less credible than soft news stories?

Scholarship suggests that audiences enjoy reading tabloidized content (Johansson, 2008). Research also suggests that editors have increased the tabloidization of their content because they are responding to audience demands for that type of content. This combined research suggests that audiences enjoy tabloidized material. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Participants who read tabloidized stories will report a higher level of enjoyment than participants that read traditional, untabloidized stories.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Participants for the study came from undergraduate classes at the researcher's institution. Of the 74 participants, about 34% were male and 66% were female. About 53% of the participants were in the traditional group and 47% were in the tabloid group. In regards to media consumption, 33.8% of participants reported they got their news from the newspaper, 35.1% the Internet, 8.1% radio, 36.5% network news, and 31.1% cable news.

### Stimulus Construction

Participants viewed a series of mock news stories. The stimuli that participants viewed depended on whether they were randomly assigned to the traditional group or the tabloidized group.

Four fictional news stories were written by the experimenter. Each story was written in two formats. The first format followed more traditional news writing techniques, such as the inverted pyramid style where the most important

information is located at the beginning of the story. The other version kept the same basic facts, but was written in a sensational style. The guidelines for the tabloidized writing style came from Kurtz (1993) and Esser (1999). They included: a decrease in conventional hard news coverage and an increase in soft news and sleaze; a broadened view of the information readers need to determine if a candidate is fit for a political office; lower journalistic standards overall.

Before the experiment began, five current/former journalists were asked to read all eight stories and to evaluate that the stories accurately reflected writing techniques in the way that the researcher intended. The journalists generally agreed that the tabloidized stories were more sensationalized than the traditional stories.

Two mock Web pages were designed for a publication called "The Daily News." The pages were identical, including the story headlines. The only difference was the content of the stories.

The first treatment group stories, which were written in the conventional journalistic style, were placed on one website. The second treatment group's stories were placed on another site. The files for the websites were loaded onto the desktops of several computers.

Both groups of stories were based on the same topics and general information. They also had the same headlines. Two stories used a hard news format and were considered more timely, needing to be published immediately. The other two stories were soft, feature-style stories.

The first story on the Web pages focused on a kidnapping incident, which authorities suspected was related to an Internet stalking. The first version of the story was presented in a traditional inverted pyramid format with the most recent information at the beginning of the story, such as the fact that a teen is missing, and her age. In the second version of the story, the same facts were presented, but they were interwoven into a narrative depicting what the stalker and teen might have been thinking and doing just before the disappearance. The second

version was highly sensationalized and used sordid details to grab the reader's attention.

The second story focused on a city council meeting in which officials voted to ban cell phones in downtown businesses. The first version of the story began with what is traditionally considered the most important information: the fact that the ban was put into action. The least important information, which is related to a heated discussion that occurred after the meeting, is left for the end of the story. In the tabloidized version of the story, the order was changed, allowing the story to immediately emphasize the fight that occurred after the meeting rather than the information about the new law.

The third story was a profile of a candidate for sheriff. Both stories were written as profiles, with the emphasis on informing the reader who the candidate was and what he hoped to do if elected. The tabloidized version highlighted details that readers did not necessarily need in order to judge whether the candidate was qualified for the office, such as a physical description of the candidate. Several lines in the story emphasized the candidate's popularity among women. The information was kept to a minimum in the traditional group version of the story.

The final story was a feature about a new teen dance club. The traditional story mostly gave the bare-bones information necessary for the story, whereas the second story was more detailed and sensationalized. Unlike the traditional story, the tabloidized story was more of a narrative that explained how events evolved throughout the night, whereas the traditional group story just gave the essential facts of the story, along with a sprinkling of quotes.

## Instrument

Students were asked to evaluate the source of each news story using McCroskey's Source Credibility scale (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). The scale measures three dimensions of credibility: competence; caring and goodwill; trustworthiness. The scale has been used in several studies. Reliability of the scale was tested using

Cronbach's Alpha. The overall competence alpha was .88; caring, .77; trust, .90.

Participants were asked several demographic questions at the end of the survey. They also were asked to state how enjoyable the stories were and how likely they were to seek out stories similar to the ones that they just read.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited from communication classes and randomly assigned to the traditional or the tabloidized group. Participants were asked to read the first story and then answer a series of questions. Then, they were asked to read the next story and answer a series of questions, and so on.

## RESULTS

On any of the credibility measures, such as competence, a higher score indicated a higher level of credibility. A probability of .05 was used for all statistical results.

**RQ1:** Will participants exposed to tabloidized stories rate the sources of those stories as having lower levels of credibility than participants exposed to traditional news stories?

There were statistically significant differences in how the traditional group and the tabloid group rated all three types of credibility. The means on each of the credibility scales are shown in Table 1. The participants reading the traditional stories found the news sources to be more competent with a higher competence factor score than the participants reading the tabloidized stories,  $t(72)=3.41, p=.00$ . The sources of the traditional stories also demonstrated more care, as shown with the caring and goodwill scores,  $t(72)=2.3, p=.02$ , and more trust with a trustworthiness score,  $t(72)=2.28, p=.03$ .

There also was statistical significance in how the traditional participants and the tab-

Table 1. Credibility scores for traditional versus tabloidized participants

Credibility Type	Traditional	Tabloidized
Competence overall	165.21*	145.14*
Competence hard news	57.64*	48.97*
Competence soft news	57.49	54.97
Caring/goodwill overall	111.38*	102.69*
Caring/goodwill hard news	55.85*	50.86*
Caring/goodwill soft news	55.54	51.83
Trustworthiness overall	120.77*	111.54*
Trustworthiness hard news	60.77*	54.74*
Trustworthiness soft news	60.00	56.80

\*Denotes statistical significance

loidized group evaluated the credibility of the hard news and the soft news stories. Participants in the traditional group found the sources of the hard news stories more competent than the tabloidized group,  $t(72)=4.45$ ,  $p=.00$ . The traditional group also found the sources of the soft news stories more competent than the tabloidized group, but the relationship was not statistically significant. Traditional participants found the sources of the hard news stories more trustworthy than the tabloidized group,  $t(72)=2.61$ ,  $p=.01$ . The traditional group also found the sources of the soft news stories more trustworthy than the tabloidized group, but the relationship was not statistically significant. Traditional participants found the sources of the hard news stories more caring than the tabloidized group,  $t(72)=2.47$ ,  $p=.016$ . The traditional group found the soft news stories more credible than the tabloidized group, but the relationship was not statistically significant.

**RQ2:** Will readers perceive tabloidized hard news stories as more or less credible than soft news stories?

There was a statistically significant difference in how the tabloidized group rated the credibility of the hard and soft news stories,  $t(35) = -3.04$ ,  $p=.01$ . Participants found the sources of the soft news stories (54.97) more compe-

tent than the authors of the hard news stories (48.97). There was no statistical significance on the caring or the trust factor.

**H1:** Participants who read tabloidized stories will report a higher level of enjoyment than participants that read traditional, untabloidized stories.

This hypothesis was tested by analyzing participant responses to two questions. One question asked how much the participant “enjoyed reading the style of writing” used on the website. The other question asked how likely the participant would be to “seek out stories that were written in a style similar” to the stories that they viewed. The relationships were tested with Chi-square tests.

There was statistical significance in how participants responded to both questions. Participants in the traditional group were more likely to report a higher level of enjoyment in reading the stories than the tabloidized participants,  $\chi^2(3)=9.776$ ,  $p=.02$ . The results are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Table 3, participants in the traditional group also were more likely to report that they would seek out stories written in a similar style than tabloidized participants,  $\chi^2(3)=10.739$ ,  $p=.01$ .

The hypothesis was not supported.

*Table 2. Enjoyment responses for traditional versus tabloidized participants*

Enjoyment level	Traditional (%)	Tabloidized (%)
Very enjoyable	38.5	8.6
Somewhat enjoyable	51.3	68.6
Not very enjoyable	7.7	20
Not enjoyable	2.6	2.9

## DISCUSSION

Tabloidization has become a tool for mainstream journalists (Conboy, 2006). It has been interpreted as a method for attracting younger audiences and as an agent for increasing the audience size overall (Nice, 2007; Gans, 2000). The participants in this study suggested, however, that tabloidized material posted online is less credible than content written in a more traditional journalistic style. Participants were more accepting of sleazy and lurid details when the story was soft news-oriented. While the news media may offer tabloidized content because they believe that audiences want that writing style, the participants in the tabloidized group were less likely to report that they enjoyed reading the stories in this study than participants who read stories written in a more traditional style. While it certainly is possible that participants did not want to admit that they enjoyed reading trashy content and two questions are a limited means for accessing enjoyment, this result raises a question as to whether journalists truly are providing audiences with the content that the audiences want the most. Other scholars have attempted to tackle that question, but more research is needed in this important area. The

study did not attempt to ascertain the reasons as to why participants enjoyed a particular style of writing more than another. That is another important question that could be addressed in future research.

## Utilitarianism

In addition to studying how audiences responded to tabloidized content, we sought to understand how journalists should address the tabloidization temptation in terms of normative ethical theory. We have chosen to address that issue by applying act utilitarianism to our study results.

Utilitarianism is interested in maximizing utility. The theory suggests that the highest pleasure is that of intellect (Mill, 2009). When applying act utilitarianism, specific actions are evaluated based on the utility that will result from said action. Actual outcomes are difficult to predict, so utilitarians determine the best action based on expected outcomes. If a utilitarian approach is used, journalists should be concerned with providing the highest pleasure for the majority of people. Traditional news stories offer important details and relevant information that might be buried in tabloidized stories. Utilitarianism would suggest that news

*Table 3. Seek similar content responses for traditional versus tabloidized participants*

Seek Likelihood	Traditional (%)	Tabloidized (%)
Very likely	30.8	17.1
Somewhat likely	48.7	28.6
Not very likely	20.5	42.9
Would not	0	11.4

readers experience more intellectual pleasure by reading stories that stick to the facts rather than sleazy content.

The participants in this study reported that they were more likely to enjoy and seek out stories written in a traditional style rather than tabloidized content. From the perspective of utilitarianism, these participants were more likely to seek out a higher pleasure rather than a lower pleasure. The participants were more interested in seeking out the material that would maximize utility. Therefore, the best way for journalists to accommodate the enjoyment and overall pleasure needs of the audience is to supply readers with more traditional content rather than tabloidized material. There is some question as to why tabloid content is popular even though participants reported that they were less likely to seek out this type of story. One explanation for the popularity of tabloidized content may be that some people do not have enthusiasm for higher pleasures. Mill argues that people who chose not to enjoy higher pleasures have become incapable of experiencing such pleasures (Crisp, 1997).

Research suggests that people value credibility (Kaufman et al., 1999). Journalists also value credibility. The concept is found throughout journalism textbooks and news organization ethics codes. Participants in this study were more likely to find the journalists who wrote with a more traditional style to be more credible on the basis of competence, trustworthiness, and good will. Utilitarianism calls for one (the journalist) to be impartial to his own happiness when considering actions that yield the most utility (Mill, 2009). Utilitarianism would suggest, therefore, that it would be in the best interest of both the journalist and the audience if content is presented in a more traditional style.

When considering utilitarianism, the news writing styles was relevant not just to journalists, but news consumers as well. Mill suggested that people have a duty “to form the truest opinions they can” (Mill, 1859, p. 102). Being informed on matters of concern to society is the best way to do that. Elliot (2007) furthers this point by em-

phasizing the importance of public discussion in providing the opportunity to compare one’s beliefs against others. As such, in most cases, utilitarianism would suggest that journalists should use a more traditional writing style that would appeal to the highest possible intellectual pleasure. There may be instances, however, when the only way to reach the masses may be to use a more tabloidized writing style that will grab the attention of audiences and ensure that they pay attention to a story. Act utilitarianism recognizes that there is no single one-size-fits-all answer to all complex ethical issues. It suggests that decisions should be made on the basis of specific circumstances that the journalist faces. Perhaps the tabloidized style should be utilized when evidence suggests that audiences have failed to take note of a similar story that was important. Participants here suggested that they were more comfortable with the credibility of writers when they read tabloidized soft news stories than they were with tabloidized hard news stories. This also might suggest that the journalist can have more flexibility in choosing to use a more tabloidized writing style for those feature stories than with breaking news stories, such as homicides and car accidents.

## CONCLUSION

Questions of technoethics surround the modern journalist. New technology gives audiences more access to information than ever before, forcing journalists to compete with one another on a global stage. It can be tempting to add sleazy details to a story in the hopes of garnering some repeat posts on Facebook and other social networking sites. Nonetheless, the participants in this study suggested that they were not fond of tabloidized content and they were less likely to trust the writers of lurid stories. Furthermore, utilitarianism suggests that tabloidization generally is not an ethical way to reach audiences. As journalists continue to ponder their survival in a market that is over-saturated with free content, perhaps they should take a moment to consider not just what they write about, but how they

write stories. This may help them to appease the ever-technologically savvy audience. Perhaps it also is time for us to revisit discussions of philosophical ethics in our journalism classes. It seems the classical theories are as relevant in the modern world of technoethics as they were in Aristotle's time.

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