TABLOIDS AND QUALITIES: WHY TRANSATLANTIC JOURNALISM TRENDS VARY

A CASE STUDY OF THE 2010 BRITISH PETROLEUM OIL SPILL IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

by

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This thesis analyzes news styles and the presence of sensationalized content in the top-circulating newspapers of London and New York City. The two cities are comparable in population size and as hubs of national news titles, but the two have developed contrasting news environments. Circulation numbers reveal a dominance of tabloid newspapers in London but a dominance of more serious, or “quality,” newspapers in New York City. This distinction involves quality newspapers aiming to inform the public, while tabloid newspapers aim to entertain, heighten curiosity and lure buyers. These contrasting aims are explained in a historical analysis of industry development and in a case study of news coverage during the 2010 British Petroleum oil spill. By comparing front-page coverage of oil spill news in London and New York City newspapers, this case study evaluates tabloid readers’ awareness of international events and why this type of newspaper journalism dominates in London.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Above all, always, my thanks go to my family. They encourage and support me through all of my decisions, challenges, and wild endeavors, such as, writing a senior thesis at all and squeezing most of it into my final semester. On that note, I owe many thanks to the faculty who guided me through the thesis process, both in these final four months and in the preceding year which I spent in London and Washington, D.C. Finally, I am so grateful to the faculty, staff and students of the John V. Roach Honors College, to whom I attribute every opened door in my four years at TCU.
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INTRODUCTION

When Londoners leave work and shuffle through the crowds entering Tube stations, vendors offer free copies of the London Evening Standard. The vendors shout to the passing commuters, “Standard! Get your Standard!” Copies of the front page are taped to the station railings, touting headlines such as, “MINISTER QUITS IN EXES SCANDAL” or “GEORGE IS THE PLAY BOY PRINCE.”

These all-capitalized and curiosity-inducing headlines have come to dominate London’s top newspapers. Called tabloids, such newspapers are characterized by large font sizes, all-capitalized headlines, news in condensed form, large photographs, and a prioritization on sensational—meaning false, misleading, or exaggerated—stories.

In his book The British Press, journalism professor Mick Temple describes the distinction of “redtop” versus “quality” newspapers. He calls redtops “merely the latest and most marketable permutation of the language of the people in periodical form” and refers to the quality newspapers as serious with a readership of educated, affluent, cultivated and influential people.1 This terminology focuses on content style, though in terms of paper size, most British quality newspapers have abandoned the broadsheet paper size, which is a tall paper folded in half. All but one leading British quality is now printed as a tabloid, which is stapled and resembles a magazine.

London’s leading newspapers are tabloids, as demonstrated by figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), the United Kingdom’s body for media measurement. See Table 1.1 below for the full chart. Of London’s top ten daily

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newspapers in 2012, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Mirror* tabloids topped the list with one to two million copies circulated on weekdays. After those top three tabloids come quality newspapers like *The Daily Telegraph* with a daily circulation of 560,398 and further down the list *The Times, Financial Times*, and *The Guardian*. The leading tabloids circulate at two-four times the qualities’ circulations. These numbers reflect a strong presence of both types of newspapers in London but a dominance of tabloids; London is a tabloid-dominant news culture.

*Table 1.1 Daily Newspaper Circulation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>London</th>
<th>New York City</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>T or Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>The Sun</td>
<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
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<td>#3</td>
<td>Daily Mirror</td>
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<td>Daily Star</td>
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<td>The Telegraph</td>
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<td>#6</td>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>Q</td>
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<td>#7</td>
<td>Financial Times</td>
<td>Q</td>
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<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>Daily Record</td>
<td>Q</td>
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<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Q</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"T" represents tabloid; "Q" represents quality.
*Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2012*

In contrast, quality newspapers make up the top-circulation in New York City, as demonstrated in Table 1.1. These are newspapers regarded as serious, truthful and more informative than entertaining. In 2012, ABC reported weekday print circulation for *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* qualities at 2 million copies each, followed by the *New York Post* and *New York Daily News* tabloids at less than 500,000 copies each. Based on these figures, the quality is clearly dominant; the qualities circulate at
two-four times the tabloids’ circulations. New York City’s quality/tabloid divide is almost exactly the inverse of London’s quality/tabloid divide.

Prevalence of tabloid news in London yields questioning of its news culture. News of wars, catastrophes, and government appear secondary to news of celebrities, strange occurrences, and scandals. Even when there is news of wars, catastrophes, and government, the focus may be on the gossip or the dirt, not the facts. Are these readers aware of world news? Do they question what they read? Are the quality newspapers non-sensational? How did sensational content come to dominate London’s journalism culture?
BACKGROUND OF CASE STUDY

Questions about Londoners’ news awareness in a tabloid-driven culture shaped the following case study: to determine the accuracy of claiming London is a tabloid-driven culture and what a London newspaper reader learns of a major world event. The analysis compared newspaper content in tabloid newspapers versus quality newspapers to determine what a reader learns from each and how the information is presented.

The major world event chosen for this case study is the 2010 British Petroleum (BP) oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Being a British company affecting United States’ waters, coasts, and oil supply, news of the event was reported in both British and United States’ media.

Specifically, this case study analyzed newspapers of London and New York City. These cities are of comparable size, each having a population of approximately 8 million. In 2013, The Guardian estimated London had a population of 8.3 million, while the U.S. Census Bureau recorded a population of 8.4 million for New York City. Both cities have prominent news cultures with widely circulated newspapers.

Specifying a time frame, this case study of London and New York City newspapers examined broadly the 86 days before the spewing well was capped and specifically three important dates therein. These 86 days spanned April 22, 2010 to July 16, 2010. Within that range, there are three dates for which most New York City and

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London newspaper archives were attainable for this study, allowing for the widest comparison:

1. April 30, 2010 – the date news coverage reported the oceanic oil slick had almost reached the southern coast of the U.S. ³

2. May 28, 2010 – the date news coverage focused on President Barack Obama first publicly addressing the issue from the White House. For containment efforts, Obama pledged “every single available resource,” including the U.S. military, and also charged BP with responsibility for the cleanup.⁴

3. July 16, 2010 – the date news coverage focused on BP successfully capping the well after several failed attempts.

Throughout this nearly three-month period, the oil well gushed an estimated 40,000 barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico each day.⁵ This amounted to at least eight times more oil than released in the 1989 Exxon Valdez Spill. If refined to gasoline, this amount of oil, on each of those 86 days, could refill the tanks of about 175 sedans and 26 tracker trailers. In addition to the magnitude of oil wasted, the event became world news because of the harm brought to marine and coastal wildlife and because of the company’s failure to prevent or efficiently solve the problem.

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In a final specification, this case study looked only at front pages of London and New York City newspapers on the specified dates. The front-page coverage is the first item a reader sees, demonstrates prevalence given to the topic, and reveals what kind of words and imagery are used to grab attention, convey the message, and lure buyers. Within the newspaper, prevalence may be demonstrated by page number or by amount of content and editorial opinions. The newspaper’s cover reveals priority given to information versus entertainment.

In summary, this case study examined front-page coverage in London and New York City tabloid and quality newspapers during the 86 days of the 2010 BP oil spill, with particular attention given to April 30, May 28 and July 16. See Table 2.1 with these qualifications in table format. This case study compared the newspapers for how much content appears, in what format the content appears, what a reader learns about the event, and what news appears on the cover if not the oil spill.

Table 2.1 Components of Case Study

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Components of Case Study</th>
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<td><strong>Event</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Time Frame</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Page</strong></td>
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</table>
Analysis of this sample of newspapers aimed to answer two questions: 1) Does this sample exemplify London newspapers prioritizing coverage of major world events, and is that coverage factual? and 2) Does this sample support the argument that London has a sensational news culture, while New York City has a factual news culture?
HISTORY AND THEORY

History reflects a definable shift brought on by the Industrial Revolution, when newspapers transformed into a competitive mass medium. Before this shift, both British and U.S. media produced truthful, informative daily newspapers for more than a century. The first daily is credited to Britain: the *Daily Courant*, begun in 1702. This was a two-column single sheet containing shipping news and bits of international news. Such dailies circulated primarily among elite, literate classes and served as sources of information, not entertainment.

At the turn of the 19th century and throughout the 1800s, however, came the most identifiable shift to a sensational press. This shift began with a series of advancements that broke newspapers’ elite mold. These advancements occurred in the manufacture of paper, in the 1844 telegraph which overcame distance and increased the speed of information, and in rising standards of living. All of this made information cheaper and contributed to the development of the penny press. Newspapers were now cheap to produce and affordable across socio-economic lines. News coverage was democratized. A wider audience was now able to purchase reading materials as an affordable form of participation in information and entertainment.

Wider reach and a cheaper product had its downfalls. This early 19th-century shift was what journalism historian Frank L. Mott calls the “dark ages of journalism.”

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7 Ibid., 179.
more readers, advertising expanded and made news a commodity and a competition. Advertisers expanded advertising directed at luring buyers and beginning to measure newspaper readership. As journalism and modern media scholar David R. Spencer writes, “It was not enough to report the facts of the day’s events; those facts had to be interpreted and placed in a setting where readership could be attracted and retained.” In content, these new penny papers “pandered to the masses by sensationalizing the trivial and easily understood at the expense of the economically and politically significant,” writes sociologist Alfred McClung Lee. Their approach was to “satisfy curiosity, heighten thrill, and sell newspapers.” This industry development, beginning in the early- to mid-1800s, would later come to be known as “yellow journalism” for the murkiness of news and skewing of truth.

By the 1920s, in both nations, the distinction between the sensational tabloid and the more serious quality was well defined. For example, the New York Daily News tabloid “captured readers’ attention with an emotional mix of sex and crime news, sensational photographs, and glaring headlines,” while The New York Times provided “the official

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11 Ibid., 226.
record of the governing elite in a rational, logical and factual format.”\textsuperscript{14} This distinction between well-defined tabloids and qualities has persisted to today, as evident in the circulation numbers listed in the Introduction. The list of top five circulated newspapers for both New York City and London includes both tabloids and qualities.

Two leading figures of tabloid media in the U.S. were William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. The two molded a new form of journalism. Pulitzer’s stories had “color and life,” appealed to human interest, and used suggestive headlines.\textsuperscript{15} These qualities sealed the entertainment aspect of tabloid news. As industrial America was developing a lifestyle that included leisure, entertaining tabloids were one source of “diversion from the tensions of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{16} Tabloids did carry news but were more focused on selling than informing.

In the U.K., the biggest name in tabloid journalism arose in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Rupert Murdoch revamped London’s \textit{The Sun} and \textit{News of the World} newspapers to be “irreverent and anti-establishment, ensuring the economic viability of the British newspaper industry.”\textsuperscript{17} Murdoch’s news style maintained cozy news relationships with the British prime minister, exploited the commodity of celebrity,\textsuperscript{18} and employed

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 454.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Kaufmann, Barbara. “Sensationalism, Inflammatory Words and the History of Tabloid Journalism.” Charter for Compassion International. Accessed 19 May 2014.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
unethical tactics like phone hacking, bribing, and stalking to reveal seemingly newsworthy scandals. These tactics were more extreme than expected of yellow journalism, but Murdoch made them successful. Murdoch eventually owned *The Times*, *The Sun*, *News of the World*, British and Japanese television networks, and Twentieth Century Fox in the U.S., including *The Wall Street Journal*.

Since Hearst and Pulitzer infiltrated and Murdoch continues to infiltrate newspapers, tabloid culture has continued to grow because of tabloid tendencies in television and Internet news. This cross-media shift began with televised events like the O.J. Simpson trial and the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Now, the public consumes celebrity news on shows like *Inside Edition* and *TMZ* and gets a “voyeuristic look into people’s private lives” with reality television like *John and Kate Plus Eight* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Tabloid culture zeros in on individuals and their situations rather than the status quo. The ordinary becomes celebrity. Now with a 24-hour news cycle, the hours must be filled with more and repeated dissection of the lives of these ordinary individuals-turned celebrities and microscope lens on the lives of public figures.

Sensationalism has spanned the boundaries of newspaper, television, and Internet news in both U.K. and U.S. media. At the root, however, the nations’ media operate on different theories. These theories are defined by three communication professors in the 1956 book *Four Theories of the Press*.

The libertarian theory of the press is attributed to Britain. Under this concept, the functions of the mass media are to inform and entertain with the essential characteristic

http://voiceseducation.org/content/sensationalism-inflammatory-words-and-history-tabloid-journalism.

19 Kaufmann, “Sensationalism, Inflammatory Words and the History of Tabloid Journalism.”
being freedom from government controls. Because the government has the power to intervene at the end of a dispute, it should not have the additional advantage of access to the public during arguments. Murdoch’s tactics provide a good example of this theory. He rubs elbows with the prime minister, and the government will not intervene with his trivialized or untrue news or his unethical approaches to newsgathering. The power of words—even if they are false or misleading—is in his hands.

Temple cites a 1938 *Report on the British Press* which recognized a downgrade in the commitment to public service:

“A dangerous tendency has recently been manifesting itself by which entertainment ceases to be ancillary to news and either supersedes or absorbs it. The popular press’s diet of ‘triviality and sex appeal’ left the readers of such newspapers ill informed and ‘unable to participate intelligently in political debate.’”

While Britain does carry several reputable quality newspapers, there is undeniably a “nasty streak” in the British press. Tabloid tendencies have flourished more so than in U.S. media.

The U.S. falls into the press theory of social responsibility, creating a stark transatlantic contrast. In the early 20th century, the U.S. recognized tabloid tendencies in the media and rerouted its path toward a news model of social responsibility. The major premise of this model acknowledges the press’ privileged position under government and the stature of media as powerful, monopolistic enterprises owing nothing to the public. Because of these positions, the press is bound to inherent obligations of accountability to

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22 Ibid., 210.
the public and service to the general welfare. Such accountability and service includes the media’s watchdog role toward government, its role as stimulant of public political discourse, and its aims of financial self-sufficiency so as not to appease special interests. One product of this social responsibility model was the establishment of codes of ethics, the first of which was created in 1923 by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and is now a common component of news organizations nationwide.\textsuperscript{23} \textit{The New York Times} stands as an example of a socially responsible news organization in an increasingly sensational news environment. It is regarded as truthful and accurate.

In contrast to social responsibility, Temple describes the news environment that has developed in the U.K. press:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“The intimate relationships of celebrities, from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more ‘newsworthy’ than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence… The commitment to ‘public service’ – informing the public about key social and political issues – has been downgraded.”}\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Though to a lesser extent, American newspaper readers certainly consume news of celebrities, soap operas, and sport. Tabloid culture infiltrates traditional news in increasing ways. The question remains of what lasts of the medium originally designed to be truthful, informative, and non-sensational. A necessary degree of skepticism lies in whether the remaining qualities have not also turned sensational, to some degree.

\textsuperscript{23} Siebert, \textit{Four Theories of the Press}, 83.
\textsuperscript{24} Temple, \textit{The British Press}, 174.
CASE STUDY

Introducing the case study of 2010 BP oil spill coverage on the front pages of leading London and New York City newspapers, the following paragraphs will first provide an overview of front-page coverage in the selected 86-day period and will then look at individual front pages from the three aforementioned dates. Archives were not available for every paper or every single date within the range, but enough were available to evaluate general practices. Archive sources included Washington D.C.’s Newseum website, websites of individual newspapers, and the databases Access World News, Lexus Nexus, and ProQuest.

To begin, not once in 86 days did BP oil spill news appear on the front page of London’s two top-circulated newspapers, *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror* tabloids. Instead, cover headlines focused on crime and celebrity, as portrayed in *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror* sample cover pages in Illustrations 1.1 and 1.2. Slightly better were these newspaper’s counterparts, the top two tabloid newspapers in New York City, *New York Daily News* and *New York Post*. These two tabloids carried news of the BP oil spill on their front pages on 14 and 13 out of 86 days, respectively. The slightly more serious *London Evening Standard* carried oil spill news on just three of the 86 days. Meanwhile, qualities like *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London carried BP oil spill news on the front page nearly every single day. This priority demonstrated by the qualities stresses just how under-prioritized the BP oil spill news is in tabloid newspapers, in particular the tabloids of London which circulate at two to four times that of the London qualities. This event
pertained to both nations, as is demonstrated in both cities’ quality newspapers prioritizing the BP news day after day.

Illustration 1.1 The Sun cover for April 29, 2010 (The Guardian).
Illustration 1.2 Daily Mirror cover for May 28, 2010 (ukpressonline.co.uk).

After this overview of 86 days, the case study narrowed to front-page BP oil spill coverage for three key dates: April 30, May 28, and July 16. This analysis will evaluate:

1. how much content is present.
2. in what format the content appears.
3. what a reader learns from the content.
4. what the main topics are, if not the BP oil spill.
April 30th Coverage

The first date, April 30, 2010, is the date news coverage focused on the oil slick nearing the southern coast of the U.S. This case study yielded nine results for this date: the news appears on the front pages of *The Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* and does not appear on the front page of the *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Telegraph*, *London Evening Standard*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post* or *The Sun*. See Illustrations 2.1-2.3 for three examples.

Of the three newspapers that do carry front-page news of the BP oil spill, *The Times* features only a teaser at the bottom of the page. (See Illustration 2.1) Eight days into the oil spill, this teaser marks the first time oil spill news has appeared on *The Times’* cover. Placed as the middle of five similar teasers, the headline reads “Oil spill catastrophe” with the short description “America is facing an oil disaster, with crude pouring from a ruptured well in the Gulf of Mexico expected to reach the Louisiana coast today, threatening hundreds of species” and a note that more information can be found on pages 4-5. This wording broadly introduces the

*Illustration 2.1 The Times cover for April 30, 2010 (Microfilm, Mary Couts Burnett Library).*
reader to the issue overall. Interestingly, this teaser does not make mention of BP. Rather, the issue is presented as America’s problem and disaster, not an event that in any way pertains to Great Britain. If The Times staff believes the spill is America’s problem or seeks to protect BP’s reputation, it follows that no more front-page prominence would be given to the issue during these first eight days. The British press has grown to favor corporate perspectives, and omitting BP’s name from this teaser is an example of such.\textsuperscript{25} In that case, the dominant and more newsworthy topic on The Times cover is the third debate between Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg in their campaigns for political party leadership.

As for The New York Times, its April 30 front-page BP coverage includes the dominant cover image, a headline, the first six paragraphs of an article, and a note that coverage continues on page A14. (See Illustration 2.2) The image depicts an aerial view of a boat in open water working on the spill. The headline is the same font size as the page’s other headlines and states, “U.S. INTENSIFIES BID TO CONTROL

\textsuperscript{25} Temple, The British Press, 197.
SPILL IN GULF.” The deck, or secondary headline, reads, “Naval Resources Added—Review of Gulf Rigs is Ordered.” The opening paragraphs of the article describe the oil slick’s three-mile proximity to the U.S. southern coast and the federal government’s orders for more Navy vessels and aircraft attending to the efforts.

This information is more specific than that of London’s The Times’ cover. The New York Times assumes readers’ familiarity with the issue and does give a broad introduction like The Times gives. Instead of stating America’s impending disaster due to a ruptured crude well, The New York Times details response efforts. The emphasis is recovery and leadership, not doom. Interestingly, The New York Times’ detailed coverage makes no mention of BP, just like The Times’ condensed coverage did not. Coverage focuses on U.S. efforts and resources, not on BP. The omission of BP and the contrasting tones of recovery versus doom create a stark dichotomy between The Times and The New York Times. Each newspaper takes a nationalistic stance, and The Times is more sensational. Focus on disaster and doom is more thrilling and less factual than recovery.

Similar to The New York Times, the oil spill is the main news piece on the front page of The Wall Street Journal. (See Illustration 2.3) This coverage consists of a headline, the opening nine paragraphs of an article, a note about additional information on page A6, a map graphic which serves as the dominant cover image, and a couple sentences in the daily column of front-page world news briefs. The main headline reads, “Navy Joins Oil Spill Fight” followed by the deck “Gulf Coast Braces for Effects of Huge Slick; BP Chief Predicts New Regulations.” The information parallels that of The New York Times but also makes mention of BP leadership and appeals to the investment audiences by mentioning harm to coastal food industries and oil companies. Such
targeted content is a product of competitive media and the advent of penny papers. Though competition sprouted alongside sensationalism, the mention of industry welfare is factual and newsworthy, not sensational.

In comparing *The Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*’s coverage on April 30, the approaches vary greatly for being the two cities’ leading qualities. *The Times* conveys a minimalist, unhopeful, and removed tone, while *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* convey prominence, resolve and ownership. *The Times*’ minimalist approach uses the words “catastrophe” and “disaster” but does not provide context that supports use of such strong words. Eliminating context yet using strong wording exemplifies sensationalism. The result is a shorter, punchy story. Both New York City qualities excluded sensational wording, using straightforward terms supported by surrounding context.
For this date alone, this sample of newspapers indicates sensationalism has, indeed, infiltrated London’s quality press. Nationalistic and corporate interests are protected, and sensational wording is used without supporting context. The quality press of New York City, on the other hand, remains reputable and non-sensational.
May 28th Coverage


To begin, The Times of London prioritizes BP oil spill news as one of its top two cover stories. (See Illustration 3.1) The large headline “Obama attacks BP over ‘worst’ oil disaster” competes for dominance against the cover photo of Sex and the City 2 actresses at the movie’s London premier. Below the BP headline runs the deck “President under pressure promises action” and also the first nine paragraphs of an article, which continues on page 15. From this information, a reader learns briefly of numerous topics Obama covered in his press conference: suspending dozens of off-shore drilling projects, holding BP accountable for the disaster,
warning that the initial success of one plugging effort may not last, stating the spill is worse than the Exxon Valdez spill, and addressing the resignation of the head of Minerals Management Service (MMS), which regulates off-shore drilling. These topics read like a bulleted list. This list presentation borders on the sensational quality of condensing news, simplifying topics by removing context, data analysis, and alternate perspectives. *The Times* does sensationalize in its use of exaggerated verbiage. The opening paragraphs include phrases like Obama’s “ferocious attack on BP” and the event threatening “to derail his presidency” similar to Hurricane Katrina destroying “President Bush’s reputation for competence.” The exaggeration of the second statement, in particular, is unsupported. The article makes no mention of public unrest toward Obama’s efforts. *The Times*’ reporting is rooted in facts but spliced with opinion short of context.

Sensationalism is present—in verbiage and condensed news.

*The Guardian* is reputed similarly, as a quality London newspaper. Its May 28th edition treats BP news as third in importance on the front page. (See Illustration 3.2) The two dominant
stories cover Iraqi war reports and prostitution in the city of Bradford. Below these runs the BP news runs horizontally along the bottom of the page. The headline reads, “BP Deepwater slick now worst oil disaster in US history” followed by 13 paragraphs, and more on page 22. Surrounding the 13 paragraphs are two smaller photos making mention of threatened marine wildlife and “the ultimate pullout guide to the BP disaster” on page 24. The Guardian’s treatment of the issue is slightly more respectable than The Times. The article offers much the same news as The Times but eliminates exaggerated phrases. The Guardian uses to-the-point, straightforward reporting in describing Obama’s press conference, initially successful efforts at plugging the well, the resignation of MMS’ head officer, and comparisons to the Exxon Valdez and Hurricane Katrina. By mentioning its pullout guide, The Guardian is prioritizing the directing of readers to at least four pages it has devoted to the BP topic. Unlike The Times, sensationalism has not infiltrated The Guardian in this example.

BP news also appears on the May 28th front pages of the British qualities’ New York counterparts, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. Both newspapers give the spill the number-one spot in their coverage. The New York Times’ cover image shows members of Louisiana’s National Guard installing floating dams to protect its beaches from oil. There are also two oil spill headlines on The New York Times’ front page: an editorial analysis titled “Regret Mixed with Resolve: President Concedes Mistakes on Oil Spill” and a news article titled “AFTER DELAY, BP RESUMES EFFORTS TO PLUG OIL LEAK” to be continued on pages A14-15.
These pieces provide much the same information as *The Times* and *The Guardian*: Obama’s press conference, resignation of the MMS head officer, suspending off-shore drilling, and comparing oil amounts to the Exxon Valdez spill. *The New York Times* also includes Obama’s blaming the George W. Bush Administration for fostering a “cozy and sometimes corrupt” relationship between oil companies and MMS regulators, a relationship which prevented notice of BP’s flawed rig. The previous two newspapers do not mention this relationship in their coverage of MMS leadership. This mention offers an example of social responsibility theory. *The New York Times* reports corrupt government relationships, a non-nationalistic choice which paints its own federal government in poor light. This contrasts *The Times* April 30th coverage which omitted words harmful to national and corporate interests.

Continuing on social responsibility theory, *The New York Times* includes a front-page editorial analysis of Obama’s statements. Rather than reiterating Obama’s message,
as the London qualities have done, *The New York Times* provides analysis of Obama’s message on page one. Rather than taking Obama’s word as fact at face value, writer Peter Baker takes on the “watchdog” role. His analysis serves to interpret Obama’s message and compare it to public perception and historical fact. In doing so, Baker points to the rarity of a U.S. president admitting error, admitting that his agenda is flawed. Baker quotes Obama’s admittance that, by pushing for expanded off-shore drilling, he wrongly assumed that oil companies were prepared for risk management and were properly regulated by the MMS. This editorial, and its front-page placement, serves as a strong testament to social responsibility and non-sensationalism in *The New York Times*.

As for *The Wall Street Journal*, minimal front-page attention is given to Obama’s press conference. (See Illustration 3.4)

*Illustration 3.4 The Wall Street Journal cover for May 28, 2010 (Digital Microfilm, ProQuest).*
More focus is placed on the magnitude of the spill, compared to the Exxon Valdez event, and to processes of plugging attempts and of industry regulations. Similar to its April 30th edition, *The Wall Street Journal* for May 28 focuses its BP coverage on commercial matters. The information comes in the form of the cover’s primary news story and in a paragraph in the newspaper’s daily front-page column of world news briefs. The cover story is headlined “Spill Tops Valdez Disaster” followed by the deck “BP Pauses, Then Resumes Pumping ‘Mud’ Into Broken Well; Regulator Resigns.” The first four paragraphs of the article, to be continued on page 6, appear alongside an image graphic of the rig on fire when the events began on April 20. Sensationalism does not exist here in presentation or writing. Targeting a corporate audience by emphasizing commercial news rather than political leadership echoes presensationalism newswriting. *The Wall Street Journal* seemingly targets elite audiences, as did the world’s original broadsheets. Therefore, sensationalism and tabloid tendencies are not present here either.

Of these four quality newspapers, sensationalism is only evident in *The Times*—for

*Illustration 3.5 Metro cover for May 28, 2010 (e-edition.metro.co.uk).*
exaggerated, unsupported verbiage and condensed news. The final newspapers to analyze for BP oil spill coverage on May 28, 2010 are the tabloids. Of the London and New York City tabloids, this case study found front-page oil spill coverage in *Metro, New York Daily News*, and *New York Post*.

In London’s *Metro*, the front-page coverage for the oil spill was only a small teaser to the full story on page 23. (See Illustration 3.5) The teaser headline reads, “Obama vs ‘cosy’ oil industry” with the teaser text “Barack Obama last night attacked the ‘scandalously close’ links between regulators and oil companies, as BP’s Gulf of Mexico spill became the worst in US history. The US president put all drilling on hold.” This information is surprisingly factual and non-sensational for a tabloid newspaper. The news is comprehensive; nearly all news elements listed in the quality newspapers’ coverage is included in this short teaser. The choice to include the words “cosy” and “scandalously close” lean toward sensationalism, but because they are quotes from the source, cannot truly be considered sensational. This respectable oil spill coverage is unexpected and impressive for a London tabloid. The oil spill is not the most prominent cover item, but it is treated with minimal sensationalism. In comparison, *The Sun, The Daily Mirror* and *London Evening Standard* tabloids do not include BP news on the cover.

*Illustration 3.6 New York Daily News cover for May 28, 2010 (Newseum).*
In *New York Daily News*, the oil spill news covers two-thirds of the front page. This consists of the large, all-capital pun “OIL VEY!” next to a headshot image from Obama’s press conference. (See Illustration 3.6) The two decks read “Bam takes some blame in worst oil spill” and “Malia: Did you plug the hole, yet Daddy?” with more on pages 8-9. This pun, name abbreviation, and child quote are all tactics to sell news, to lure consumers, and to heighten curiosity rather than strictly to inform. In fact, the information is minimal. Compared to the other front pages analyzed, a *New York Daily News* reader does not learn of Obama stopping off-shore drilling, of the MMS chief resigning or regulation issues, or of the comparisons to the events of the Exxon Valdez or Hurricane Katrina. The pun, in particular, offers no news value. It does not inform but strictly entertains and grabs attention. Sensationalism is rampant in this *New York Daily News* cover, by way of capital letters, a pun, a large photograph, an abbreviated name of a world leader, absent or condensed news, and a child’s quote.

*New York Post* treats the front-page coverage similarly. (See Illustration 3.7) It uses a photo spanning two-thirds of the page and showing Obama looking downward, shamefully, during his press conference. In the text next to his face, first comes the topic phrase “GULF OIL DISASTER” and the headline “‘DID YOU PLUG THE HOLE YET DADDY?’ Even Obama’s daughter wants an answer.”

*Illustration 3.7 New York Post cover for May 28, 2010 (Newseum).*
THE HOLE YET, DADDY?’” followed by the deck “Even Obama’s daughter wants an answer” with more on pages 4-5. This coverage is even less informative than the cover of New York Daily News. This cover does not tell any news. It is not clear that the president has addressed the issue publicly, took any blame for the issue, or that the issue has been named the worst in oil event in U.S. history. Even clearer than New York Daily News, this edition of New York Post aims to sell. It aims to heighten curiosity, persuading the reader to open the paper in order to find the news. The sensationalism is evident in capital letters, the large photograph, use of a child’s quote, and absence of news.

These tabloid examples—London’s Metro and New York City’s Daily News and Post—draw an important distinction between the two cultures’ nature of tabloids. In London, tabloid newspapers are the primary circulators and, for some, a primary source of news. They are more widely circulated than quality newspapers. Britain’s Chancellor George Osborne was recently quoted for appreciating how tabloids “bring life” and news appeal to a boring topic like the national budget. This statement came after The Sun created a cover photo of the chancellor in denim shorts and high heels, strutting over a booming economy and job market. (See Illustration 4.1) A wider audience is willing to read about the budget, when presented in this risqué tabloid manner, as opposed to a more factual manner expected of the quality newspapers.
In New York City, however, the tabloid circulation is far subordinate to the qualities’ circulation. New York City tabloids could be compared to a weekly magazine; they are not primary sources of news but entertaining takes on news which the reader has already learned.

In total, this May 28, 2010 sample of newspapers revealed some exceptions to tabloid and quality expectations. The Times of London was heavily sensational for a quality newspaper, while the London Metro was non-sensational for a tabloid. Even with the U.S. president addressing an international event and pointing fingers at BP, still the news is mostly absent from London’s leading newspapers, the tabloids.

On Friday, July 16, 2010, *The Times* newspaper announces the end of the BP oil spill with an understated teaser at the bottom of the front page. The headline reads “BP halts oil spill” followed by a short summary: “BP halted the flow of oil from its ruptured well in the Gulf of Mexico for the first time since April. It is preparing

![Illustration 5.1 The Times cover for July 16, 2010 (Newseum).](image-url)
to freeze dividend payouts until well into next year, hitting pension funds.” It finishes by listing pages 14-15 as the location of the full story.

From this teaser, a reader would learn the two key news elements: stopping the oil and the financial chaos facing the company. Unlike *The Times* editions analyzed in the previous pages, this front-page teaser is accurate. It informs via non-exaggerated and non-sensational wording. However, the understated placement, size and presentation of this teaser undermine the historical, economical and ecological significance of the event and Great Britain’s co-ownership of the mess. Just like its April 30 coverage, *The Times* represents Britain as minimalist and removed. The news deserves more front-page prominence, but in all other aspects, sensationalism is not present.

Meanwhile, *The Guardian* takes a much different approach. Its July 16 front page does not mention capping the oil well, but it does include one element of BP news. Running along the bottom of the page is the headline “Homophobia still rife in public life, says outing BP chief” followed by 11 paragraphs and a continuation to be found on page 2. In those first 11 paragraphs, this article makes no mention of the oil spill. The
first sentence states that BP’s former chief executive officer stepped down “after failing to halt the publication of details of a gay relationship” and is now speaking out about public regard toward homophobia.

With this homophobia story and the cover image of South African Olympic runner Caster Semenya, who is featured for returning to international competition after a win-less year and “sex test controversy,” The Guardian aligns with Temple’s description of “an increasing dependence on sex and sensation.” The BP homophobia topic lures readers to continue reading onto page two, where they will learn the less local news that the well has been capped after 86 days. The writing is straightforward and factual, and the topic is important. But the presence of several sex-related stories and not the oil spill on the cover of The Guardian make this edition more sensational than the respectable May 28th edition.

In this comparison of London qualities, The Times and The Guardian treat July 16th oil spill news similarly. The writing is factual and non-sensationalized, but the news is understated. As for New York City newspapers, front-page coverage of the BP oil spill is much more prevalent. The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, New York Daily News, and New York Post all feature the oil spill news as the primary cover story.

To begin, The New York Times carries two articles and the front page’s largest and primary image about the oil spill ending, all of which lie above the fold. (See Illustration 5.3) The main headline reads, “BP Caps Its Leaking Well, Stopping the Oil After 86 Days” with the image and caption displaying a deckhand reeling in an oily batch of oysters. The two articles discuss the cap used and the wildlife endangered, with a

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continuation on pages 17-18. At the bottom of the front page is another photo, showing the top of the oil rig capped, without oil escaping.

From the information present on the front page, a reader would learn that the last of several valves was capped at 2:25 PM July 15 and that there are several possible routes for ensuring the cap’s permanence. The headlines, the captions, and the articles are unbiased, straightforward facts. The words tell what happened, by whom, when and where.

The reader would also gain a glimpse of the oil’s impact on coastal wildlife and on seafood industries in the feature article “From an Oyster in the Gulf, A Domino Effect.” The feature article does, perhaps, trace its roots to Joseph Pulitzer’s style of giving news “color and life.” This type of feature delocalizes writing and dwells on an individual to exemplify conditions region-wide or industry-wide. This individualization and delocalization is cited as a trait of sensational journalism, as part of newspapers widening their audiences.27 Individualization of news

has also been coined “keyhole journalism,” which political critic George T. Rider calls indecent and trivial for “parading personalities.” While narrowed to individuals, this feature is neither accusatory nor negative. It hones in on an individual to help readers understand the issue. The individualization is a route to inform, not to entertain. Therefore, no unwarranted sensationalism is present in this edition of The New York Times.

Similarly, The Wall Street Journal carries news of the oil spill with before-and-after images of the gushing and capped rig and the headline “Oil Spill Halts, For Now, As BP Tests New Cap.” The headline and images do compete for prominence with a headline of larger font size about Congressional reform of banking regulations. Whether or not BP is the first item that draws the eye, there is much material present: the image and headline, the article, a flow chart of BP’s rising

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share price as the oil spill ceases, a note about further content on pages A14 and C10, as well as a paragraph summary in the daily front-page column of world news blurbs.

From these various elements, a reader of The Wall Street Journal would learn that the cap is being tested for 48 hours to determine its permanence, and would learn of the spill’s vast impact geographically, politically, and financially. This information is very similar to that of The New York Times, except for a bit less fact and a bit more editorializing. This editorializing, or sensationalizing, comes with word choices like “a wide swath of the Gulf” and “upended domestic politics.” These words seem subtly strong, particularly the idea of the oil spill “upending” U.S. politics. Otherwise, The Wall Street Journal’s coverage is straightforward, unbiased and much like The New York Times’ coverage of who, what, when, and where. Word choice in The Wall Street Journal has traces of sensationalism, but overall, the writing and emphasis is reputable.

In summary of July 16th qualities, London newspapers understate the news but do cover it factually and non-sensationally. New York City newspapers prioritize the news but involve traces of sensationalism—in individualization and word choice.

Transitioning to tabloids, the front page of New York Daily News on July 16 allots nearly two-thirds of the page to oil

spill news, along with the death of sports commentator Bob Sheppard and an *Inception* movie review. The BP news is the first item to catch the reader’s eye, using the catchy phrase “GLUG, GLUG, PLUG!” in capital letters and large font size. Beneath the catchy phrase, the front page summarizes the breaking news with the deck “At last, BP may have halted the gulf oil leak” and “see page 5.”

In comparison to the New York City qualities, this front-page information is limited. A reader learns that the oil flow has ceased and may get the impression that the fix is not permanent. The word choice of “leak” without supporting context seems to belittle the situation. This was not like a leaking kitchen faucet; it was 86 days of spewing that caused significant political, biological, and financial harm and is considered one of the greatest oil disasters in world history. This word choice could fall under the category of “trivialization of news,” which critics began to observe in the mid-1800s. Trivializing complex events made news more punchy, concise, and appealing to the masses. This edition of the *New York Daily News* is factual but has strong elements of sensationalism in its catchy headline, large font.

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size, use of capital letters, limited front-page news, selection of front-page stories, and word choice.

The last tabloid example is the New York Post. Unlike any of the previous examples, the July 16th New York Post carries only one story on the cover, and that is the end of the BP oil spill. The front page utilizes a full-page background image of the capped oil rig and several lines of text. The text reads, “After 85 days and 200 million gallons of crude in the Gulf... OIL’S WELL! Gusher plugged as BP finally fixes devastating leak” and “See pages 6-7.”

From this information, a reader would learn the magnitude and duration of the spill. However, the text fails to hint at the question of the cap’s permanence, which the other newspapers included. “OIL’S WELL” is quite the opposite, actually. This phrase, plus the use of the word “leak,” trivializes the event, similar to the word choice in New York Daily News. Conveying the idea that the problem is fixed and completed actually misconstrues the news and misleads the reader. Therefore, for the little bit that the reader learns from reading page one of New York Post, the information learned is inaccurate or incomplete. Falsity is one attribute associated with tabloid journalism. As early as 1885 one critic observed, “There is no doubt that it is all wrong, but it sells the paper.”30 New York Post, like New York Daily News, does give due prominence to the event but sensationalizes the ending of the BP oil spill with capital letters and a large font size, misleading information, and trivialized word choice.

For July 16, this sample of newspapers indicated London’s low priority on the news of the oil spill ending. London’s leading newspapers, the tabloids, did not value the

news as page-one worthy, and the qualities barely did either. Despite this low prevalence, the London qualities, as well as the New York qualities, were all non-sensational. The news was straightforward and comprehensive, which was not true of *The Times*’ previous editions analyzed. New York City tabloids did prioritize the event but were highly sensational via font treatment, word choice, and absent or misleading news.
CONCLUSION

As previously stated, this case study of London and New York City newspapers’ front-page coverage during the 2010 BP oil spill sought to answer:

1) Does this sample exemplify London newspapers prioritizing coverage of major world events, and is that coverage factual?

2) Does this sample support the argument that London has a sensational news culture, while New York City has a factual news culture?

In conclusion, the quality/tabloid divide among New York City newspapers was as expected. All four newspapers (The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, New York Daily News, and New York Post) prioritized the oil event, with the qualities being more thorough and factual. The tabloids were more limited and sensational, aiming to grab attention. The London newspapers were less predictable. Mostly, the covers of the London qualities did include the BP news, while the tabloids did not. However, the qualities’ cover content was limited; the bulk of the BP content was buried deeper in the pages. Of this front-page content, there were tendencies to omit context and prioritize sex or celebrity news. Therefore, a degree of sensationalism has seeped into the London quality newspaper market.

These observations lend to a question of news value. Why does the BP news barely headline the London newspapers? It is clear that the event was given much more prominence in U.S. news than in U.K. news, despite the event pertaining to both nations. The U.S. may have felt much greater impact than the U.K., but the event very much applied to the U.K., as BP is a British company which Obama publicly charged with
cleanup responsibilities. In a survey of its newspapers, the U.K. appears to claim little credit, relationship or involvement with the issue and instead chooses to plaster its front pages with sensational content. Sex, crime and scandal supersede history-making international events that affect local and global industries and environmentalism.

Disregarding the presence or prevalence of BP news, there are identifiable similarities between content styles in the qualities and tabloids. Both U.S. and U.K. qualities feature numerous stories on the front page, headlines of consistent size, and factual wording. The tabloids, on the other hand, feature few stories on the front page, front-page advertisements, headlines in large font sizes and capital letters, and non-factual, misleading or curiosity-inducing words.

As the press media has developed and rapidly changed during the past centuries and decades, new media develop to inform the public. Today, newspapers compete with radio, television, and Internet news to break the latest stories and provide details and opinions. In a 24-hour news cycle, newspapers are unlikely to first break the news to readers. This signals a shift in purpose. Today, the purpose may be not to announce the latest events but to provide details and commentary. In the competitive news environment, broadcasters may now be first out of the gate, but newspaper writers may provide the deeper and more complete knowledge. In leading British newspapers, this deeper and more complete knowledge is buried. Readers must first sift through pages of sex, crime and scandal. Entertainment news sells the top-circulating British newspapers.

While newspapers remain a critical informer on issues and opinions, Sir Philip Gibbs acknowledges the “sad plight of the British Press” with its “word no longer
accepted as gospel.” Even if British newspapers help shape public opinion, perhaps the information cannot be accepted as fact. Content is driven by libertarian and capitalistic ideals. Capitalism forces quality newspapers toward sensationalism in order to compete with the tabloids’ circulations. Whether in qualities or tabloids, British journalism does not follow the “tough-minded and skeptical” standards of American journalism.

Geography also contributes to London’s more competitive newspaper environment. London dominates the national newspaper market, with leading titles concentrated within one city. In the U.S., however, the top-circulating newspapers are more dispersed. New York City claims The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, while McLean, Virginia holds USA Today, and Los Angeles holds the Los Angeles Times. There is not one overarching U.S. news hub the way London functions for the U.K.

Beyond transatlantic comparisons that find British journalism to be more sensational, the question remains if American journalism is itself sensationalized. After all, tabloid mogul Joseph Pulitzer’s name is “linked with the best work the craft can produce.” While uncovering scandals and authorities’ secrets, journalists and

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35 Spencer, The Yellow Journalism, xii.
consumers blur the lines of personal privacy and newsworthiness. The industry may become numb to sensational content morphing into today’s general content.\textsuperscript{36}

In analyzing New York City qualities—\textit{The New York Times} and \textit{The Wall Street Journal}—I found the former’s coverage of the BP oil spill to be factual and straightforward. Opinions were not included. All necessary and available news was included. For the most part, \textit{The Wall Street Journal} did the same, except for small instances of strong word choice. Both newspapers did include elements of targeted coverage, such as corporate stock fluctuations likely aimed at affluent readership. While this targeted content is a product of the competitive penny press, the New York City qualities present this content factually. The content or presentation is not exaggerated to increase sales.

The leading American qualities have recognized tabloid trends and routed themselves on a path of social responsibility. This path is defined by ethical standards, monitoring the government, and informing public opinion. This path is successful in American journalism culture, as evidenced in \textit{The New York Times}’ leading circulation numbers locally and nationally. British journalism culture is different. \textit{The Sun}, an irreverent tabloid, leads circulation numbers locally and nationally. Leading U.S. quality newspapers have refused to yield to the transatlantic, and perhaps worldwide, rise of tabloid journalism.

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