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Tabloidization in the Modern American Press:
A Textual Analysis and Assessment of Newspaper and Tabloid Coverage of the "Runaway Bride" Case

by

Nichola Reneé Harris

Under the Direction of Merrill Morris

ABSTRACT

The media have extensive power in that they represent the primary, and often the only, source of information about many important events and topics. Media can define which events are important, as well as how media consumers should understand these events. The current trend towards tabloidization, or sensationalism, in today's American media, has caused an uproar among media traditionalists, primarily in the fields of news and print media. This study seeks to examine the actual influence of tabloidization in newspaper media. My primary research question is as follows: Do tabloid newspapers in the United States set the agenda for more mainstream newspapers? An ethnographic textual analysis will be done of tabloid and newspaper coverage of a recent nationwide story about an Atlanta-area woman running away from town days before her wedding, the "Runaway Bride" saga, in order to compare how the story was covered in tabloid and mainstream newspapers.

INDEX WORDS: Runaway bride, Newspaper, Tabloid, Jennifer Wilbanks, Thesis, Communications, Georgia State University, Nichola Harris

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by

NICHOLA RENEÉ HARRIS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2005

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Nichola Reneé Harris
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NICHOLA RENEÉ HARRIS

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
December 2005

Dedication

To Ms. Nichola Reneé Harris, as proof that you can do whatever you set your mind to.

Don’t you forget it!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank God for getting me out of this place. No, really. I mean it.

That being said, I would like to thank all of those who supported me during this stressful time in my life, helping me climb the mountain, slay the dragon, and defeat the forces of evil otherwise known as "graduate school!"

Thank you to committee member Dr. Kay Beck for your service on my committee and your great ability as a teacher and friend. I'll miss you!

I must also give a special thanks to committee chair Dr. Merrill Morris for all of your suggestions and efforts during the completion of this thesis. At last, we have emerged victorious from the battle with He Who Must Not Be Named, and for your help in that, I am grateful!

I must acknowledge all of the love, support, concern and understanding shown me by my wonderful friends and family members:

Special thanks to my best friend Angela, my homey Dock "DJ Dock" Ervin, my great friends Anita, Diana and Sonya, my buddies Deidra and Melissa and my brother Greg. You listened to me gripe, passed me tissue when I got weepy, gave me time and encouragement and helped me plot bodily harm to those who would see me fail. You are all true friends, and I am lucky to have you covering my back. Thank you so much!

Finally, I must give sincere and profound thanks to my mother, Vida Elizabeth Harris, for her boundless love, guidance and support. You have made this achievement possible, and as I FINALLY move into the next phase in my life, I am glad to have you behind me. I love you, and thank you.

And now…on with the show!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> In the fall of 1998, *Newsweek* writer Richard Turner visited Tabloid Valley in south Florida and included the following vignette in an article titled "A Tabloid Shocker": Hanging on the wall of editor Steve Coz's office at the *National Enquirer* is a makeshift poster featuring four magazine covers. There's a recent *People* offering up "Men Behaving Badly," about celebrities who cheat on their wives; *Times*' "The Roswell Files," about UFOs; *Newsweek*'s "We're Having a Baby," picturing gay musician Melissa Etheridge and her lover. And finally, the oft-scorned *Enquirer* itself, with Bill Cosby, Jon Benet Ramsey, and other stories. Above all this is the headline WHICH ONE IS THE TABLOID? (Sloan, 2001, p. 214)

Today's news media are a study in both contemporary progression and traditional methodology, with numerous sites of conflict among those supporting either side. Modern innovations such as the Internet and satellite broadcast have drastically reduced global information gaps, and speedy newsgathering is in high demand among consumers. Information is now being pushed faster than ever, causing displeasure amongst the "slow and steady" news media purists. In contrast, more traditional reporting techniques (i.e., correspondent reporting and deliberate, thorough checking of sources) continue to be implemented; seen as being the "proper" way of doing things among traditionalists, these traditions often represent journalistic prudishness and an archaic outlook. However, as of late there has been increased attention given to a noticeable shift in news content that is proving alarming to both sides of the media community – the phenomenon termed as "tabloidization."

"Tabloidization" or the emergence of pervasive sensationalism within the media, is thought to have a multitude of origins and characteristics, seemingly dependent upon

which faction you choose to support (the modernists or the traditionalists). According to various media theorists and experts (and Steven Barnett as quoted by fellow author Kevin Williams), "the growth of media and cultural industries and the rise of the information society coincides with a 'pervasive sense of declining cultural, educational and political standards' or 'dumbing down" (Williams, 2003, p. 229). Said Colin Sparks (also cited in Williams):

> While there may be more information available, the quality of this information as well as public understanding is declining. Public ignorance and apathy is growing as the serious, challenging and truthful is being pushed aside by the trivial, sensational, vulgar and manipulated. (Williams, 2003, p. 230)

Unchecked information sources, the success of the American tabloid, falling circulation and ratings numbers and the abandonment of quality in favor of speedy gossip have become major sources of contention in American media and are among the factors thought to have led to modern tabloidization. Despite differences of opinion as to its features and inception it is generally agreed that tabloidization is a powerful force, given the importance of the media to many as informer, entertainer and educator. However, there is surprisingly little research concerning tabloidization and American media. The objective of this study is to look further into tabloidization in the U.S. media, or more specifically tabloidization within American news and tabloid media. As a means to this end, a textual analysis will be done of both mainstream newspaper and tabloid coverage of a specific news event, the early 2005 case of the "Runaway Bride," as a case study. Among features slated for study will be the respective placement of the story, any illustration combined with the story, headline or caption use, as well as the style of content. It is hoped that there will be further insight gained into the role of tabloidization within American print news media as a result of this study. The chapters in this thesis

will be as follows: Chapter 1, Introduction; Chapter 2, Literature Review; Chapter 3, Methodology; Chapter 4, Findings, Limitations and Suggestions for further research, followed by References and Appendices A, B, and C.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

What is a tabloid?

In the past a "tabloid" was simply a medical pill or tablet, taken internally for a variety of ailments. According to John Tulloch, the term "tabloid" was a source of contention between the drug industry and the media at the end of the nineteenth century. Tulloch, author of, "The Eternal Occurrence of Journalism" states that in England, "tabloid" was "registered by the pill manufacturers Burroughs, Wellcome & Co. in 1884 as a trademark for a combination of the words *tablet* and *alkaloid.*" Fewer than twelve years later, the word "tabloid" had come to mean anything in a concentrated medium. In a journalistic sense, the tabloid described the print media most notably designated by Alfred Harmsworth, once editor of the New York *Daily World* in 1900. Harmsworth's tabloid referred to the use of economy with words – short sentences and short, simple paragraphs (Tulloch, 2000, p. 146). "Tabloids" are also defined as a specific print media structure, where a "newspaper" or "magazine" is made half the size of the traditional broadsheet newspaper.

Today, according to author Elizabeth Bird, the label of "tabloid" is most often used to represent the "sensational tabloid – the paper whose stock in trade is the human-interest, graphically told story, heavy on pictures and short, pithy, highly stereotyped prose" (Bird, 1992, p. 8). Colin Sparks defines "tabloid" in a similar manner:

> It devotes relatively little attention to politics, economics, and society and relatively much to diversions like sports, scandal, and popular entertainment; it devotes relatively much attention to the personal and private lives of people, both celebrities and ordinary people, and relatively little to political processes, economic developments, and social changes. (Sparks, 2000, p. 11)

Other labels that are regularly used interchangeably with "tabloid" include "yellow journalism," "soft news," "infotainment" and most recently, "newszak."

Tabloids tend to be filled with "soft news," a type of news that is less hard-edged or challenging and consisting of stories with a human-interest spin. In the article *"*Myth, Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News,*"* S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne noted:

> Running through most American writing on news is the assumption that there are two kinds of news, variously called "hard" versus "soft," "important" versus "interesting" (Gans, 1979) "news" versus "human interest" (Hughes, 1968) and "information" versus "story" (Schudson, 1978). Hughes, for example, claims that news articles either edify or entertain, and this either/or split has become a taken-for-granted, if constantly qualified, assumption in American journalism. (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, pp. 68-69)

"Infotainment" and "newszak" are hardly considered news at all and are often pointed to as examples of "dumbed-down" news content for consumption by the masses. Both "infotainment" and "newszak" are believed to be lacking in quality, "hard," informative and useful news. Said Bird in support of the tabloid-infotainment connection, "Tabloids do not claim to be fiction, even if they do claim primarily to be entertainment. They do report on real people and events, and their staff members are journalists" (Bird, 1992, p. 104). Bob Franklin defined "newszak" as " a product designed and 'processed' for a particular market and delivered in increasingly homogenous 'snippets' that make only modest demands on the audience. Newszak is news converted into entertainment" (Franklin, 1997, p. 5).

Finally, the word "tabloid" has become associated with a distinctly negative connotation, one of sleazy content and immoral reporting techniques. The tabloid is now considered by many to be a villain in the media world, as well as a source of extreme embarrassment for society's journalistic and literary elite. Citing Mary Ellen Brown, Bird provided an example of anti-tabloid thought:

> As defined by the elite, tabloids are the epitome of "trash" reading as described by Brown: "First, trash connotes that which ought to be discarded, a sort of instant garbage; second, it connotes cheapness, shoddiness, the overflow of the capitalist commodity system. Third, it connotes a superficial glitter designed to appeal to those whose tastes are ill-formed according to the dominant perspective…Fourth, trash is excessive: it has more vulgarity, more tastelessness, more offensiveness than is necessary for its function as a cheap commodity. (Bird, 1992, p. 107)

Tabloids are also almost exclusively thought of as belonging to the "supermarket tabloid" variety, a tabloid that (among other locales) is sold in supermarkets across the United States. Supermarket tabloids are commonly described as colorful tabloid-size papers (half the size of the traditional broadsheet newspaper), containing large headlines, plenty of pictures, the latest gossip (usually about American celebrities) and other columns about a variety of subjects. In a much more critical definition of the supermarket tabloid, Jostein Gripsrud referred to John Paletz's view of popular supermarket tabloids the *Star* and the *National Enquirer*. Both tabloids, he said, "emphasize sexy crime, celebrities, and scandal," use exaggerated language and "re-stage events as they may or may not have occurred." They "skirt journalistic ethics by using long-lens cameras, engaging in high-speed chases, paying for interviews and exclusive rights to information…Their stories are often fanciful, if not invented" (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 293).

What is the elite press?

As mentioned earlier, members of the mainstream press often hold disapproving views of the tabloid. According to Paletz:

> The elite press tends to emphasize government and politics, employs or uses foreign correspondents and reports their stories, strives to delve into issues and trends, and indulges in investigative journalism. Its news stories include background and explanations, often containing more than one perspective and source. It treats the news with relative sobriety, downplays flamboyant material, and eschews hyperbolic (but not evocative) language. (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 292)

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* are often given as prime examples of the elite press in the United States. An extended grouping of the elite press would include other media: "Programs like '60 Minutes' and 'Larry King Live' and magazines such as *Time* or *Newsweek* whose tone is serious, official, impersonal and aimed at producing understanding and belief" (Fiske, 1992, p. 47). The elite press routinely denounce the tabloid, its producers and its supporters as appealing to the basest of human fascinations and motivations in order to increase circulations and sales. The elite are also those most often decrying the mass corruption of the American quality press and media by a new evil generated by tabloid consumption and influence: tabloidization.

What is tabloidization?

Tabloidization can be defined as "involving a shift in the priorities within a given medium away from news and information toward an emphasis on entertainment," or as "concerning the shifting boundaries of taste within different media forms" (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000, pp. 10-11). More simply, it is the "process by which the press pays more and more attention to [soft news] at the expense of the coverage of public affairs" (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000, p. 16). The idea or threat of tabloidization triggers intense anger and

protest as to its perceived or actual effects on the media. "It is generally felt," said Sparks, "that the moral and practical bases of American journalism are slipping away. The high standards of yesterday are being undermined by sensationalism, prurience, triviality, malice, and plain, simple credulity" (Sparks, 2000, p. 1). Tom Rosentiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism and media critic for MSNBC in 1998, also characterized tabloidization in a negative light, calling it a "crisis on conviction, a philosophical collapse in the belief in the purpose of journalism and the meaning of news" (Kurtz *et al.*, 1998, pp. 44-47).

Despite the characterizations of tabloids as trash by the media elite, implementation of some of the tools of the tabloid has affected mainstream media's bottom line in a very positive way – better circulations, bigger audiences and of course, larger profits. These practices have become so successful, that they are now being used on a large scale, so widespread, in fact, that tabloidization has been called an epidemic. According to Bird, tabloid news style is a "storytelling" news style that focuses on narratives that highlight individuals and their concerns. Second, there is a domination of visual images (i.e. photographs, sketches) over analysis and rational description (Bird, 2000, p. 215). "An important axis to the debate about changes to the press involves the kinds of layout, headline sizes, and use of pictorial material that are commonly in use in different kinds of newspapers" (Sparks, 2000, p. 13). Finally, there is the growing use of techniques for dramatic appeal, such as photo enhancement, reenactments and diagrams (Bird, 2000, p. 215).

Reasons for tabloidization

Why is tabloidization occurring now? Sparks sees three of the "master themes" of "social change in the developed world" as likely playing a part in this change in the media and their audience (Sparks, 2000, p. 33). First, Sparks refers to the high literacy and educational level of the overall population, which increases the potential market for serious newspaper consumerism. However, his second theme, changes in the structure of the family and labor market, goes against this market potential. Although there is an increasing population of women involved in education and employment, and thereby an increase in the number of potential consumers, their status as "reluctant purchasers of newspapers, quality or otherwise, compared to their male equivalents" does not provide a supportive environment for the quality press. Newspaper content in general traditionally has had a distinctly male focus, reducing the likelihood of female interest or consumption. Third, while the number of college graduates is increasing, the "graduate" job share is likely not keeping up, leading to a possible dissatisfaction among college graduates with the status quo. "The positions of economic and social responsibility and leadership that were characteristic of the elite readership of the serious press are not shared by many of the new, educated employees" (Sparks, 2000, p. 33). These three factors, says Sparks, may cause general upheaval in the news and established newspaper market:

> The confluence of three of the master themes of contemporary social change in the developed world are combining to alter the social ground of the audience for serious media, and with it what we might term the preferred average mix of content is shifting. The serious press is struggling to identify this new mix, and in the course of doing so is finding that it seems to contain much more sensation and scandal than they were trained to believe was appropriate in a serious newspaper or news broadcast. Hence the shrieks of "tabloidization." (Sparks, 2000, p. 33)

They point to a perceived crisis in the democratic process, marked by low participation rates and declining party membership, as well as the rise of new technologies for the delivery of news as agents of change in the composition and lifestyles of the modern news audience. Another factor is the existence of intense competition between commercial news outlets, which forces editors and journalists to scrutinize and tailor their product as never before. Next, as mentioned earlier, society's consumer composition is drastically changing in regards to education and the participation of women, and as a result, news producers must reconsider news that is potentially unappealing to many of its female consumers. Finally, there is displeasure with the political and private elite's immense power, which happens to be the main ingredient of the serious media news diet. This type of content is seen by many possible consumers as being uninteresting and useless to themselves personally, marking it as distinctly undesirable (Sparks, 2000, pp. 35-36).

Peter Golding and Philip Elliott, authors of the 2000 article "News Values and News Production," gave a similar opinion on tabloidization and the news audience, saying that the desire of the journalist to engage the audience may cut across some professional and moral standards and ideals long-standing among the journalist community. The familiar argument is that in order to inform the audience you must first gain its attention. Said Golding & Elliott, "There's no point preparing serious, well-intentioned, high-minded journalism if the audience registers its boredom by switching off. Thus entertainment is high on the list of news values both as an end in itself and as a means to other journalistic ideals" (Golding & Elliott, 2000, p. 635).

Tabloidization's many facets

There are many media critics and observers who feel that the hoopla surrounding the modern evil of mass tabloidization is ill conceived and misguided. Further, they believe that the modern tabloidization phenomenon is old news, a revolutionary tool, beneficial to the masses, or does not exist at all (Sparks, 2000, p. 2). Journalists' use of sensationalism, gossip and lewd or intrusive material has long been a concern of media critics, academics, and moralists. Yellow journalism, the penny press and tabloids have also been around for centuries, and have their place in American history. Tabloids, stated Sparks, were "a stage on the road from European oppression and patrician condescension to the full integration of the immigrant and the proletarian into the world of U.S. democracy" (Sparks, 2000, p. 26). They also enjoyed a major boom in the daily newspaper market by the 1950s, and have remained a constant presence ever since.

In at least two senses, the suggestion that tabloidization is some sort of newfangled manifestation does not ring true. First, critics of contemporary journalism have tended to incessantly romanticize and revere the journalism of yesteryear, conveniently forgetting the low points journalism has had throughout history. Second, newspapers, and more recently broadcast media, have always been motivated by two aspirations that show serious potential for conflict: providing essential information for those in a democratic society and entertaining the public. Perhaps a third might be the pursuit of profits. Since the very beginning, the history of the press has been marked with high and low periods, as well as both successful and failed attempts to discover the right mix of information, news, story-telling, truth and old-fashioned gossip. Given this type of background, it seems reasonable to question whether the recent changes in

journalism add up to an actual substantial trend, or simply a continuation of previous developments (Franklin, 1997, p. 6). In his 2001 history of the supermarket tabloid, *I Watched a Wild Hog Eat My Baby!: Tabloids and Their Cultural Impact*, Bill Sloan recounted the rise of the supermarket tabloid, the long-standing trends surrounding tabloids in general, and the influence that the tabloid has commanded. He also gave recognition to the eternal human desire for stimulation and excitement. "No single factor," stated Sloan, "has played a bigger role in the way today's news media gather and display the news than the public's timeless desire to be horrified, outraged, amazed, scandalized, amused, infuriated, and titillated (not necessarily in that order)" (Sloan, 2001, p. 18). Sloan also alluded to the familiar notion that sensationalism (i.e. sex, gore, violence) is used because it sells. If the public did not want it, they would not purchase or consume it. In any case, these are not new trends, but familiar ones. Colin Sparks was likeminded: "It may not be true that things are, as many commentators claim, 'getting worse.'" It might simply be that their gaze has lighted on an established phenomenon they had previously overlooked (Sparks, 2000, p. 2).

Academic defenders of the tabloid point to it as a potential tool of revolution or subversion, or at least a means of circumventing elite news gatekeepers. These defenders of the tabloid medium are more skeptical as to the inclusive claims of American political life and present the tabloid form as "the site of a counterpolitics that stands for the world of the immigrant and the proletarian" (Sparks, 2000, p. 26). They accuse tabloidization critics of endeavoring to make their own elite conceptions of news and politics the universal standard of "valuable" news. Defenders also want the messages in tabloid content to be validated, as well as the values of those who consume them.

At best, the tabloid can be looked upon as a site for popular opposition to the dominant powers that be, providing a resource where "the people" can generate their own meanings and thus empower themselves at the expense of the "'power bloc'" (Sparks, 2000, p. 25). The "power bloc," said author John Fiske in 1992, is "an alliance of the forces of domination, expressed in institutions such as government, politics, industry, the media, the educational system, the law and so on" (Fiske, 1992, p. 45). The power bloc regulates the news, diffusing only the information that they want the lower subjects to have (meaning the "elite" or "quality" news). News sources such as tabloids offer alternatives to this news, first by selecting "other" events to report and second by the *way* news is selected, resulting in a news diet that is often devoid of explicitly political information (Fiske, 1992, p. 47). Jack Levin and Arnold Arluke, coauthors of the 1987 book *Gossip: The Inside Scoop* saw "media gossip" (an aspect of tabloidization) to be a positive force in American life, if not a necessary part of the democratic process. By providing a forum for public opinion, tabloid media gossip and investigation "acts to constrain the behavior of our political leaders and national celebrities by making it almost impossible for them to hide from their constituents, and by giving us the 'inside scoop' on their unethical behavior" (Levin & Arluke, 1987, p. 193).

Others defend the tabloid from more of an industrial or stylized point of view. Rarely going beyond stressing the entertainment content and market value of the tabloid medium, these defenders see the tabloid as a means of relieving stress, providing escape and earning money in the U.S. capital system. The tabloid, they say, is not to be taken seriously, means no harm and is simply a legitimate form of the press that is sold for profit, like a book or magazine. Tabloids use conversational writing style. They may use

slang, snappy headlines, puns and one-liners, as well as talk about subjects such as aliens, the occult, etc., that the elite media would ostensibly never dream of covering. However, just because tabloid content tends to concentrate on stories about celebrities, gossip and private drama, this does not mean that the tabloid is incapable of addressing the same issues as the serious media (Sparks, 2000, pp. 26-27).

Tabloids are constantly being held up to the standards of serious newspapers and high-minded literature. Supermarket tabloids with high circulations such as the *Sun, Star* and *National Enquirer* are often the most vilified among the tabloid variety, and according to the 1981 article "*National Enquirer* is National Fetish! The Untold Story!" by Fred Schroeder, they are also the most misunderstood. First, said Schroeder, the "book" is invariably judged by its cover: the blatant tabloid covers and headlines often belie the contents. Also, tabloids are misclassified as newspapers and criticized as journalism. Said Schroeder, "*Why* – the analytic discussion of causation is absent or superficial, and *when* and *where* do not exist at all: there are no datelines to the stories! They exist out of place and time" (Schroeder, 1981, p. 169). This goes along with the view that tabloids were never meant to be compared with the serious newspaper and are really just for fun.

Some even believe that tabloids serve the greater good, providing an essential alternative to elite journalism. The definition of "serious" or "worthwhile" news is rather restrictive. Sparks noted that the concentration of serious news media on issues designated by the "power bloc" or existing powers can in effect render them blind to social change and innovation (Sparks, 2000, p. 27). Indeed, there are numerous instances of tabloid stories or discoveries (i.e., within the O.J. Simpson trial, or the Clinton-

Lewinsky affair) that would likely have gone undetected by the massive (but slow) elite press machine.

News stories are, as the term suggests, stories as well as news. Good ones exhibit a narrative structure akin to the root elements in human drama. As Reuven Frank, former president of NBC news, said, in America "'joy, sorrow, shock, fear, these are the stuff of news" (Golding & Elliott, 2000, p. 633). However, news sources such as the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times* (with their famous slogan *"All the news that's fit to print"*) almost seem to pride themselves in covering the most dull and tedious of stories and details. Meanwhile, according to Sloan, consumers have "invariably chosen shipwrecks over shipping notices, crime and carnage over commodity futures, and whorehouse raids over wholesale price indexes. For them, the more shocking the news, the better" (Sloan, 2001, p. 17).

Finally, some argue that tabloidization is in fact not real, does not warrant the current tumult surrounding it, or does not exist in the way that the present concern would have us believe. A major part of the charge of tabloidization in the United States is squarely founded on the belief that tabloids are less truthful or reliable than the legitimate press, and that this deficiency is somehow contaminating serious news. Tabloidization skeptics feel it is one thing to point toward the existence of tabloid media, but it is quite another to state that there are changes going on in the media that amount to "tabloidization." Supermarket tabloids have indeed shown enormous growth and gained vast circulations, but they have also recently had serious losses in both circulations and profits. There is also absolutely no evidence that supermarket tabloids have any likelihood of replacing the serious press in the daily news market (Sparks, 2000, p. 21).

According to Franklin, three changes in journalism and news media are sounding alarms. First, the shifting balance from hard news in favor of entertainment in news media content has rarely, if ever, been so apparent. Secondly, this shift has been accompanied by a related decline in investigative news journalism, which has virtually disappeared from some news media. Finally, this decline in news coverage and rise of entertainment content has become evident across all news media, albeit to differing degrees (Franklin, 1997, p. 6). Tabloids and the embracing of their practices by other media are also being blamed for this downturn. "What was once the occasional waiver into the tabloid gutter has been institutionalized for much of the media," said *Washington Post* writer Howard Kurtz in 1997 (O'Brien, 1999, p. 118). It is important to also recognize the influential relationship between different media and the fact that changes in one medium will likely have an effect on another. Coupled with the effects of tabloidization, this is seen as a dangerous means by which sensational practices may be spread amongst all media. The tabloid style has had a massive effect on the way other media choose their stories and format their copy. For example, tabloid-style banner headlines, "punny" and wisecracking headlines, large print, less text, shorter words, bigger pictures, color pictures and more of them, have become standard components of the broadsheet newspaper front page (Franklin, 1997, p. 7). All media are connected in some way. Said Bird, "Tabloids, like television, movies, newspapers, and oral tradition, reflect and feed into each other and may only really be understood in relation to each other" (Bird, 1992, pp. 2-3). Sparks (an Englishman) commented further on the American view of tabloidization, saying it is seen as "coming from outside of the world of proper, respectable journalism. It is an alien form, invading the world and

contaminating it. It threatens to destroy U.S. journalism" (Sparks, 2000, p. 7). This "contamination" has extended to society's perception of American media.

Today, there is also an ongoing theme of the public's dissatisfaction with the media, which is becoming more and more pronounced. Adam Goodheart, author of an article entitled, "Sleaze Journalism? It's an Old Story" sums up the current sentiment:

> Reporters and editors, we're told, care less about being right than about being first, scandalmongers spread rumors and falsehoods, any crackpot with a strong opinion and a little money can make himself heard, and no one in the press exhibits the slightest respect for the dignity of high public office. (Goodheart, 1999, p. 68)

Despite numerous examples of misdeeds by the press elite, the tabloid and the tabloid writer continue to occupy one of the lowest rungs on the journalistic ladder. Said Andrea Sachs (as quoted in Sparks) "Although some argue that they are running more stories that qualify as serious journalism, even the most sympathetic accounts of the U.S. tabloids admit that, for example, 'the *Enquirer* is still a pariah publication'" (Sparks, 2000, p. 3). Tabloids have become synonymous with trash and sensationalism.

John C. Merrill, author of the article, "Needed: A More Ethical Press," set the blame for intensifying media disapproval squarely on the shoulders of tabloidization. "The image or reputation of the press as a serious and helpful social institution seems to be dissolving everywhere in the world. Tabloidism is largely responsible for this" (Merrill, 1999, p. 21). Many believe that the media are pushing all kinds of sensational, misrepresentative and generally irresponsible information in the name of freedom of the press. These changes are seen as widespread, affecting the entire practice of journalism and the face of news:

> Journalism's editorial priorities have changed. Entertainment has superceded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest;

> measured judgment has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; 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. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant. (Franklin, 1997, p. 4)

Others evaluate the potential danger of tabloidization in terms of the democratic process and the lessening of proper and necessary information reaching the public. Sparks conceded the fact that tabloids and tabloidization may be seen as constituting a threat to democracy, in that they inhibit its proper functioning by not providing essential information and knowledge to the public that is essential to the exercise of their rights as citizens. "[Academic critics] are critical of the actual practical functioning of most, it not all, mass media as falling short of the necessities for democratic debate but are particularly critical of impact of the tabloids" (Sparks, 2000, p. 24).

While the tabloid form has demonstrated its ability to reach the individual as a consumer, "it has little or nothing to contribute to the life of the citizen" (Sparks, 2000, p. 29). Gripsrud concurred, saying that tabloids cannot possibly serve the information needs of the public. Political and economic trends and decisions, international conditions and struggles, said Gripsrud, receive very little to no coverage in tabloids, even though knowledge of such things may be important or beneficial to the reader. These tabloidization effects are also being seen across the media spectrum. The 60-second sound bite, which was already a compromise with corporate media guidelines, is now down to 9 seconds, according to Colin Sparks. Mainstream news broadcasts have less and less serious political and hard news coverage, while the opinions of the wealthy celebrity fill slots previously devoted to significant news. Those who do the actual writing and reporting are drawing criticism as well. According to Franklin, "Columnists

are not specialist reporters with expertise in a particular area of journalism, but generalists, would-be renaissance figures, and members of the popular literati who routinely appear as guests on late-night chat shows and arts programs" (Franklin, 1997, p. 8). Public interest journalism is being overwhelmed and marginalized by entertainment and tabloidization in the information marketplace; "By restricting the flow of information essential to political discourse and citizen participation, media trust imperil democracy" (Sparks, 2000, p. 5). "Meaningfully active citizenship requires other forms of journalistic information than the pseudo 'news' exemplified here" (Gripsrud, 2000, pp. 286-287). Because of this lack of "democratic" information, the tabloid is seen as a threat to the "proper" workings of the democratic process and ominously "provide(s) the fuel for dangerous populist flames" (Sparks, 2000, p. 25).

Looking for solutions

A forum held by the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1998 entitled "Erosion of Values: A Debate Among Journalists Over How to Cope," addressed the popular impression that journalism is in a state of crisis. One of the most fiery subjects was, of course, the encroachment of tabloidization on the media, "the rise of the tabloid and trivial on our pages and screens and the increasing pressure to conform to the values of (their) corporate owners" (Sparks, 2000, p. 1). Among the calls for licensure of journalists, there was a general agreement on a need for the recommitment of all journalists to traditional moral and value standards for the press, and hope for a less profit and corporate-driven news.

Perhaps the most notable prior attempt to recalibrate the balance between media responsibility and the quest for profitability is known as "civic journalism" or "public

journalism." Civic journalism, which was much more in the forefront in the late 1980s and early 1990s than it is today, was created specifically to rescue newspapers from their entertainment and tabloid tendencies and reaffirm them as a stage for facilitating and discussing public debate over certain more legitimate issues. Supporters of civic journalism align themselves against the journalistic evils of trivialization, sensationalism, tabloidization and the like, as well as strive to maintain the distinction between the media "consumer" and the "citizen." Quoting Jay Rosen, Andrew Calabrese related, "If the first form of understanding – seeing people as consumers – is typical of 'the media' as a business, the second – regarding people as citizens – characterizes 'the press' as an American institution" (Calabrese, 2000, p. 54). Civic journalism, though supported by many, has proven to be little or no hindrance to the increasing occurrence of "newszak" and commercialism in today's media.

The importance of tabloidization

Tabloidization matters because our media are responsible for informing us as to what is going on and informing us as citizens in a democracy. Without media in some form or another, we would be ignorant of anything that we did not experience or hear about directly from another person.

> The media thus represent the primary, and often the only, source of information about many important events and topics. The media define for the majority of the population *what* significant events are taking place, but, also, they offer powerful interpretations of *how* to understand these events. (Hall *et al.*, 2000, p. 648)

In an article called, "On Journalistic Authority" David Eason wrote that the debate over media's possible effects has generated a body of critical studies that show that news offers a way to understand the social world, as well as the values, routines and conventions of the news journalist (Carey, 1988, p. 207). The media and journalism also

facilitate developments in the cultural field at large, by informing us as to the political and cultural experience in other cultures as well as our own. We are ultimately dependent on news-gatherers and the media they produce. As a result, any sign of the media weakening in form, function or efficiency should give us pause.

Tabloid history

Sensationalism was not invented by the modern press, much less the creators of the modern tabloid. According to Sloan, sensationalism predates the appearance of the very first newspaper in Germany in 1609 by many centuries:

> It can be found in the bloodcurdling ballads sung by wandering balladeers in the sixteenth century, the crowds that flocked to public beheadings in the Middle Ages, the gruesome "games" of ancient Rome, and all the way back to prehistoric times. (Sloan, 2001, p. 18)

Songs and folklore such as mythology and tall tales were some of the first means of mass diffusion of sensational stories before print journalism began. In America, the six-penny press marked that beginning with the settlers of American colonies from England. Even then, concerns over newspaper standards were an issue. Said Michael Schudson in 1978, the introduction of the penny press (a cut rate version of the six-penny papers) elicited charges of sensationalism from the six-penny authority. This accusation was confirmed "less by the way the penny papers treated the news (there were no sensational photographs, of course, no cartoons, drawings or large headlines) than by the fact that the penny papers would print 'news' – as we understand it – at all" (Sparks, 2000, p. 18). This debate would continue over the years as new, more evolved newspapers and magazines established themselves, often with serious competition and criticism by others.

A new standard would be set in 1903 with the establishment of the world's first tabloid newspaper, the *British Daily Mirror*. This paper set the tabloid formative

standard, with an emphasis on large pictures, sensational banner headlines and certain varieties of short stories, which has not been altered by any tabloid paper since (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 289). Tabloids, or "yellow papers" as they were then called, used many of the reporting techniques first used by the penny press hundreds of years prior, producing stories containing detailed physical description, colloquial dialogue and alliterative wording (Bird, 1992, pp. 17-18). Tabloids also introduced the Sunday edition, a practice then unheard of among the serious press. By the 1920s, tabloids had gained a devoted following, as well as a bad reputation. Moral leaders and ethic champions issued dire warnings about the evils of tabloid excess, and admonished would-be consumers to avoid the tabloid pitfall. Large sensational photographs made their first appearance, with the topics of sex, violence, accidents and scandal as their major themes. According to Fiske, press historians point to this era as a low point for the press, defined by the "loose morals and loss of ethical standards" that they believed threatened public and private life (K. E. Becker, 1992, p. 133). Despite the warnings, however, the next ten years saw tabloids grow into a permanent fixture within American journalism. By 1937, there were at least forty-nine established tabloids, with a combined circulation of around 3.5 million (Bird, 1992, p. 23).

Tabloids had also begun their influence on other forms of media. The excitement and innovation surrounding this "new" and boundlessly popular journalism form quickly took root, and was widely adapted. David Krajicek, author of the book *Scooped!: Media Miss Real Story on Crime While Chasing Sex, Sleaze, and Celebrities* quipped, "the American media seemed to transform itself into a hybridized combination of *Police Gazette* and *Confidential* magazine" (Krajicek, 1998, p. Preface). Tabloids and what we

now consider elements of "tabloidization" were even beginning to be seriously studied for more than their novelty and moneymaking elements. In a study of newspaper design in the late 1940s, it was noted that "several of the methods introduced" by the yellow journals, notably banner headlines, "have had a lasting effect on the American press" (Campbell, 2001, p. 151). Tabloids also made the leap from selling on street corners and at newsstands to appearing on general store and market shelves – and began being referred to as "supermarket tabloids." This event precipitated what is known by many to be a monumental change in media in the United States. To quote Bill Sloan, "Future historians may recognize the 'Age of the Supermarket Tabs' for what it actually was: the strongest influence of the past hundred years on the overall direction and philosophy of the America's mass media" (Sloan, 2001, p. 16). By the 1960s it was widely accepted that tabloids had had a profound and lasting effect on other forms of media, particularly the print variety.

In the 1960s and 1970s, tabloid journalists were making enormous strides and boldly covering new ground in the American press. Sloan explained the tremendous contributions tabloid journalists made to the news in the United States:

> Tabloid journalists in the 1960s and 1970s became the first among their profession since World War II – at least in this country – to take a questioning, aggressive, often adversarial approach to government and other major forces that control our society. Long before the downfall of Richard Nixon shook the mainstream media out of its lethargic naïveté, the tabs were telling their readers how secretive, scheming, wasteful, and willful the nation's power brokers could be. Watergate and subsequent government scandals proved how right they were. The period since Watergate has been called the "Age of Endless Exposure," and this is an apt description. Supermarket tabloids led the way into this age, digging in celebrities' garbage and dogging the heels of the famous and notorious wherever they went. (Sloan, 2001, pp. 15-16)

The mid 1970s to late 1980s were the reported high point of tabloid sales and popularity. Sales of traditional newspapers actually fell, while those of tabloids rose to unprecedented levels (Bird, 1992, pp. 15-16; Sloan, 2001). Tabloid content during that time was similar, but not completely identical to that of today's tabloid. Coverage included stories about unexplained phenomena (i.e. UFOs, telekinesis, the afterlife), strange inventions and hobbies, medical breakthroughs and self-help articles, but interestingly enough, little attention was paid to celebrities (Sloan, 2001, p. 95). This mix of "trashy" stories pummeled quality newspaper circulation figures, forcing other media outlets to concede the advantages of utilizing tabloid fare. What tabloids did (to the dismay of the media elite) was add an "irresistible new flavor" to the media scene, "one so delectably irreverent and seductively spicy that a vast segment of the reading public became addicted to it" (Sloan, 2001, p. 18). Tabloids seldom, if ever, had any reason to concern themselves with the doings of other media outlets. Tabloids had their niche; their market was theirs and theirs alone. Wrote Sloan, they operated in what *Newsweek* once called "a kind of parallel universe," "covering and creating stories that the mainstream wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole," and of course, earning massive profits that were largely competitor-free (aside from other tabloids). The rest of the media was simply part of the Hollywood publicity and government propaganda machines, docilely accepting and reporting whatever information was given them (Sloan, 2001, p. 213).

Finally it became clear that mainstream newspapers could no longer afford to turn up their noses at stories typical of the sensational tabloid. "The hunger for dirt and thirst for scandal that fueled the tabs' immense popularity in the 1970s and 1980s had spread like a virus through every level of "serious" journalism (Sloan, 2001, p. 209). The late

1980s and early 1990s saw a major turn in the way the American media produced its product. "Trashy stories came to dominate our news and popular culture as newspapers and news broadcasts chased the *National Enquirer* and its broadcast playmate, tabloid television, to the margins of legitimacy," (Krajicek, 1998, p. 3), all the while protesting against media sensationalism and calling for a renewed commitment to press decency. This trend has gone far beyond any fad or phase, although many media critics had hoped it would be otherwise, and has become the norm for established American media.

Since the late 1990s, mainstream newspapers in particular have managed to surpass the production ability of the tabloids, so much so that tabloids have begun to be squeezed out of the news market. Newspapers possess a larger page size and number of pages (not to mention production staff), an extensive list of advertisers with deep pockets and most importantly, an ability to whitewash gossipy, sensational and trashy stories by merely placing them under their banner or excusing them as a necessary take on stories that are "already out there." By whitewashing these stories, mainstream papers were able to do what the still-shameful tabloids could not: They made these stories "legitimate" and acceptable. Also, the ability of newspapers to exhaust any story with endless columns of detailed information (i.e. legal depositions, taped interviews, testimony) spiced with the juiciest, most explicit details (and run them long after tabloids could afford to do so) often left the tabloids with nowhere to go (Sloan, 2001, p. 210). Tabloids, whose smaller page size and number necessitate short numerous stories to maintain reader interest and story variety, cannot afford to focus too much on any one subject. According to Sloan, most popular magazines, many metropolitan newspapers and major TV news operations had, in essence, become tabloids themselves by the last

years of the twentieth century, "leaving the supermarket papers to sift through leftovers or ballyhoo lesser scandals" (Sloan, 2001, pp. 15-16).

> The time came when the public's mounting thirst for exposé-style journalism outgrew the tabs' ability to satisfy it. The supermarket papers, after all, only came out once a week and in a rapidly shrinking world where news could circle the globe in seconds, new scandals and horrors were erupting by the hour, sometimes by the minute. In this supercharged news environment, the mainstream press could deliver doses of sensation and shock every day, and television could supply it instantly or endlessly – or both – as circumstances dictated. At this point, the mainstream media simply "out-tabloided" the tabloids. (Sloan, 2001, p. 16)

As this brief history of the American tabloid shows, there has long been criticism as to the existence of sensationalism, gossip and trashiness in our media, lending added support to the idea that tabloidization in one form or another is not a new phenomenon. "Journalists' emphasis on the personal, the sensational, and the dramatic is nothing new. Street literature, ballads, and oral gossip and rumor all contributed to the development of news" (Bird, 2000, p. 216). Moreover, wrote Bird, while "journalists today seem to prefer the idea that the tabloids have nothing to do with 'real journalism,'" they have also "always been torn between a perceived duty to inform and a need to engage their audience" (Bird, 1992, p. 9). This history also refutes the sentimental idea of the so-called "golden age of journalism." The idea that there could ever be an American media that create entirely serious, enlightening and ethically impeccable journalism is basically futile (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 287). Author Goodheart agreed, noting that it wasn't until after World War II, when political journalism became dominated by only a few big news services, networks and newspapers, that there was perception of impartiality and imperishable moral standards among the news media. He went on to say that the current "wild anarchy" within our media (i.e. the Internet, round-the-clock television news, and

other new media), warned against by certain media analysts and critics, represents not a break with American media traditions, but a return to them (Goodheart, 1999, pp. 68-69).

Current Tabloids versus Current Newspapers

Even with the mass influence tabloids have had over other forms of media, there is still a distinct line that most people draw between the modern tabloid and the modern newspaper. Titles thought to be "unequivocally tabloid" are the *National Enquirer, Globe, Star*, and other similar papers. These titles are distributed weekly, outside the usual newspaper channels (supermarkets, subscription based, etc.) and contain what is thought to be more sensational, racy fare than their newspaper counterparts. Content is dominated by scandal, sports, and entertainment and often has a strong element of fantasy. Tabloid journalism, according to Sparks, seeks mainly to facilitate private enjoyment and pleasure (Sparks, 2000, p. 28). In addition, American tabloids tend to be neutral when it comes to any rare coverage of political issues, except at the personality level, a fact that further distances them from the typical mainstream paper. Tabloids are marginally, if at all, concerned with the same news agenda as the serious press (referring to themselves as the "voice of the people") and are "popular" in the sense that they stand some distance from the concerns of the official world and "straight" journalism. In the opinion of the media elite, tabloids are detached from legitimate media in terms of content, periodicity, and in their physical location. "They are other; separate; different" (Sparks, 2000, pp. 6,15).

Tabloids, however, have had to undergo some changes in the past few decades. While newspapers were initiating the sensationalization of their content, tabloids like the *National Enquirer* were cutting costs and toning down their content in order to expand

their middle-class market and attract "respectable" national advertisers. These changes in tabloid content were necessitated by their newly established competition with mainstream newspapers for readers. For example, the "gore of yesteryear is all but gone," said Levin & Arluke in 1987, "having been replaced by stories with a positive message," and the *Star* now has a number of upbeat articles and a "stapled cover that looks more like that of a magazine than a tabloid" (Levin & Arluke, 1987, p. 82). Tabloids have also refocused their primary traditional coverage from the "gee-whiz," fantastic stories of yesteryear to that of celebrities and popular scandals in order to draw a larger, more generic readership. Finally, top tabloids like the *Enquirer* and the *Star* have cut the total number of pages in a typical issue from about sixty-four pages to a slim forty-eight pages (Sloan, 2001, p. 210).

One of the greatest changes that occurred in supermarket tabloid history was the massive reorganization of the top six American tabloids. As of 1999, The *National Enquirer, Star, Globe, Examiner, Weekly World News*, and *Sun* all came under the ownership of a single giant company, American Media, Inc. This brought sweeping changes to the way the six tabloids operate, gather news, and report. Bill Sloan, one of the foremost authorities on American tabloids, has found these changes to be rather distasteful to some in the tabloid industry and ominous for the quality of tabloid content:

> Centralized management, one-size-fits-all corporate policies, bean-counting mentalities, and assembly line methods have been in full sway ever since, according to disgruntled industry veterans. Worse yet, critics contend, is that plans call for all six papers to be written and edited under the same roof in the near future, with an inevitable overlapping of staffs and homogenization of styles. (Sloan, 2001, p. 180)

Perhaps as a result of the new, more cautious owners, the encroachment and overtaking of tabloid topics by mainstream media, the shrinking impact of shock value on the public,

or something else altogether, supermarket tabloids have been steadily losing money, circulation and influence over the past twenty years. According to Sloan, the decline in sales has been gradual enough not to "set off hysteria among the executives who run the tabs or the several hundred editorial and production employees," but large enough to show that it has been steady and continuous – a sign that this trend may be permanent (Sloan, 2001, p. 218). For example, the *Enquirer* (one of the most popular tabloids in history) has lost at least 3.4 million copies per week in sales since its circulation peaked at around 5.4 million in the late 1970s. As of mid 2000, sales had slipped to less than 2 million – a drop of more than 60 percent over an eighteen-year period. Within this same time period the *Star*'s circulation fell from 3.9 million to 1.7 million – a loss of just over 55 percent, and the *Sun* has gone from top sales of about 500 thousand sales to around 200 thousand (Sloan, 2001, pp. 218-219).

All of this, according to Sloan and other tabloid industry supporters, is causing the abandonment of the traditional tabloid, in favor of a more generic, mainstream one. Conservative tabloid leaders like David Pecker (president, chief executive officer, and chief operating officer of American Media, Inc.) are now steering the tabloids in a more conventional direction by preaching "reform and respectability," courting new and powerful national advertisers whose influence may "further impede the tabs' ability to deal with unsavory subjects," and actively trying to change the public's perception of tabloid publications and erase old stigmas – all of which is detrimental to the established tabloid way of life. "In the process, they further blur the lines that separate them from the rest of the media. They erode – and risk losing – their own identity" (Sloan, 2001, p. 210).

Unlike supermarket tabloids (who are nationwide in circulation), most newspapers are regional in publication, and devote a significant portion of their content to regional issues and discussions. Large metropolitan newspapers are often distributed daily, while small community-based papers are usually circulated once a week. In terms of the more elite examples of the U.S. newspaper press, titles such as *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* enjoy nationwide distribution and are consequentially the most visible. It is these papers who claim (and are cited) to be the most unlike or opposite to the American tabloid (Sparks, 2000, pp. 6,15).

American newspapers have been slow to change over the years, but one rather obvious change is their willingness to cover the more sensational aspects of the news. According to Sparks, the purpose of serious journalism is to "facilitate political involvement and democratic participation" (Sparks, 2000, p. 28), a service that to many is increasingly neglected with the adaptation of tabloid values. Sloan (and many other media critics, for that matter) maintains that the mainstream media has shown a growing capacity for the provocative, whether it's reveling in the latest sex scandal, or employing innuendo and anonymous sources. Recent years have seen the printing of uncensored sexual material, including detailed articles on oral sex and "other timely topics" (Sloan, 2001, p. 210).

In his book *Newszak & News Media*, Bob Franklin included an interview with a regional newspaper journalist regarding the changes that have impacted the newspaper editorial style and caused the shift toward a more tabloid-like content. In it, the reporter affirms the traditional means of newsgathering, such as investigation and "all the things which we believe any self-respecting newspaper should do" (Franklin, 1997, p. 223). He

goes on to say, however, that because of increased competition, newspapers have been forced to "tweak" their content. Instead of going for the heavy story about politics, world events and the like, newspapers are now increasingly looking for the "lighter story." "Readers," said the reporter, "have become more interested in soundbites or wordbites" (Franklin, 1997, p. 223).

In the reporter's opinion, the principal change in newspaper content is the added concentration on satisfying the reading audience. Newspapers (among other forms of media) are now considering and using the findings of focus groups, surveys and census reports in order to gauge which stories to print. By having to cater to a public with a "grasshopper mentality," papers have had to shorten and diversify the number of their stories. To win over the audience, one must "go for a big read and keep the story count as high as possible in your publication in order to keep the audience's attention" (Franklin, 1997, p. 223). It is no coincidence that these "changes" to the newspaper directly correspond with the traditional format of the tabloid.

Tabloids and papers: Pros and cons

Author Elizabeth Bird notes that tabloids are seen as a pernicious influence: "(Tabloids) represent a collective 'demon' that tells the journalistic profession that what journalists do is a distinctly different and inherently more noble enterprise" (Bird, 1992, p. 106). Tabloidization happened because, according to Krajicek, "many journalists were willing to acquiesce to breaches of the traditional values of (their) occupation" (Krajicek, 1998, p. 3). With the "right" on their side, the indignant cries of serious press supporters against the tabloid have grown all the louder. Krajicek related his introduction to this "new" face of media:

> It first occurred to me that the conventions of journalism were changing about a decade ago as I watched a colleague hunched over a portable radio at his desk in the newsroom at the *New York Daily News*. He was listening to the "Howard Stern Show" and gleefully scribbling notes for a story as Jessica Hahn giggled and gossiped about the ungodly sexual acts allegedly committed against her by a TV preacher – and about whether she had had a boob job. (Krajicek, 1998, Preface)

These media outsiders are often criticized as being irresponsible, distasteful and immoral, not to mention exploitive and disingenuous. These media, wrote Sloan, have routinely thumbed their noses at "convention and civility," and "catered shamelessly to baser human instincts" in order to sell papers and make a profit. Moreover, their so-called journalists are of the absolute worst sort, "seldom averse to tweaking the facts a bit or leaving out a few bothersome details to 'liven up' the news and get their readers more emotionally involved" (Sloan, 2001, p. 17). In a similar description, Bird stated that the very words, "tabloid reporter" "conjure up images of 'sleaze' personified – the slimy, pushy nuisance working in shabby offices who will do anything to dig up dirt and invent preposterous stories" (Bird, 1992, p. 79). Even with more progressive content and often credentialed journalists involved in the production of today's tabloids (tabloid journalists often work in mainstream papers before switching to tabloid writing), the intensely negative stigma attached to tabloids continues to be a major source of frustration for tabloid supporters, as well as a rallying cry for tabloid opponents.

Tabloid supporters and those against rigid news sanctions and elitism in the media point to the "established" media as being exceedingly dull and snobbishly disconnected to its current and potential consumer. In addition, attempts by said media to "spice up" and revamp their content by espousing the very traditional tabloid fare that they worked so hard to vilify have hastened harsh criticism and accusations of hypocrisy. The

grandson of Joseph Pulitzer, head of the 1897 infamous yellow paper the *New York World*, made an interesting observation in 1997: "Today's journalism has adapted – maybe the better word is 'adopted' – what Joseph Pulitzer did" (Campbell, 2001, p. 151). *U.S. News & World Report* columnist John Leo also noted later in that same year that the world has become very "competitive and tabloidy" (Campbell, 2001, p. 152). Editors who would look down their noses in the past at tabloids like the *National Enquirer* now sit up and take notice. "(They) know that if they ignore some prurient story, their readers will see it on 'Hard Copy' or 'Dateline,' perhaps even on the network news, and once again think that the print media are hopelessly old fashioned" (Sloan, 2001, p. 215).

As mentioned earlier, the pretentious nature of the elite media has also done nothing to earn them popularity within the general population, nor with those in the media who champion relevant information for the masses. It is popularly held that elite media represent only themselves, the elite minority, with no regard for the much larger majority's information needs or desires. Leftist critics also believe that a press which is synonymous with those of powerful societal institutions can serve only to maintain its current control over the rest of the populace (Eason, 1988, p. 207).

Along with alienating the "common" majority of its own consumer base, the media have also lost the confidence and esteem of the public. According to John C. Merrill, author of the article "Needed: A More Ethical Press," numerous recent studies have shown that the public has a decidedly negative attitude with regards to the established press and media in general. Citing Professor Charles Self of Texas A&M University and his examination of public opinions on the press, Merrill points out the following four reasons for the public's dissatisfaction:

1) Insensitivity, arrogance, and generally bad behavior by journalists
2) Inaccuracies, incompleteness, and generally poor professional practices
3) Disagreements over the kinds of news used and over news judgment
4) Disagreements over the task of news in the lives of readers

(Merrill, 1999, p. 21)

Paramount in the minds of the public is the feeling that elite press coverage has little or nothing to do with their own day-to-day lives and is, in effect, discussing subject matter that is utterly useless to them. These subjects are also breeched in a way that is often far beyond the average consumer linguistically, chock full of endless statistics and long-winded minutiae. Tabloid writers and readers argue that their "other," more tangible type of journalism offers a necessary alternative view of the world that intellectuals would likely rather believe does not exist (Bird, 1992, p. 104). Indeed, said author John Langer – as quoted by Gripsrud – "The mundane, the world of everyday life is the baseline from which 'the other news' occurrences gain newsworthiness."…"Rather than distracting audiences away from 'more important' issues,…the 'other news' paves a way into the news discourse where those important issues reside" (Gripsrud, 2000, pp. 298-299).

Another aspect in the need for alternative media is the isolated character of the serious press. With their insistent tunnel vision regarding socially accepted newsworthy subjects, other equally important outside news events repeatedly fall by the wayside. According to Sparks, the tabloid is popular because, at least in part, it takes the time to address issues that directly concern most people rather than dwelling on the "deeds of the leaders of politics and business" (Sparks, 2000, p. 27). Perhaps another way of putting it would be, "tabloids are bad, but in a good way." Citing an article by Louise Mengelkoch, A. David Gordon and John Michael Kittross, editors of the book *Controversies in Media Ethics*, observed:

> The tabloids' greatest virtue is exactly (what) makes people sneer at them – they're often foolish and not very selective. As gatekeepers they're lousy, and that's often fortunate for those who need them most. They will listen to your story when nobody else will. If we truly believe in access, that journalists should be dedicated to comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, the tabloids must be recognized as sharing that mission. (Gordon, 1999, p. 227)

It is in part due to this sense of inclusiveness that tabloids have managed to build a loyal following, giving them a better stake in the hearts and minds of the reading consumer.

The blandness of much established media also factors into the mass avoidance of elite media and the popularity of alternate media forms. Rather than appearing as one large body, American media have split into two factions or schools representing opposite points on the journalistic spectrum; "One school believes in covering the news with scrupulous dignity, weighty seriousness – and a great many dull stories" (Sloan, 2001, p. 17), while the other speaks "the history of a time as it would have been written by its people" (as quoted from Randolph Hearst) (Bird, 1992, p. 19). When asked, past and present writers and editors have talked about their fascinating experiences as a member of a tabloid staff, both in the gathering of news and the actual writing of stories. Again, many have had experience working for both serious newspapers and tabloids but they overwhelmingly prefer their time with the tabloids. Former *National Examiner* editor William Burt remarked about creative license afforded to tabloid writers: "Any story – let's say, 'Mum Gives Birth to 50-lb. Baby' – I could write it in such a way that it would be acceptable in the *New York Times*, and then I would write it properly, and it would go into the tabloids" (Bird, 1992, p. 97). Cliff Linedecker, former associate editor of the *National Examiner* concurred, citing the freedom of the tabloid editor as a major source of enjoyment. Said Linedecker (as quoted by Bird), "It's wonderful. I love talking to

witches and Satanists and vampire hunters, and people who've been kidnapped by UFOs – it sure beats covering zoning board meetings" (Bird, 1992, p. 79).

According to Bill Sloan, journalists who easily navigate both writing for tabloids and reporting for mainstream papers have also rediscovered a basic truth about their profession:

> They recognized early on what William Randolph Hearst had figured out eighty years earlier and what practically every TV new executive and major daily editor realizes today – what qualifies as "hot news" has only the sketchiest relationship to pure information. For all their lofty pretenses, today's mainstream media are essentially just another branch of show biz. The tabloidists understood this at a time when most journalists either didn't or wouldn't admit it. (Sloan, 2001, p. 15)

Given the approval of the editors and writers themselves, it is not difficult to imagine the draw such content has on the general readership. Interviewed by Elizabeth Bird for her book *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids*, former *National Examiner* editor Bill Burt reveled in the fun and fantasy retreat that tabloids bring to their readers: "We're fun, we're fascinating. When you don't want to be bored, you turn to your tabloid…We're providing them with an alternative, relieving them from the barrage of boredom that hits them every day" (Bird, 1992, p. 91). Tabloids even have something to offer when it comes to more conventional readers. Despite their reputation for sensational headlines and outrageous stories, tabloids are actually quite conservative in that they are constantly rising to the defense of traditional American values with stories that exclude profanity and often uphold morals, standards and virtue. Even in their extremely compartmentalized capacity, they have repeatedly shown their ability to break stories, after which "mainstream media report on the coverage by tabloid and other sensation-seeking media of stories that otherwise would not be made public" (Gordon, 1999, p. 228). The publisher of *Confidential* magazine – once called the most scandalous

scandal magazine in the history of the world by author Tom Wolfe – claimed to have regularly run stories that exposed racketeering and other societal problems. "'But,' said the publisher, 'we had to have the other stuff, the gossip, to sell the magazine, or we could never have run these stories at all'" (Gordon, 1999, p. 228).

Finally, the hypocrisy with which elite newspapers and other media formats first regarded tabloids as trashy rags, then turned and adopted their story formats and other characteristics has struck a sour note with tabloid enthusiasts as well as elite journalistic purists. Since the turn of the twentieth century it has become increasingly evident that newspapers have been actively borrowing from their more successful tabloid relatives. An early example of this trend is an editorial in *Independent* magazine, which claimed in 1900 that "those very journals which have hitherto most bitterly attacked the yellow press are now quietly adopting many of the most successful yellow methods" (Campbell, 2001, p. 152). History also remembers the infamous arrival of the *USA Today* newspaper in the early 1980s, which was heavily criticized for its colorful tabloid-like format. As author A. David Gordon recalled:

> It was fashionable then for more established papers to say that they were not being influenced by *USA Today*, at the same time that they were changing their weather sections and their graphics and adding various quickly-read roundups of short news items. (Gordon, 1999, p. 228)

Gordon posed the question: "If some use of tabloid techniques and some inclusion of tabloid content are indeed appropriate for the networks or for local stations or newspapers, then why should we condemn this approach wholesale?" (Gordon, 1999, p. 226). However, as mentioned earlier, it seems that the vast majority are reluctant to admit that they themselves willingly participated in this sort of "borrowing" of ideas.

Many journalists seem to either allude to being forced or tricked into it somehow, or simply fall back on the concept of journalistic objectivity.

Objectivity as a concept can be traced back to early 1900, defined as holding that the "facts speak for themselves, whether these facts are observations recorded by a reporter or quotes from sources" (Bird, 1992, p. 17). The exposure of these facts is often accompanied by disclaimers as a means of releasing the reporter and the paper from any liability regarding morally questionable disclosures, which may be offensive or false. Said Bird, "They may wash their hands of their sensationalism under such rubrics as 'seeing is believing' or through the routine act of reportorial disassociation …which transfers responsibility to documentary and interview sources" (Bird, 1992, p. 18). By presenting their source as an expert, complete with credentials and qualifications, news writers are able to absolve themselves from responsibility for the expert's opinions (Bird, 1992, p. 99). Not unlike some items in various tabloids and gossip columns, front-page newspaper stories, which are often breaking news and less-stringently researched, rely heavily on unidentified and ambiguous sources of information.

Needless to say, the use of objectivity as an appropriate news assessment tool has become extremely controversial. Legitimate journalists now find themselves caught between two ideals – the demands of "reality" or the need to tell the authentic story (no matter how boring it may be), and the need for compelling and engaging narration – two ideals which often conflict. This is perhaps at the root of the current dilemma surrounding tabloidization: To sell or not to sell? Beyond any discussion of tradition or morality, there is the hard reality that publications must sell their papers in order to stay afloat and make a profit. Bird & Dardenne summed up:

> [Journalists] face a paradox; the more "objective" they are, the more unreadable they become; while the better storytellers they are, the more readers will respond, and the more they fear they are betraying their ideals. So journalists do some chronicling, some story telling, and a lot that is something of both. (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, pp. 78-79)

Many critics like writer John Pauly feel that American journalists are unlike journalists in other countries, in that they feel the need to make a marked distinction between "information" and "entertainment," designating those in the latter category as being purely trivial. While these distinctions may be intellectually feeble, they provide a valuable way for journalists to define boundaries and justify what they themselves are doing as worthwhile. What they conveniently forget, according to Pauly, are the numerous assignments the require "serious" journalists to cover frivolous events, such as interviewing the Chamber of Commerce's Miss Teen Personality, documenting the annual Christmas rush at the airport, or promoting the newspaper-sponsored boat show or charity marathon (Bird, 1992, pp. 103-104). It is also important to note that while there is a definite note of whimsy to some of the stories (in certain tabloid publications more than others) there often is some form of pertinent information within the attractive details; tabloids are entertainment that also informs (Bird, 1992, p. 91). By utilizing interesting stories or personal narratives with a clear structure, moral point and vivid imagery, important information is more easily delivered and able to recall. Traditional news stories with the standard "who, what, where, when and why" format, are usually the most difficult to remember (Bird, 2000, p. 217).

Some journalists believe that tabloids are being held to unfair and unreasonable standards regarding information and entertainment values. Former *National Examiner* editor Bill Burt was part of the team who managed to raise that tabloid's circulation to

over one million in less than three years. Despite their success, Burt (as quoted by Bird) and his colleagues still felt the sting of disapproval which was, he felt, ignorant elitist criticism which "[sneered] at the tastes of millions of people" (Bird, 1992, p. 90). In his opinion, the very nature of tabloids continues to be misunderstood by constant unfavorable comparisons with "straight" newspapers. Instead, Burt argued, "[tabloids] should be considered an entertainment medium comparable to television shows like "Entertainment Tonight" "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" or "Ripley's Believe It or Not." Magazines are a more worthy subject for comparison. Said Burt, "The magazines that scoff at us, like *People* magazine, like *Us* magazine, they're doing exactly what we're doing, only they're trying to disguise it. We yell it, they whisper it" (Bird, 1992, p. 91).

Tabloids and Newspapers: Squabbling Siblings

Some media observers believe that the supposed media distinctions of yesteryear have all but disappeared. Gossip, wrote Levin & Arluke, "also occurs where the "serious" news is located: in the front-page headlines or political pages of our most respected daily newspapers" (Levin & Arluke, 1987, p. 193). These trends got their start in the 1970s and 1980s, and have grown dramatically since then, making for significant changes in the print media industry. In terms of competition for revenue and story content, today's American tabloids and newspapers more alike than they've ever been before.

Author Bill Sloan noted that there are two undeniable truths about the news business – first, even in its most socially powerful and financially successful form, journalism is at least as much about playing on the reader's emotions as about the

dissemination of information. Second, the best way to sell lots of papers is by entertaining the masses, not by enlightening them (Sloan, 2001, p. 18). "Newspapers are informational, according to traditional journalistic standards, but they must also entertain to survive" (Bird, 1992, p. 91). In the past, newspaper patrons and tabloid consumers were very separate groups, which could be counted on to loyally support their chosen publication. "Straight" papers were generally read and purchased only by the elite, while tabloids were designated for the middle to lower class. There was little worry that there would be any sort of crossing to the "other side," and newspapers and tabloids made huge amounts of money by catering to their own respective group of readers.

However, with societal changes such as the widening of the gap between the upper class and all other classes, the growth of communication technology, the softening of moral and racial conventions and the diversification of humanity at large, newspapers and tabloids have become direct competitors for our nation's media dollars, and worse, they have become direct competitors for the very same consumers. Rather than the tabloids' difficulties (many tabloids are currently experiencing shrinking circulation and profits due to this new competition), most critics recognize and empathize with the plight of the failing newspaper and its fight to stay alive. Newspapers, Sparks noted, are desperately trying to maintain and extend their readership and sponsorship. "[They] face the threat of the defection of at least some of their audience to the sources of news and entertainment provided round the clock by the Internet. [They] face the defection of some of the advertisers to new media" (Sparks, 2000, p. 4).

As distinguished sixty-six-year radio and television veteran and co-editor of the television program "60 Minutes" George Wallace said in remarks at a 1998 conference:

> The *New York Times* decided twenty years ago that it was going to expand and do a Home section, a Science section, a Business section and so forth. Why did they do that? For the news? Hell no! They did it because the *New York Times* was in financial trouble, and they needed to get a certain kind of audience, and a certain kind of advertising. (Kurtz et al., 1998, pp. 44-47)

Wallace's comment exactly supports the ongoing war over money and content that is being waged in America's print media industry. Newspapers have actively been altering their content in order to raise their profits; after all, stated author Kristin McGrath, "fewer newspaper purchases are habit purchases and more are impulse purchases" (McGrath, 2003, p. 42). Every effort must be made to catch the attention of consumers and make that sale. These adjustments have mirrored the traditional content foundation of the tabloid. Such alterations include livening up their writing, using more catchy headlines, splashing color across their pages, and increasing their personality profiles and human interest stories (Gordon, 1999, p. 236). Over the years tabloids have relentlessly been disparaged for their "soft" content, consisting mainly of gossip items, household tips, scientific finds and unusual event stories…again, the same types of stories familiar to any newspaper's lifestyle pages, which have been hurriedly snatched up by their new newspaper competition in the race for both consumer and advertising dollars.

As reported by Shelley McLachlan and Peter Golding, at a 1997 conference in Great Britain the editor of the United Kingdom's recently altered (and increasingly widely purchased) premier print daily, the *London Times*, came under attack, notably from his U.S. peers. The criticism stemmed from the formerly broadsheet-sized ultra-conservative newspaper changing to a more colorful, attractive, and easier to read tabloid-sized paper. The *Times* editor fired back, pointing to American newspapers relative ease in keeping their newspapers alive by benefiting from functional regional

monopolies. The constant brutal marketplace battles in the U.K. press necessitate a different way of thinking. The sad truth, said the editor, is that the *Times* has been "unsuccessful, unprofitable, and too often regarding of itself than its readers" for the majority of the 20th century. Readers must be attracted: "It is our job to make sure they want to read newspapers, rather than to rely only on television" (McLachlan & Golding, 2000, p. 76). Gaining circulation in the U.K. market is a tough business, especially with the marked influence of pop culture and the supposedly short attention span of today's youth. Said the editor:

> Many of these young people do not read if they can avoid it, they are not interested in politics or current affairs; they do not go to opera or the theatre…They are post-modern, post-serious, post-literate – and post broadsheet, which means that the audience for serious journalism is disappearing. (McLachlan & Golding, 2000, p. 76)

Money is a key facet in the battle over tabloidization and sensationalism. In a capitalist society such as ours, economics is a primary concern to any corporation, small family business, or wage earner. Mass media concerns such as advertising dollars, circulation numbers, audience share and ratings play a huge part in the generation of media revenue – the constant pursuit of money has an enormous impact on the media that we are given to consume. As is blatantly obvious in television, but often overlooked in print media, profits generated by advertising play a principal role. Said author Andrew Calabrese, "Advertising shapes television news story selection and framing more than most self-respecting broadcast journalists are prepared to acknowledge publicly" (Calabrese, 2000, p. 55). By constructing frames, advertisers are choosing what will be the focus of the story, selecting "what will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and above all, how it will not be discussed" (Altheide, 1996, p. 31). Advertisers will not

bother placing their ads in a publication that does not sell, meaning both newspapers and tabloids must turn out a product that satisfies the purchasing consumer as well as the advertiser. Advertisers have immense power over the nation's print, radio, television and Internet producers. Before advertising became prominent, the price of a newspaper had to cover the costs of the paper's operations. With the growth of advertising, papers were able to charge a much smaller price per copy, which in turn gave rise to greater sales. Those newspapers that were unable to attract wealthy advertisers would often be forced to fold. Author and historian James Curran (as cited in Williams) pointed out that advertisers are not interested in reaching *everyone*. Some people are better suited to an advertiser's particular product, have more disposable income than others or greater power over corporate spending, and are consequently more sought after by certain advertisers than others. In Curran's opinion, broadsheet newspapers continue to survive in spite of relatively small circulations because their readers are mainly drawn from the wealthier sector of society (Williams, 2003, p. 89). This puts papers lacking in advertising income at a serious disadvantage: their prices tend to be higher, inhibiting sales, and they have less profit to reinvest into improving the paper itself (better features, more attractive format, promotion, etc.). As a result, it is largely the advertiser's money that calls the shots. "With advertising, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which final buyer choice decides. The *advertiser's* choices influence media prosperity and survival" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 289). Creativity, art and original thought are thereby disregarded in the face of monetary gain, while the newspaper staff takes exquisite care not to upset its investors or advertisers.

Once it was observed that tabloids had the winning formula for sales, newspapers were obliged to adopt this same formula or risk going under. Joseph Angotti, former senior vice president of NBC News and currently a journalism professor at the University of Miami, summed it up this way:

> It used to be that news organizations wanted to keep those (identifying) lines very defined. But now, as the result of entertainment values entering the news business, and a critical attention to ratings, there's little difference between the local news, network news, and "Entertainment Tonight." News media of all sorts are sliding toward infotainment. (Sloan, 2001, p. 229)

Content has become the major point of contention among media critics and scholars, tabloid supporters and newspaper purists alike. Most frequently, disputes arise over the means by which stories are produced or the types of stories that receive coverage. While news and tabloid reporting are seemingly becoming more and more similar, there are still fierce battle lines drawn between tabloids and newspapers. Even now, some unapprised citizens regard news as being completely substantiated, meticulously verified, and based on several incontrovertible sources, while gossip is made out to be completely untested and patently unreliable. Nonetheless, it has become virtually impossible for any truthful knowledgeable observer to deny the growing similarities between the newspaper and the tabloid, casting doubt on the once superior purist stance of serious news.

Tabloids and "straight" newspapers have come to employ some of the same techniques, specifically in the way each prepare and present their stories. Both profess to make some effort in producing sources that back up their storylines, often by presenting the views of an expert in that particular field. Most news publications have stables of sources that might be contacted to weigh in on some story detail, and tabloids are no

exception. "Experts who would be consulted by mainstream reporters – physicians, psychologists, academics, politicians – are also regularly used by tabloids. Shorn of their adjectives, many feature stories in tabloids would be interchangeable with those in other newspapers" (Bird, 1992, p. 98).

The front-page location in a newspaper is a very important position. According to author Kristin McGrath, the "page one" tradition dictates that the most important story of the day be placed in the top right-hand corner of the front page. Feature stories that are most likely to appeal to readers are placed on the bottom half of the front page, a position referred to as "below the fold." This rule, said McGrath, "often has been followed even when the most important story is likely to have limited reader appeal"…even though an increasing proportion of newspaper purchasers say that they decided to buy the paper after seeing the front page only (McGrath, 2003, p. 42). In many cases, the only difference between gossip and news in a newspaper is their assigned position. "In other words, news is what you find on the front page; gossip is located in the "Living" section or in a supermarket tabloid" (Levin & Arluke, 1987, p. 146). It is a fact, however, that many front-page news stories are based on an anonymous but supposedly "reliable" source, which may lead to inaccuracy. After all, wrote Bird, "Only the most naïve journalist would cling to the idea that newspapers simply transmit "reality" to the printed page, unaffected by preconceptions, formulaic story patterns, and other considerations" (Bird, 1992, pp. 97-98).

The lack of routine verification of statements reported as fact has also led to an unhealthy dependence solely on the word of the journalist and the increased probability of writers' subjective interpretation. There have been numerous highly publicized

instances of journalists (i.e. Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair, Jack Kelley, Dan Rather etc.) who have fabricated stories or given false data (knowingly or unknowingly) for their respective, respected conservative publications. Each occasion has prompted intense but temporary efforts to renew significant boundaries between substantiated fact (hard news) and unconfirmed rumor (gossip), all of which have eventually faded into the ever-present gray area between the two. At this point, wrote Sinead O'Brien, the pattern has become all too familiar:

> The media massively overplay a story, generally one with tabloid or pop culture elements; they wallow in guilt and shame for allowing things to get so far out of hand; then when the next Nancy Kerrigan/Tonya Harding or Lorena Bobbitt saga comes along, they start the process all over again. (O'Brien, 1999, p. 115)

Others have pointed toward adopting a more unified view of the news, rather than constantly squabbling over exactly what news should be.

> It is accepted that "hard" news is informative and factual, while "soft" news is diverting…it could be argued that the totality of news as an enduring symbolic system "teaches" audiences more than any of its component parts, no matter whether these parts are intended to inform, irritate, or entertain. (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, p. 69)

Even if they give prominence to different things, according to Bird, newspapers and tabloids are inevitably linked along the same storytelling continuum. "Maybe one reason newspaper people despise tabloids so vehemently is precisely because the line separating them from 'real' newspapers is not as clear-cut as they would like to believe" (Bird, 1992, p. 104). Tabloid news is often just daily occurrences – "stories that merit a column or two in the *New York Times* are picked up, dressed up, and spread over half a page in a tabloid" (Bird, 1992, p. 103). Again, the primary difference between tabloid and newspaper news is the style of its presentation, not its subject matter. In Leo Bogart's article "The Pursuit of Sensation," he offered the following invaluable comparison

between the headlines of various supermarket tabloids, and the headlines of selected newspapers.

Headlines of Supermarket Tabloids:
"Dead Mom Gives Birth in Coffin"
"Princess Di Raped by Skinheads From Mars"
"A Space Alien Made Me Pregnant"
"Cats Eats Parrot – Now It Talks"
"Son Kills Father and Eats Him"

Newspaper Headlines:
"2 Teen-Age Children are Held as Plotters of Father's Murder"
"Madman Sears 2 with Acid in Subway"
"Says Hotel Forced Her to be Sex Spy"
"Kinky Hubby's Into Bondage"
"Arizona Bishop Jailed Over Shootout" (Bogart, 1999, p. 278)

While such headlines are not necessarily the rule, they do occur often enough to support claims of tabloidization's influence on the media.

"Tabloid" cases in mainstream media

Yet another indicator of tabloidization is the influx of tabloid-like cases, which have increasingly appeared in serious news publications and programming. Shocking and frequently trivial stories are being hashed out detail by outrageous detail in our media, in a practice that some call "tabloid laundering." As mentioned earlier, this is the means by which a newspaper (or other serious news source) takes a tabloid story, which is usually somewhat lewd, fantastic or gossip-driven and publishes it, applying the excuse that the story had already appeared elsewhere. Thus the paper is allowed to also quote and profit from the story without being the one to have broken the story, nor to have originally given the sensational details.

Another trick is to actually report on the story by criticizing others who have reported it first, including tabloids and other "dignified" news sources. A favorite site for

this kind of bait-and-switch scam is coverage of trials in the court of law. Because many particulars of various crimes are matters of public record (i.e. mug shots, statements of charges, prior convictions and court appearances), journalists may report on them without ever having to take responsibility for the origination of any false, untrue, or particularly distasteful disclosure communicated by law enforcement. Also, said journalist Howard Kurtz, "We put our hearts in stories about trials because we can dress them up with legal terms and pretend they're socially redeeming" (O'Brien, 1999, p. 118).

Most visible are the fantastic cases that seem to completely take over the American media, interrupting scheduled programming, prompting scrolling news updates at the bottom of the television screen, and grabbing the front page of every newspaper and magazine, all at the expense of everything else going on in the world. These frequent occurrences only add to the current fears surrounding traditional news journalism and rampant tabloidization. "When supposedly responsible news organizations stop pursuit of the best obtainable version of the truth and reproduce rumor and gossip," said Tom Rosensteil, "they are shedding long-standing principles" (Kurtz et al., 1998, pp. 44-47). In 1998 Kurtz, media reporter and columnist for the *Washington Post*, and acclaimed author of the book *Hot Air: All Talk, All the Time* spoke of a "crisis of tabloidizm." He said, "The whole business has channel-surfed lately, from Marv Albert to (Princess) Diana to the nanny trial to O.J. and back again. We are complicit, in varying degrees, in the paparazzi phenomenon" (Kurtz et al., 1998, pp. 44-47). Seven years later, it seems that there is no end in sight to the "paparazzi phenomenon," and little likelihood of a complete media turnaround with stories of celebrity scandal, murder, sexual perversion, etc. garnering incredible amounts of attention from the press. Said *Los Angeles Times*

writer Davis Shaw, "We beat our breast in public and say we're different from the paparazzi, but there'll be no changes. We enjoy it" (O'Brien, 1999, p. 116).

Along those lines, there are a plethora of instances where sensationalism and tabloidization have dominated news coverage. In 1997 sportscaster Marv Albert's sexual assault trial, "replete with lurid details about kinky sex," captured the then sixth largest amount of airtime on nightly news network broadcasts during the week of September 22, according to *The Tyndall Weekly* (O'Brien, 1999, p. 116). Albert, who worked for NBC, plead guilty to the charges and was subsequently fired, which launched another slew of coverage, including front page coverage by *USA Today* and three individual stories in the *Washington Post* all on the same day – figures which basically represent the statistical low end of similar coverage today. While some charged that coverage of the case was not in tabloid style, and that it "just happen[ed] to delve into sex and private doings," others admitted to its tabloid qualities. Marvin Kalb (as quoted in O'Brien), then director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University remarked, "The Marv Albert trial shows when there's a clear temptation to go the route of kinky journalism, journalists – even the very best – can't quite resist," (O'Brien, 1999, p. 116).

The notorious case of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky was another sordid affair that reached gargantuan media proportions. While it is understandable that there might be substantial coverage of such a central figure like the President of the United States having an extra-marital affair and lying to the world, the amounts of sexually explicit details that were dissected day after day were clearly in excess of necessary disclosure. "It often seemed as if traditional rules on attribution and sourcing had been

suspended, and it appeared that the mainstream press and the tabloids were moving closer together than ever before" (Sparks, 2000, p. 3). In his article "After Monica, What Next?" Neil Hickey gave a behind-the-scenes look at the aftermath of the Clinton-Lewinsky fiasco within the journalism community. Said Hickey, "Many respondents scolded their colleagues for misplaced priorities, pointing out that most news organizations have never devoted to foreign affairs, health care, the budget, or the military the same ardent coverage bestowed on the Lewinsky affair" (Hickey, 1999, p. 134). James E. Shelledy, (as quoted in Hickey) then editor of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, gave his own take on reasons behind the extensive coverage, saying "[Kenneth] Starr injected plenty of sex into the [Starr] report in order to get it covered, and the media were eager, compliant partners in that objective. (He adds: 'And we make fun of the tabloids who put a nude on page three.')" (Hickey, 1999, p. 134). Bill Endicott, deputy managing editor of the *Sacramento Bee* (also cited in Hickey), gave an alternate view on the situation, saying that if newspapers had attempted to take the high road and hadn't published the Starr report, they would have subsequently been accused of blindly supporting the [guilty] president. However, when the media did choose to the print the report, said Endicott, "people called us pornographers" (Hickey, 1999, p. 134).

Author Lawrence K. Grossman addressed the Clinton-Lewinsky case further in his article, "Spot News: The Press and the Dress," intimating that it was a tabloid publication, not the mainstream media, who first began the rumor of Monica Lewinsky's infamous semen-stained dress. This rumor was completely unproven and was reportedly first publicly mentioned by Internet gossip authority Matt Drudge (creator of the intensely popular "Drudge Report") on NBC's January 21, 1998 television episode of

"Today." According to Grossman, once Drudge had put his stamp on the story, idle talk was rushed into certainty.

> Speculation immediately graduated from gossip to news, gaining a good measure of credibility and legitimacy despite the fact that no mainstream journalist had yet verified it. The newspapers were soon to follow, many confusing the "Stained Dress" story with another allegedly taped account of a dress given to Lewinsky as a gift from President Clinton. "The *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Baltimore Sun*, among others, repeated that error on succeeding days. (Grossman, 1999, p. 142)

Don Hazen, author of the article entitled "Wag the Media" effectively expressed the reporting frenzy: "We now have a situation where the lure of the tabloid is completely irresistible to all media everywhere, or as Frank Rich wryly noted in the *New York Times*, "All Monica, All the Time" (Hazen, 1999, p. 149).

In the rush to outdo everyone else, publications scrambled after NBC's original story, printing whatever they could find on the matter, substantiated or not. A few weeks later elite conservative magazines *Time* and *Newsweek* also jumped on the bandwagon, printing their much-borrowed take on the dress debacle, adding to the flurry of exhaustive news coverage. Said Krajicek, "The peer culture among journalists is as intense as that at any junior high school. Reporters and editors look to one another – both colleagues and competitors – to determine what is appropriate. If everyone else is doing it, that serves as affirmation" (Krajicek, 1998, p. 35). Competition also offers a strange sort of comfort, for by competing with others, journalists can be assured that they are not the only ones making decisions on certain stories, plus it gives them some justification to rush into breaking particular stories. At any rate, if they don't do it first, they believe that their completion likely will.

The genre of respectable newspapers and magazines also reached a new low when the *New York Times* printed the word "fuck" for the first time ever in its history while recounting an excerpt of the Linda Tripp tapes. *Time* magazine also printed a story weeks later, rife with obscene sexual slang concerning oral sex. Writer Bill Sloan made the observation during this time that most would fail or refuse to realize: At that very moment, newspapers and other media had become virtual (if not honorary) super-tabloids themselves.

> The dailies and network TV went after the story like starving dogs after raw meat. By the time they finished devouring it, smothering it, regurgitating it every day for weeks, and rolling in the kinkiest, most explicit details of it, the tabs were basically left with nothing to add. (Sloan, 2001, p. 209)

One would never see the aforementioned offensive words printed in any supermarket tabloid due to their surprisingly conservative nature and for monetary reasons. Said Sloan, "Clearly, the risk of being tossed out by major chains, at least temporarily, is simply too great for low-brow publications already tainted by their real or imagined pasts" (Sloan, 2001, p. 211). Even though the story of Lewinsky's stained dress eventually turned out to be true (luckily for the mainstream media), the fact remains that so-called "legitimate" and respected media sources like the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* based their news stories entirely on the word of a notorious gossip columnist.

Various other tabloid-like stories of note that were endlessly covered by mainstream media include the murder of Ennis Cosby, the Buttafuoco-Fisher case, the O.J. Simpson circus and of course the Tyson-Givens situation. David Krajicek, author of the book *Scooped! Media Miss Real Story on Crime While Chasing Sex, Sleaze, and Celebrities* noted that *Newsday*, the daily newspaper that covers Joey Buttafuoco's home of Long Island during the scandal, had mentioned Buttafuoco or his teenage lover Amy

Fisher in more than one thousand stories. During reporting surrounding the Cosby killing, "networks covered an information-free, second-day feature about Ennis Cosby's murder over the first-ever censure of the Speaker of the House" (Kurtz et al., 1998, pp. 44-47). The O.J Simpson murder case, often referred to as the "Trial of the Century," amazingly racked up more than one million stories as tallied by LexisNexis in 1996 (Krajicek, 1998, p. 13).

Journalists are experiencing an age where tabloids have risen to great power, and most are not happy about it. Krajicek recalled the fall of 1998 when he was drafted to cover the Mike Tyson-Robin Givens divorce for the *New York Daily News*, where he worked as a crime reporter. Going for a different angle, Krajicek interviewed Givens' estranged father Reuben Givens, hoping he could shed some light on the details of the former couple's life together and subsequent divorce. When it turned out that Reuben hadn't spoken with his daughter for more than a year and had never even met Tyson, Krajicek wrote an account of the interview and filed the story with the editor, to supposedly be used later in some capacity. Krajicek was dumbfounded when he was supposedly "scooped" by a competitor on the very same story. After being dressed-down by his editor for not getting the "real" story after reading a completely different account in another publication, then finding out that said publication was in fact the *National Enquirer*, Krajicek realized that the rules of journalism had changed.

> As I sat there on the edge of my bed, I wondered whether I was dreaming. Had I really been called at home at midnight by an editor trying to gauge the veracity and accuracy of my reporting against that of the *National Enquirer*? Yes, I had been, and it turned out that the editor was ahead of his time in chasing a supermarket tabloid. Within a few years nearly everyone in journalism was doing it. (Krajicek, 1998, p. 3)

A theoretical perspective

There are numerous theories, ideologies, approaches and opinions that provide support for the existence of tabloidization within today's popular culture and modern mass media. According to authors Meenakshi Durham and Douglas Kellner, (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 4), a theory represents a way of seeing, "an optic, that focuses on a specific subject matter…cultural and social theories are descriptive and interpretive; they highlight specific topics, make connections, contextualize, provide interpretations, and offer explanations," all of which provide greater opportunity for thought and understanding. Ideologies on the other hand represent a sort of evolved theory, a series or system of beliefs that often have been accepted by a large segment of the populace. The term "ideology," say Durham & Kellner, was originally coined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 1840s to describe the dominant ideas and representations in a given social order. Marx and Engels began a critique of ideology, attempting to show how ruling ideas reproduce dominant social interests serving to naturalize, idealize, and legitimate the existing society and its institutions and values. In their opinion, "piety, honor, valor, and military chivalry were the ruling ideas of the hegemonic aristocratic classes" during the feudal period, while the values of "individualism, profit, competition, and the market" prevailed during the capitalist era, "articulating the ideology of the new bourgeois class which was consolidating its class power" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 6). In this view, ideologies have the potential to "reproduce social domination… reproducing the point of view of their producers and often the values of the dominate social groups" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 6).

Any number of these theories and ideologies can be applied to the current issues surrounding the tabloidization of modern media, particularly in the areas of popular culture, class and government, gender, economics and mass media studies. It is important to note, however, that theories and ideologies are not infallible. Theories, for example, often focus on one aspect of an argument while ignoring another. Original (and revised) theories are also often reworked by subsequent theorists who believe some alteration is needed, making theories slightly transitory as a means of study basis or explanation. Also, the identification of ideology can be a tricky business. Those who recognize the presence of ideology are compelled to understand that all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests, and embedded values. "Ideologies appear natural, they seem to be common sense, and are thus often invisible and elude criticism" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 6). Nevertheless, many communication theories and ideologies represent a valuable source of past findings, are highly relevant to the topic of tabloidization within the mass media and are certainly worthy of exploration and discussion.

Mass media studies describe the past and current conditions of the mass media and are a fertile site to begin any theoretical discussion of tabloidization. According to author Stuart Hall, "…media forms and representations constitute major sites for conflict and negotiation, a central goal of which is the definition of what is to be taken as 'real,'" as well as the great effort "to name and win support for certain kinds of cultural value and identity over others" (Hall, 1997, p. 348). By examining various aspects of the mass media, one can gain insight into how tabloidization may have begun, was able to take hold, and is continuously perpetuated.

German philosopher and theorist Karl Marx (as cited by Williams) has had a profound effect on the development of thinking in the humanities and social sciences. For Marx, social change was explained by the conflict and struggle between two competing and aggressive forces in society that he referred to as the "haves" and the "have nots." The "haves" were the bourgeoisie, who possessed economic power, and were the "capitalist owning class, who exercised power through their control of the means of production – that is land, factories and labor." The "have nots" were the "proletariat or working classes," otherwise known as the masses (Williams, 2003, p. 36). The bourgeoisie continuously generates greater economic power and material profit by exploiting the working classes. Through this manipulation of the working class, the bourgeoisie or ruling class has gained the means to take over key industries and positions, such as the fuel industry, the government and the mass media. As a result, they have asserted their own ideas, values and desires as the proper and necessary ideas, values and desires for all the underlying classes. Further, what was once considered our culture is now, according to American scholar Herbert Schiller (as quoted by Durham & Kellner), "…construed as an arm of the industrial-business sector, combined with the 'corporate takeover of public expression' whereby corporations come to control the media, education, public spaces, and cultural creation" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 221). In order to further facilitate mass assimilation, the ruling classes "employ intellectuals and cultural producers who both produce ideas that glorify the dominant institutions and ways of life, and propagate these governing ideas in cultural forms such as literature, the press,

or in our day film and television."…"The class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. pp. 25; 51).

Another source of theoretical thought was The Institute of Social Research (later called the Frankfurt School), an independent site for scholarly research. The school, founded in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923, specialized in "sociology, social psychology, philosophy, and political economy, with a pronounced affiliation to Marxism" and counted among its members noted researchers such as Jurgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (Marris & Thornham, 2000, p. 6). By following in Marx's footsteps, Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas are each what author Susanna Priest referred to as a "conflict theorist" – rather than wondering how mass media may be able to aid in establishing a smooth social order, conflict theorists look at how mass media supports the status quo, continuing the reign of the ruling class, endorsing favored points of view and ignoring or labeling others as deviant. These critical scholars use media material as evidence of how some ways of thinking are socially privileged over others, and they identify the media themselves as an instrument through which this is accomplished (Priest, 1996, p. 54). Durham & Kellner regard the Frankfurt school as the originator of the term culture industries, "signifying the process of the industrialization of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives which drove the system" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 9). The Frankfurt School thought, for the most part, that media culture simply reproduced the existing society and manipulated mass audiences into obedience. An example of this would be the Habermas perspective on the

colonization of the public sphere by mass media and the consequential reorganization of the public sphere into a site of manipulation by corporate powers.

According to Habermas (as cited in Durham & Kellner), newspapers began as commercial sheets that disseminated notes on items of interest, but were later transformed into a means of ongoing and outspoken political debate with the organization of political groups. Here is where newspapers have arguably rested, given the conservative or liberal slant within many mainstream papers. However, newspapers also discovered a commercial interest, and at times abandoned their own political sensibilities in favor of monetary gain (again, a reality in today's papers), "selling advertising and papers via tabloid sensationalism and entertainment rather than disseminating political information and ideas" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 10). As society became more absorbed with mass media, corporations recognized the earning potential, and began purchasing newspapers, film studios, radio and television stations, etc.

> These arms of the culture industry served the interests of the media conglomerates and the corporations and advertisers who financed them. Thus, in this conjecture, the public sphere was colonized by big media which came to dominate public life and which recast the public sphere from a locus of information and debate to a site of manipulation by corporate powers. (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 11)

The term "public sphere" refers to a means by which public opinion can be gathered and accessed; in today's language that would include print media such as newspapers and magazines, the Internet, radio and television.

Frankfurt School colleagues Horkheimer and Adorno (as cited by Stokes) took a slightly different turn than Habermas, yet their assertions are still distinctly Marxist in tone. Both researchers adopted an anti-capitalist ideology – due to their belief that the bourgeoisie was unfairly profiting off the sweat of the working class – and proclaimed

that the media should be a revolutionary tool, supporting the underclasses in rebellion against the system. But, says Stokes, "because of the industrial nature of artistic production under capitalism, it is not possible for the artifacts produced to have the liberating potential Adorno and Horkheimer believe[d] they should" (Stokes, 2003, p. 77). Furthermore, the artifacts of a mass-produced, monopolized culture are just false and insincere, resulting in a stale, worn output:

> Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly; as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 72)

In this view, the mass media are seen as the flavorless, generic mutation of the original individual idea, as well as a tool of the ruling class used to gain extra profits.

Tabloidization is regarded as both a cause and an effect in relation to the ongoing media drive for profit. As mentioned earlier, the sensational quality of tabloidization speaks to the curious, thrill-seeking, and passionate nature of the human psyche, and the inclusion of this type of material invariably gains consumer attention. Tabloidization is also seen as an effect, as its very existence occurred with the broad implementation of sensational fare into the mass media. In the 1950s and 1960s, critical theorist Marshall McLuhan (cited in Durham & Kellner) took a very different historical and cultural approach to the study of North American media and culture, describing a paradigm shift from the earlier, more traditional print media culture to the new media culture. While the traditional print culture produced "rational, literate, and individualist subjects, who followed the linear and logical form of print media in thought and reasoning," the new media culture presented "more fragmentary, non-rational, and aestheticized subjects, immersed in the sights, sounds, and spectacles of media such as film, radio, television,

and advertising" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 14). This "new media culture" described by McLuhan was tribal in nature, "sharing collective ideas and behavior" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 14). It was even generating a brand new culture and consciousness that McLuhan believed would finally prevail over the individualism and nationalism of the previous modern era. Tabloidization and sensationalism seem to have a place in just such a culture, and while there are sure to be excesses and abuses, it appears that they are more accepted in this cultural outlook.

Obviously, McLuhan had his detractors, and one of the most noted was French artist and theorist Guy Debord. Debord (also profiled by Durham & Kellner) was fervently against the incorporation of spectacle in any culture or society, and felt that there was no good to be had in it. In his opinion, "the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a permanent opium war which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life – recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 13). By passively consuming spectacles, one is not participating or producing in one's own life. Like Marx, Debord held capitalist society responsible for removing the worker from the fruits of his own labor, and for industrializing art and the public sphere. He also felt that spectacle was used as a means of promotion and advertisement, providing a whimsical escape for consumers bored with their own reality. He warned, "the spectacle is entangling its devotees in the clutches of consumer capitalism, replicating consumption fetishism, and helping capital to commodify all domains of social and everyday life" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 113). Tabloidization critics would likely agree with Debord's theory, believing that we currently exist in what Debord would call the "society

of the spectacle," referring to a media and consumer society, "organized around the consumption of images, commodities, and spectacles," as well as "the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary societies which produce commodities and media events" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 15). The debate for or against tabloidization certainly possesses both positive and negative viewpoints that may be attached as theoretical evidence for its support or rejection. In any case, one cannot argue that tabloidization has equaled big bucks for media producers, media investors and advertisers alike, but has also become associated with the evil, money-grubbing mass media.

It is not unusual for the mass media to be characterized as the villain; from media effects to sensationalism, the study of mass media has helped initiate numerous mass media theories with a markedly negative perspective. One of the first theories in mass media studies was mass society theory, which is summarized by the following features:

1) Mass media are a negative and disruptive force in society and should be controlled.
2) Mass media have the power to directly influence the attitudes and behavior of ordinary people.
3) People are vulnerable to the power of mass media because they have become isolated and alienated from traditional social institutions that have protected them from propaganda and manipulation.
4) The social changes brought about by the disruptive influence of mass media will result in the advent of more authoritarian and centrally controlled sources.
5) Mass media also bring about the decline in cultural standards and values by promoting trivial and demeaning ideas and activities that threaten civilized behavior. Source: Adapted from Baran and Davies, 1995: 41-50 (Williams, 2003, p. 29)

Mass society theory, with its notions of mass media as a "negative and disruptive force" with the awesome power to "directly influence the attitudes and behavior of ordinary people," had a sizeable influence over early media theory, and continues its impact even today. Mass media do have the power of persuasion, inspiration and titillation, along

with the ability to define reality. Depending on what the mass media say is trendy, incorrect, passé or approved, millions of consumers are motivated to make various choices. Often, these choices mirror the intent or declaration of the mass media, deciding the adoption or rejection of certain ideologies, trends or groups.

The concepts of high and low culture and subculture are also very important in this discussion, as mass media are largely responsible for their definition, and also because sensation and tabloidization play a large part in their existence. Culture, as defined by Durham & Kellner, "constitutes a set of discourses, stories, images, spectacles, and varying cultural forms and practices that generate meaning, identities, and political effects" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 6). It includes texts such as popular music, movies, television programs, newspapers and the Internet, as well as social activity such as going to a club, watching sports or grocery shopping. The mass media (and their content) are often charged with describing one culture to another, both by an active sharing of media while a culture is active, and the passive dissemination of media left behind once a culture has passed on. Cultures are regularly judged due to the content of their media. "Cultural texts are saturated with social meanings, they generate political effects, reproducing or opposing governing social institutions and relations of domination and subordination" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 6). This is where tabloidization and sensation are a source of conflict. There are cultural members who feel that the tabloidization of the mass media is a negative thing, and that sensational content in general does not represent or define their culture in a positive way.

In the words of Stuart Hall, "High culture versus popular culture was, for many years, the classic way of framing the debate about culture – the terms carrying a

powerfully evaluative charge (roughly, high=good; popular=debased)" (Hall, 1997, p. 2). Tabloidization has become a hallmark of popular or low culture. Popular culture is the culture of the majority, the average working class person, which in the eyes of the elite is a study of ignorance, lewdness, dumbed-down ramblings and basically all that is weak, mindless, simple entertainment. Said Priest:

> High culture includes such mass media segments as the elite press (e.g. the *New York Times*), public television, and books written by and for intellectuals, as well as such things as symphony, art and "art films," and opera. Low culture (also called popular or "mass" culture – the culture of the masses) is the tabloid press (e.g. the *National Enquirer*), popular books such as romance novels, most movies and network television shows, and rock and country music. (Priest, 1996, pp. 18-19)

High culture is linked to the wealthy, intelligent upper class, as well as the ruling body of the respective culture. It is important to note that the affluent members of the upper class and government are the small minority who decide the policy for the rest of the population. This power does not end with the crafting of traffic laws, devising a new social security plan or the like; those in power also control both the flow of information and the approval of its use. "The media are tiered," said Durham & Kellner, "with the top tier as measured by prestige, resources, and outreach"…"It is this top tier, along with government and wire services, that defines the news agenda and supplies much of the national and international news to the lower tiers of the media, and thus for the general public (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 283).

As noted previously, the elite serve as the news gatekeepers, choosing what news to release to the public through a series of gates and various channels. David Manning White produced a classic study on the process of news selection (published in 1950) that first introduced the concept of the "gatekeeper." White (as quoted by Kevin Williams)

defined gatekeeping as a story "transmitted from one 'gatekeeper' after another in the chain of communication each of whom opens gates to let some stories through and closes them to others" (Williams, 2003, p. 101). By regulating the news flow and giving access to controlled data such as film footage, government press releases, etc., the establishment is able to manipulate the actual knowledge and beliefs of the population, creating its own brand of propaganda in order to serve its needs. The "propaganda model," first termed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their 1988 work *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, examines the dominant influence of market forces on media content in the U.S. Herman and Chomsky (as included in Durham & Kellner) demonstrated that "the free-market economics model of media leads inevitably to normative and narrow reportorial frames," culminating in attempts by the mass media to "marginalize dissent and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public in ways that promote hegemonic constructions and suppress oppositional voices" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 220). Those who attempt to circumvent this system in the past have been dealt with accordingly. Durham & Kellner described this process as the following:

> A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multi-level effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. The essential ingredients of our propaganda model, or set of news "filters" fall under the following headings: (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5)"anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism. These elements interact with and

> reinforce one another. The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 280)

There are numerous examples of government-sanctioned propaganda and framing, as well as the withholding of "sensitive" or "classified" information on any number of subjects (i.e. the Watergate scandal, the representation of various war opponents, the supposed discovery of "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq, etc.). A likely reason for the distressed response of the elite due to the modern rise of tabloidization in the mass media is the simple fact that the populace is beginning to utilize alternate means of getting new information. The elite media are falsely positioned as the definitive source for straightforward, unadorned information, while alternative news sources (the Other) – most notably tabloids and the Internet – are belittled as gossip, unfounded rumor and trash. As with the marginalization of any opposing faction, "The Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a 'pure object, a spectacle, a clown'" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 211). Further, those who embrace virtually anything that is unsanctioned by leaders often face the same fate, leading up to and sometimes including their dismissal from the main body of society, and their relegation to a lesser subculture.

In the words of Durham & Kellner, "The more one studies cultural forms and representations, the more one sees the presence of ideologies that support the interests of the reigning economic, gender, race, or social groups, who are presented positively and idealized, while subordinate groups are often presented negatively and prejudicially" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 7). However, these "subordinate groups" can also consist

of those who subscribe to certain ideals, participate in different activities, etc. Several links can be found between tabloidization and the conditions surrounding the subculture condition.

A final ideological perspective can be found with the examination of extensive research on British youth subcultural groups by social investigator Dick Hebdige. Hebdige's conclusions relate well with the role of sensation, tabloids, and tabloidization in today's media. According to Hebdige (whose work appears in Durham & Kellner), "Subcultures represent 'noise' (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media." The "signifying power of the spectacular subculture" should not be underestimated by any means, "…not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 207). Likewise, tabloids are thought by some to be sites for revolutionary thought (i.e. Colin Sparks), with the powerful ability to represent various personalities or groups in ways that are distasteful or unattractive to certain members of the upper class. Tabloidization continues along these lines, with the large-scale adoption of the "noise" of the tabloid representative style into the mass media. These condemned modes of expression as well as unusual self-knowledge (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) represent unpopular interruptions to the authorized social flow that can significantly provoke and upset those in power and those who are comfortable in their allotted space. Steps are usually taken to either marginalize the divergent group, or shift the rebellious back into line by force,

appeal or commodification. It is this last ploy that most closely reflects the current state of tabloidization in the mass media.

Through commodification, "subcultures can be trivialized…or they can be exoticized, presented as marginal freaks," both of which have occurred during the ongoing debate concerning tabloidization (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 117). In this case, however, commodification has notably taken the form of questionable marketing schemes by the elite media. As discussed earlier in this study, strategies usually reserved for the supermarket tabloid are actively being used to sell mainstream elite media. Elite newspapers, for example, are willingly assuming the look, speech and content of the tabloid even while they bemoan the current state of mass media, defame the tabloid reader and supporter and pontificate upon the evils of tabloidization. However, "there is no pure entertainment [or information source] that does not contain representations – often extremely prejudicial – of class, gender, race, sexuality, and myriad social categories and groupings" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 6). In the past, tabloids and tabloid patrons were placed into their own sort of subcultures – tabloids were a subculture apart from the "respectable" mass media and tabloid patrons were a subculture apart from the "moral," "intelligent" and "normal" rest of society. They were each disparaged, looked at as somehow "less than" and gradually reached a somewhat taboo status within the social order. However, over the last thirty years, these subcultures have grown to the point of near acceptance, eventually making the leap to commodity status. Hebdige details the steps as follows:

> As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar…It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant

> mythology from which it in part emanates: as 'folk devil', as Other, as Enemy. The process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms:
> 1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form);
> 2) the 'labelling' and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form). (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 209)

Put simply, the original innovation loses its cache once it is recognized, mass produced and finally reabsorbed into the central body, "…rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 210). Sensation and shock-value have lost their impact, making tabloids and therefore tabloidization a product, a tool and most notably the standard.

Are papers following tabloids?

While there is much commonsensical evidence that newspapers are actively (or at least unconsciously) following tabloids, there is little empirical data that supports such a conclusion. Among the few investigational tidbits found regarding newspapers adoption of tabloid tactics, there were words both for and against the recognition of tabloidization within the media. According to Merrill, "A 1994 survey conducted in eight Western democracies indicated a deep skepticism about the growing "tabloidization" of the news media. However, in Great Britain, for example, "23% of the people said that the press hurts democracy rather than helps it" and just "49 percent of the British respondents saw the press as good for democracy" (Merrill, 1999, p. 25). The latter two points are indicators of tabloidization's activity in the media, rather than its idleness. As stated by Sparks, "In order to properly monitor the actual circulation of the serious and semiserious press, one must fully understand the extent to which the majority of 'straight' papers contain significant tabloid components alongside their more orthodox material" (Sparks

& Tulloch, 2000, p. 32). Given the lack of any definitive judgment in the battle between tabloidization watchdogs and tabloidization detractors, further study is certainly warranted.

Case description

The story of Jennifer Wilbanks, a.k.a. the "Runaway Bride," captured the nation's attention when a young, attractive Caucasian female resident of Duluth, Georgia, from a prominent family did not return Tuesday, April 26, 2005, after venturing out for her nightly jog. Slated to be married that very weekend, Wilbanks was reported to the authorities as missing by her fiancé and family. Law agencies from coast to coast were alerted as Wilbanks' fiancé John Mason, family and concerned citizens frantically searched for her. For three days police expended hundreds of hours of manpower and thousands of tax dollars investigating the case, coming up with no credible leads as to her whereabouts. Her family and those close to her were thoroughly questioned, even while her fiancé took an independent polygraph test and was targeted as the prime suspect. The media chased the story for days on end, inundating the nation through print, television and Internet media with minute-by-minute coverage of the case. Media coverage of any other event was practically nonexistent, as the nation hoped for the best outcome, but feared the worst. Then it happened: Wilbanks suddenly surfaced in Albuquerque, New Mexico, alive, healthy and without a scratch. Wilbanks phoned her fiancé, giving a harrowing account of being kidnapped by a Mexican male and Caucasian female, and driven off in a van, sexually assaulted and forcibly confined, somehow managing to win her way free of her captors. Her family was thrilled, her fiancé ecstatic (and now proven innocent), law agencies were amazed and the nation breathed a sigh of relief. Of course,

soon after it came out that the entire event had been a complete fabrication. Wilbanks had actually carefully planned an escape and fled Georgia and her impending marriage on her own after supposedly getting cold feet. She had not really been missing, and there was no kidnapping, no suspects, and no need for the intense missing persons investigation.

Why this case?

Typical case sampling, says Thomas Lindlof, usually identifies cases that seem to represent best the report's intended object of study. A typical case can be thought of in a number of ways:

> …as the most frequent case, as the average of a distribution range, or as the composite ideal of a phenomenon (albeit not ideal in the sense of "best"). The typical case makes a certain kind of claim: that this case represents what normally occurs in a scene, how people normally interpret this sort of text, and so on. (Lindlof, 1995, p. 129)

This story was chosen as the site for this thesis because it so aptly shows the extent to which tabloidization has completely saturated American media. The "Runaway Bride" case was a sensational news phenomenon, described by the *Tampa Tribune* as a "national worry" ("No sympathy for 'runaway bride'", 2005, p. 12) the *New York Times* as the case that "commanded the attention of the national news media" (Hart, 2005a, p. 32) and the *Charlotte Observer*/Associated Press as a "nationwide sensation" ("'runaway bride' accepts plea deal, sentence ", 2005, p. 8A). Beginning as a brief account from a metro-Atlanta suburb, carried in the "Gwinnett News" and "Metro News" segments of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the story rocketed to the top of the news heap, leapt into the forefront of the nation's conscience and circled around the world. Said the *New York Daily News*, "The disappearance touched off a national frenzy as her smiling, wide-eyed

face was beamed across the country" (M. Becker, 2005, p. 12). Barely two days after her disappearance, the *AJC* reported on April 28th that Wilbanks' case had drawn immediate national media attention from such organizations as Court TV, Fox News and On the Record with Greta Van Susteren (Ghirardini, 2005b, p. 1JJ). Said *AJC* staffer Don O'Briant,

> "The Jennifer Wilbanks story has been all over television and the Internet with coverage on NBC's "Today" and ABC's "Good Morning, America" as well as the cable news channels. Catherine Crier devoted her Court TV show to the case Thursday night and a People magazine photographer was on the scene in Duluth. (O'Briant, 2005, p. 12A)

This was all prior to Wilbanks' bombshell that she had fabricated the entire story, after which media attention and efforts at extensive coverage seemed to be redoubled, if that was indeed possible. "Overnight, her story went from one of suspense and concern to material for Jay Leno and a *People* magazine article that delved into her designer bridesmaid's gowns and silver pattern," said *AJC* writer Ghirardini (Ghirardini, 2005a, p. 2E). A brief search of newspaper articles from the day Wilbanks was reported missing (April 27th) through June 28, 2005, demonstrates the importance and interest placed on this story, with a multitude of both American and foreign newspapers covering the event in some capacity. Numerous foreign countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, England and Canada had multiple newspapers that ran the "Runaway Bride" story.

All manner of news media clamored for any scrap of new information on the case, with publications that had not covered the case at first rushing to climb aboard the "Wilbanks wagon." Media coverage was finally topped off with the first sit-down joint interview of Wilbanks and Mason by one of America's most popular television hosts: Katie Couric. Couric deftly snagged this rabidly sought-after interview for NBC's

"Dateline" over every other media outlet in the world. In TV terms, said the *Daily News*' TV editor Richard Huff, "Wilbanks is a big 'get,' the buzzword insiders use for interviews with major newsmakers. And while pundits [Read: newspapers and other "holier than thou" media] will argue whether her disappearance was really newsworthy, getting the first interview with her is a big deal" (Huff, 2005, p. 83). NBC's audience share savvy paid off, winning the 8-9 pm timeslot and drawing almost nine million viewers (Belcher, 2005, p. 4). Tabloid-like topics are eagerly being adopted for nonstop coverage, no matter the type of media, whether it be elite newspapers (i.e. *New York Times*), "serious" news programming (CNN), tabloid television ("A Current Affair") or the tabloids themselves (*National Enquirer*). By conducting a textual analysis of tabloid and newspaper coverage of this case, it is hoped that further insight will be gained into the role of tabloidization in today's media, as well as whether or not the "legitimate" papers' reporting can be associated with that of the lowly "trash" tabloids.

Study reviews

In 1996, Bob Franklin, author of *Newszak and the News Media*, conducted a content analysis of the political reporting of two of Britain's largest "serious" broadsheet newspapers – *The Guardian* and the *Times*. He analyzed how both papers covered activities of MPs (Members of Parliament) inside and outside parliament between 1990 and 1994. His findings confirmed fears that the news values of the British quality newspapers have changed and that parliamentary reporting is one of the clear victims of this process. The number of newspaper articles on MPs and their activities in and outside parliament decreased in *The Guardian* and the *Times* from 253 in 1990 to 205 in 1994. Positive or complimentary articles on the British Parliament in this same time period fell

by more than half from 66 to 27. The number of newspaper accounts of political scandals, however, multiplied by five, from 7 to 33. According to Franklin, the focus of news had shifted most in the area of 'scandal and misconduct.' It emerged as the third most popular from a list of 40 identified subject categories. "Scandal and misconduct now enjoy a greater prominence than significant areas of government policy such as health, education or law and order'" (Esser, 1999, p. 309). The rising reports of government scandals, unflattering portrayals of political figures, and the sharply declining number of politically informative articles are all indicators of and connected to the existence of tabloidization within the press.

In Frank Esser's study entitled, "Tabloidization of News: A Comparative Analysis of Anglo-American and German Press Journalism," Esser detailed several other studies concerning foreign print media. In 1997, an extensive study of 350 newspapers by Klaus Shoenbach demonstrated that tabloidization "simply does not sell in Germany." By using a series of detailed regression analyses, Shoenbach demonstrated that "papers which decided 'to go tabloid' by using more infotainment and emotion could not increase their circulation at all" (Schoenbach, 1997: 75, 90, 117) (Esser, 1999, pp. 297-298). Shoenbach went on to point out that Germany still had far fewer tabloid newspapers in comparison to Great Britain. Finally, Shoenbach felt that the German market is more similar to the U.S. market in that it does not have a clear dichotomy between quality and tabloid newspapers.

The subject of the German press and tabloidization was investigated further still by Hans Mathias Kepplinger (1998), who completed a content analysis of the German quality press over a period of 45 years (1950-1995). Kepplinger's interest was the

question of whether the pattern of political reporting in the (German) prestige press had changed over time. "If we assume an increasing tendency towards 'tabloidization,'" said Esser, "we should also expect, for example, a change in the way politicians are evaluated. Personalization, in particular, is considered a core element of a tabloidized coverage of political affairs" (Esser, 1999, p. 307). It was therefore of special interest whether the share of statements judging politicians on their personality, character and credibility had increased over time.

In part, the study looked at how political affairs in general were reported. Kepplinger's study identified five different kinds of story formulas: (1) whether they convey factuality or speculation; (2) optimism or pessimism; (3) bias or balance; (4) rationality or emotion; (5) scandal or no scandal. It is important to note that the share of German "scandalizing stories" has increased noticeably, and when presented on a graph, shows a clear upturn over time. The rise of the scandalizing stories began with an increase of such reports in the 1990s. "This is the first moderate indication of a process of 'tabloidization' in the German quality press" (Esser, 1999, p. 307).

Esser also mentions the much-cited historical work of Peter Golding and Shelley McLachlan in analysis of print media content and its relationship with tabloidization. Golding & McLachlan's study (as cited in Esser and by Rodrigo Uribe and Barrie Gunter) entitled "Measuring Tabloidization in the British Press" began to conduct a long-term content analysis of the British press in 1997. Tabloidization was examined on the basis of range, form and style:

> *Range*, referring to the decreasing proportion of page space devoted to hard news; *Form*, referring to the less proportional space dedicated to text and more to visuals and headlines; and *Style*, meaning more space given to stories including a personalized angle of coverage. (Uribe & Gunter, 2004, p. 390)

Preliminary results showed, among other things, that "(1) the amount of international news decreased while the number of entertainment and human-interest stories increased and that (2) the number of political news stories and their average length have become more similar between quality and tabloid newspapers" (Esser, 1999, p. 309). Upon completion of the study in 2000, Golding & McLachlan concluded that soft story coverage remained constant during the 1990s and that today "tabloidization is characterized by fewer international news stories, more pictures, less text, more human interest and entertainment news stories and less political or parliamentary news" (Bek, 2004, p. 371).

Uribe & Gunter undertook their own study in 2004, in which they examined the tabloidization of the tabloids themselves. Entitled, "Research Note: The Tabloidization of British Tabloids," Uribe & Gunter carried out a quantitative content analysis over time, comparing the news coverage in Britain's two largest tabloid newspapers by circulation – The *Sun* and the *Mirror*. "The analysis covered a 10-year period (1991-2001) and focused on a number of indicators of tabloidization derived from the research literature, but shifted the emphasis from the more usual analysis of broadsheet newspapers to tabloid newspapers" (Uribe & Gunter, 2004, p. 390). The tabloidization indicators were based on the aforementioned previous work done by McLachlan & Golding in 2000, where they determined a three-level operational definition of the tabloidization process – range, form and style. The study results showed that coverage by the *Sun* and the *Mirror* had become more "tabloidized" in its form and style, but has remained constant in its range of contents. Uribe & Gunter also found that the "coverage of tabloids can be characterized by a dominance of 'soft' and home stories, by a

significant presence of headlines and visuals and a personalized angle of coverage" (Uribe & Gunter, 2004, p. 390).

Yet another example of foreign media studies regarding tabloidization and the news media is a recent investigation done by Yasuhiro Inoue and Yoshiro Kawkami (2004) involving Japanese media. The purpose of the study was to examine tabloid news diffusion and compare those results with those of hard news diffusion and news diffusion theory. This idea states the following:

> (1) The rate and extent of diffusion are directly related to the importance/salience of the event; diffusion is more rapid and widespread as importance/salience increases.
> (2) The role of mediated and interpersonal channels in the process is functionally related to the importance/salience of the event.
> (3) Source of first awareness is related to the availability and accessibility of mediated and interpersonal channels; interpersonal dissemination will be greatest when the media are unavailable.
> (4) Source of first awareness is related to normal usage patterns associated with the mediated channels; aside from exceptional events, most people will become aware of unanticipated events from the medium they normally rely upon for news. (Inoue & Kawakami, 2004, p. 40)

Two tabloid news events and two hard news events in Japan were examined by surveying college students. The tabloid stories were the 1992 engagement of a popular sumo wrestler and actress, and the 1998 "surprise" second marriage of a popular singer. Each story was sensational and attracted national attention in Japan. The hard news events were the 1994 election of a socialist Prime Minister (the first socialist Prime Minister in 40 years) and the 1995 Great Hanshin earthquake, which claimed approximately 5,000 lives. Within a few days of each of these events, students were asked to fill out questionnaires with regards to the amount of time that had lapsed from the actual event to the time the respondent actually heard the news, how they first heard the news, and if they had in turn passed on the news to someone else. Inoue & Kawakami thought that

tabloid news "may have different attributes to activate particular demographic groups' networks from those of hard news" (Inoue & Kawakami, 2004, p. 37). Final results showed that "news diffusion theory is generally applicable to tabloid news," even though the theory was constructed exclusively with/for "hard news," "while indicating the possibility of a distinct line between news categories." Also, "women are slightly more active in post-behaviors of tabloid news events than in hard news events" (Inoue & Kawakami, 2004, pp. 49-50).

While the works of Franklin, Shoenbach, Kepplinger, Golding & MacLachlan, Uribe & Gunter, Esser, and Inoue & Kawakami provide much-needed research and information pertaining to news, media and tabloidization, each of them focuses on foreign media and was done by people from outside the United States. It is indeed possible to compare and contrast findings on media from other countries in order to provide a more informed pool of data. However, when comparing those of different cultural backgrounds and mores, one must be aware of certain rules that may or may not exist that may color the results of any attempt at comparison or generalization. Many point to Britain's print media as being the most like American print media, and while this statement may be mostly accurate, one cannot automatically accept their findings as being also true for our print media.

The next analyses are the only two found that were undertaken by Americans, examined American news media and in most directly addressed the phenomenon of tabloidization. With the support of a grant from the Smith-Richardson Foundation, Thomas Patterson (Harvard University) undertook an extensive study on the news, conducting national surveys designed to measure Americans' news habits, interests, and

preferences. Research also included an analysis of 5331 news stories, randomly selected from those available via LexisNexis during 1980-1999 for two television networks, two weekly news magazines, three leading newspapers, and twenty-six local dailies. The content analysis was limited to the front and local sections of newspapers (thereby excluding, for example, the sports and travel sections) and conventional news broadcasts (thereby excluding programs such as NBC's "Dateline") (Patterson, 2000, p. 2). In terms of indicators associated with the tabloidization effect, Patterson found that as a response to "shrinking audiences," which pose "a threat and challenge to America's news media," there has been a flood of soft news, critical reporting and negative news, which distorts the public's perceptions of what the journalist Walter Lippmann called "the world outside." As a result, said Patterson, "Interest in public affairs declines and so, too, does interest in news" (Patterson, 2000, p. 2). Patterson's study speaks to the problem of "shrinking audiences" in America for news, which is shared across all media channels, as well as the influx of "soft news, critical reporting and negative news," all of which are indicators to the presence and influence of tabloidization in our news media.

In 2000 W. Joseph Campbell, author of the book *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies*, decided to undertake "a study specifically designed to test whether, when, and to what extent, the principal typographic and content elements associated with the yellow press became embedded in American journalism during the twentieth century" (Campbell, 2001, p. 152). Campbell believed that there was no previous work that systematically tests whether or to what extent "the salient features of yellow journalism have been incorporated into, and live on in, the content and appearance of (today's) American newspapers" (Campbell, 2001, p. 152). Using content analysis,

Campbell examined the front pages of seven leading U.S. newspapers at 10-year intervals from 1899 to 1999. The *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Raleigh News and Observer* and *Washington Post* were all represented as non-yellow, conservative papers. The *Denver Post* and *San Francisco Examiner* both displayed some aspects of yellow journalism at the end of the 19th century and were classified as such. Finally, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* exhibited characteristics of both yellow journalism and conservative newspaper, and was designated as a "mixed" format. To allow for benchmarks, the *New York Journal* and the *New York World*, two well-known "yellow" papers, were included for the year of 1899, a peak year in yellow journalism, and 1909, when the genre was declining in popularity. In all, Campbell analyzed more than 1,130 front pages (Campbell, 2001, p. 152).

In terms of finding evidence of the ongoing presence or effect of "yellow journalism" or the modern equivalent of "tabloidization," results were mixed. Campbell found that some typographic features that were characteristic of the yellow papers had survived – such as the appearance of multicolumn headlines, multicolumn illustrations, and of multiple front-page illustrations. However, banner headlines, a feature that was central to the yellow paper, had not become standard or routinely used in newspapers that he examined. Also, elements closely associated with yellow paper content, such as "the keen taste for self-promotion, and the tendency to assign prominence to reports about sports and society events – have not been adapted by leading U.S. newspapers" (Campbell, 2001, pp. 152-153). Even those titles designated as yellow papers rarely used the more colorful elements of yellow journalism.

Campbell also found that newspapers that were the most conservative in 1899 (i.e. the *New York Times*) were also the least likely to adopt the more prominent features of yellow journalism. Those papers that were yellow to begin with, generally retained that status, continuing to display most of the indicators of yellow journalism. The *Post-Dispatch* remained "mixed." One outstanding change, however, was that the "striking disparity in the appearance and content of U.S. newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century lessened dramatically" (Campbell, 2001, p. 153). While Campbell believed that the differences between what were conservative papers and yellow papers can certainly be detected, he found that "the dissimilarities are far less marked than they were 100 years ago. This may suggest that a predictable homogeneity has come to characterize leading U.S. daily newspapers" (Campbell, 2001, p. 153). Perhaps it could even indicate the influence of modern-day tabloidization.

Patterson and Campbell's analyses represent the small pool of American research that investigates tabloidization within American print media. While both studies essentially are relevant to this research paper, they were also conducted from a quantitative point of view. In an effort to locate further examples of print media studies that more closely match the intended method of investigation for this undertaking, study review criteria was expanded to include international general newspaper and television news content analysis that included a qualitative approach, resulting in five additional illustrations. These five studies best represent the aspects of this study's methodology, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study will use qualitative methods of textual analysis. Although no similar study on tabloids or tabloidization has been done, there are four textual analysis studies that address relevant methodological issues. The first study, entitled "Argentian Jews as Scapegoat: A Textual Analysis of the Bombing of AMIA," was completed in 2003 by Federico Pablo Feldstein and Carolina Acosta-Alzuru. Feldstein & Acosta-Alzuru were interested in investigating the representation of Argentian Jews in local newspapers after the terrorist bombing of the Asociación de Mutuales Israelitas Argentinas or Israelite Argentinean Mutual Aid Association (AMIA) in 1994. During the bombing, the AMIA's seven-story building was destroyed, and a total of eighty-five lives were lost.

A qualitative textual analysis was done on two major daily Argentinean newspapers: *La Nación* and *Clarín*. According to Feldstein & Acosta-Alzuru, both papers were targeted as they "distanced Jews and non-Jews, presenting Argentinean Jews in the role of scapegoat, and contribut[ed] to the general perception of the AMIA attack as a Jewish problem and a Jewish burden" (Feldstein & Acosta-Alzuru, 2003, p. 166). The textual analysis examined relevant news stories beginning the day after the bombing of the AMIA and ending the day after a public commemoration of the attack's sixth anniversary (July 19, 2000), encompassing more than four hundred news items. Using an approach fashioned by Stuart Hall, all texts were first read through, then read a second time more thoroughly in order to identify any discursive strategies that might be present. Article placement, size, and headline were also noted along with its narrative structure, tone, stylistic intensification, use of metaphors, and detected factual omissions (Feldstein

& Acosta-Alzuru, 2003, p. 159). Feldstein & Acosta-Alzuru also developed analysis sheets for any included newspaper photographs in order to decode any messages hidden within their visual elements. These sheets were then used as pointers to the text as recurrent patterns were noted. The final stage of the analysis included the interpretation of the findings within the framework of the study.

The final analysis of *La Nación*'s and *Clarín*'s coverage of the bombing of the AMIA revealed a discourse that effectively differentiated between Argentinean Jews and non-Jews. Argentinean Jews were depicted as foreigners who happened to live in Argentina, and were assigned the responsibility for the attack. Both newspapers presented the terrorist event as a Jewish, but not an Argentinean issue. The researchers found that *La Nación*'s and *Clarín*'s representation of Argentinean Jews remained consistent during the period covered in this study.

The second qualitative study example was conducted in Great Britain by researcher Deborah Jermyn. "Death of the Girl Next Door": Celebrity, Femininity, and Tragedy in the Murder of Jill Dando" discussed news coverage of television presenter Jill Dando's April, 1999 murder in London, England. The study also concentrates on various feminist themes, such as violence against women and the representation of the female victim. Dando was reportedly murdered by a stalker on her own doorstep, suffering from a single gunshot wound to the head. The combination of Dando's celebrity, beauty and tragic end yielded an extremely high profile case within the UK media and garnered extensive coverage in newspapers, tabloids and television. Dando's murder also had the unique honor of being covered by the very television program the late Dando had presented for – "Crimewatch." Jermyn's analysis of news coverage included the days

immediately following the murder, focusing on that of "Crimewatch," the *Sun*, the *Mirror*, the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph* from April 27 to April 29, 1999. She also examined television evening news reports on both BBC1 (public service news) and ITV (ITN commercial service news) from April 26 to April 28. Finally, special television programs and features dedicated to Dando that aired during this period were also subject to the same analysis.

Due to Jermyn's interest in feminist themes and their part in Dando's news coverage, Jermyn chose to conduct a qualitative feminist textual analysis. The widely reported case detailed cultural discourse, narrative structure and textual patterns, and was also intertextual and cross-media, making it a great fit for a qualitative textual analysis method. After gathering her data and completing her analysis, Jermyn's investigation found that women continued to be presented as victims, and at the same time as deserving of the blame for their own misfortune. Primarily, the researcher found that the tragedy surrounding female celebrity deaths and their loss (and the loss of just about any woman for that matter) was rarely measured predominantly by the extent of their achievements but rather in terms of their failures and unfulfilled plans and desires.

In another study, researcher Nancy Worthington looked into the way a Kenyan-owned newsmagazine, the Nairobi-based *Weekly Review*, represented the Mothers of Political Prisoners' (MPP) 1992 hunger strike for the release of their sons from a Nairobi prison, and further, female advocacy based on combative motherhood. On February 28, 1992, a group of elderly Kikuyu women traveled to Kenya's capital city of Nairobi to protest their sons' incarceration by the regime of President Daniel arap Moi. According to Worthington, the MPP argued that the charges of treason against their sons were

invalidated when Moi legalized political opposition in December 1991, and that their detention was therefore a human rights violation (Worthington, 2001, p. 167). After receiving no action toward releasing their sons, the group of women began a hunger strike in an area of Nairobi's Uhuru Park known as "Freedom Corner." National outrage ensued when police raided the area and evicted those gathered there, brutally beating many of the women and their supporters in the process. During the violence it was reported that three of the MPP stripped off their own clothing in a traditional female protest that curses the perpetrator and attempts to avoid further physical hostility. The next day Nairobi was the site of citywide riots in protest of the previous day's police brutality, and the women of the MPP barricaded themselves in the basement of All-Saints Cathedral. They took turns fasting until the last four prisoners were finally released almost a year later on January 19, 1993.

This historical case study, entitled "A Division of Labor: Dividing Maternal Authority from Political Activism in the Kenyan Press," employed textual analysis to chart the emergence and change of frames appearing in *Weekly Review* coverage, and to relate those frames to relevant aspects of Kenyan culture and history. Worthington followed the definition and description of the aspects of textual analysis by both David Altheide and Stuart Hall in order to complete her investigation. Like the previous study profiled, Worthington began with what Stuart Hall called "a long preliminary soak" during which the researcher reads all relevant content (Worthington, 2001, p. 172). In this case, that included all news content, editorials, and letters that dealt with the Mothers of Political Prisoners. Worthington's final results indicated that framing emerging from the *Weekly Review* coverage aided in creating a split between the fundamental elements

of combative motherhood, such that MPP advocates were portrayed either as "overly aggressive women ill equipped for public debate" or as "well-meaning mothers whose advocacy was easily co-opted by opposition politicians" (Worthington, 2001, p. 167).

A fourth study by Elli P. Lester-Roushanzamir and Usha Raman entitled "The Global Village in Atlanta: A Textual Analysis of Olympic News Coverage for Children in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*" examined international news reporting for children and specifically the representations of international others via coverage of the 1996 Olympics in the "News for Kids" (NFK) section of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Newspaper reporting aimed at children has become a common feature within mainstream newspapers, often included during large events such as the Olympic Games, however according to Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, it has seldom been the subject of study (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999, p. 699).

Study methodology consisted of a cultural textual analysis as an alternative to the more commonly used method of content analysis. As justification for the use of qualitative textual analysis over quantitative content analysis (similar to the one mentioned earlier by researcher Deborah Jermyn), Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman quoted Hall, noting that textual analysis differs from content analysis in that it is an interpretative method which allows the researcher to take account of all aspects of content (including omissions) or, as Hall put it, "every significant stylistic, visual, linguistic, presentational and rhetorical feature" (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999, p. 702). These unique qualities make textual analysis effective for examining latent meanings and discursive strategies that may emerge during the analysis. Again, the researchers began with a long initial "soak" in the material, followed by an extremely

close reading of the NFK articles with special (though not exclusive) attention to international coverage. Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman found that while children's reporting on international events was as limited as that for adults (as demonstrated in the "News for Kids" section), powerful dominant discourses did in fact emerge, forming a systematic strategy of representation. The "Other" was indeed objectified via strategies such as anticommunism and professional journalistic practices (e.g., news values, objectivity to name two).

The final representative analysis comes closest to the methodology to be employed within this study. According to David L. Altheide, documents – "any symbolic representation that can be recorded or retrieved for analysis" – are studied in order to understand culture (Altheide, 1996, p. 2). Undertaking a document analysis "refers to an integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving and analyzing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning" (Altheide, 1996, p. 2). In his quest to find a better, more integrated approach to the actual conduct of document analysis, author, researcher and professor Altheide created a blend of the "traditional notion of *objective content analysis* with *participant observation* to form *ethnographic content analysis*, or how a researcher interacts with documentary materials so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis" (Altheide, 1996, p. 2). While it is true that culture is difficult to study because its most significant features are "subtle, taken for granted, and enacted in everyday life routines," Altheide felt that by "grounding our assessments of the social world in qualitatively oriented research," researchers help to protect the "processual character of social life even as we are able to capture it in analysis" (Altheide, 1996, p. 2 & 4).

Ethnographic content analysis (ECA) follows a reflexive transfer between "concept development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis-interpretation." The aim, according to Altheide, is to be both systematic and analytic, but not rigid and unresponsive (Altheide, 1996, p. 16). While categories and constructions may initially guide the study, it is fully expected that they will change and others will emerge by the study's conclusion. "ECA is oriented to check and supplement as well as supplant prior theoretical claims. The emphasis is on simultaneously obtaining categorical and unique data for every case studied to develop analytical constructs appropriate to several investigations" (Altheide, 1996, p. 17).

Altheide's ethnographical approach was derived from his exposure to the 1967 theoretical and methodological works of researchers such as George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer and Alfred Schutz, which guided to the following three concepts:

> First, social life consists of a process of communication and interpretation regarding the definition of the situation. …Second, it is this communicative process that breaks the distinction between the subject and object, between internal and external, and joins them in the situation that we experience and take for granted. …Third, the notion of process is key because everything is, so to speak, under construction, even our most firmly held beliefs, values, and personal commitments. (Altheide, 1996, p. 8)

Thus, it is important to properly coordinate your study approach with both the subject and goal of your study in mind. In attempting to study a medium such as newspapers, one must be conscious of the possible effects that context, process and emergence may have on your analysis. *Context*, or the social situations surrounding the document in question, must be understood in order to understand the significance of the document itself, even independently of the content in the document. Next, knowing the medium's *process* means knowing how something was actually produced and put together. Finally,

emergence refers to the gradual shaping of meaning through understanding and interpretation (Altheide, 1996, pp. 9-10). Along with the necessity of detailed, reflexive researcher participation (which is often absent in quantitative studies), these three features provide the major points in undertaking an ethnographic analysis. After examining the aspects and procedures associated with ethnographic content analysis, it seems that the implementation of this methodology would be a good fit with the subject of this study's investigation.

In 1981, Altheide completed an ethnographic textual analysis of network news coverage of the Iranian hostage crisis. His study, "Iran vs. U.S. TV News: The Hostage Story Out of Context" was later incorporated into the book *TV Coverage of the Middle East*, edited by William Adams. Altheide also included a description of the study in his own book, entitled *Qualitative Media Analysis*, which is utilized here. Hostage crisis coverage extended from November 1979 to January 1981, and included 925 news reports.

According to the author, the major focus of the study was the "concepts and relationships about TV news coverage of an international crisis, particularly the role of formats, including visual imagery, its origins, and relevance for thematic emphasis" (Altheide, 1996, p. 18). Data from selected newscasts was collected within two periods – November 4, 1979 to June 7, 1980 and July 3, 1980 to January 24, 1981 – and checked via the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. In order to gain the best sample for 14 months of daily news coverage (and not miss any important data by conducting a simple random sample), Altheide used a saturation sampling method, sorting each network news report pertaining to Iran into 17 clusters, consisting of 5 to 9 consecutive

newscasts per television network. He then constructed the following data collection protocol in order to describe each news report:

> (a) network; (b) presenter; (c) length of report; (d) origin of report. (e) news sources; (f) names and status of individuals presented or interviewed; (g) their dress, appearance, and facility with English; (h) what was filmed; and (i) the correspondence between film, speech, and overall emphasis. (Altheide, 1996, p. 20)

The general procedure was to view a few reports, evaluate each report for any news techniques, then make a note of some general categories for that particular report, as well as for the reexamination of other reports. It was by this process that the coding categories were assessed, revised and finalized for use in the study. Ethnographic content analysis (ECA) was implemented rather than qualitative content analysis (QCA), due to its ability to examine content reflexively instead of statistically. In ECA, the investigator is central; there is a reflexive and highly interactive relationship between the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis. "As with all ethnographic research, the meaning of a message is assumed to be reflected in various modes of information exchange, format, rhythm, and style" (Altheide, 1996, p. 18). QCA, on the other hand, firmly holds to the protocol as the instrument. "If the QCA approach to sampling and data collection had been followed, important thematic patterns would have been lost" (Altheide, 1996, p. 21).

Analysis of the collected data led to the discovery that the origin of reports and visuals were connected through thematic emphasis. For example, "file tape" would often be shown during reports originally broadcast from certain locations, and "anti-content" was more likely to be shown in another country. Also, the analysis of television visuals benefited from the author's experimentation and exploration of the various categories and codes. Finally, the use of an ethnographic approach made possible the capability to

revisit and revise old findings and data, which would likely have been abandoned if the inflexible protocols of a content analysis had been applied. Key questions, concerns, and limitations have the opportunity to be resolved via ethnographic content analysis.

The works of Feldstein & Acosta-Alzuru, Jermyn, Worthington, and Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman all represent studies undertaken using qualitative analysis approaches, however it is the last study by Altheide that incorporates the extra feature of ethnography. Consistent with the description offered by David Altheide, Stuart Hall defined "ethnography" as coming from the word *ethnos* meaning "people," "race," or "nation," and *graphein* meaning "writing" or "description," offering a simple definition of ethnography as seeking to describe nations of people using their customs, habits and areas of difference (Hall, 1997, p. 160). This definition checks well with the nature of this study, as its focus is the U.S. print media, specifically newspapers, tabloids and tabloidization. The mass media of any given nation is arguably one of the greatest indicators as to the customs, habits and areas of difference of its people. The tabloidization of the United States mass media and the resulting unrest addresses each of these three subjects, making it a condition worthy of study and a good fit for ethnography-driven analysis. Ethnography, wrote author Thomas R. Lindlof, is seen as a segment of the broader concept of qualitative study (such as qualitative content analysis), in that it concentrates upon preserving the form and content of human behavior and analyzing its qualities, rather than subjecting it solely to mathematical or other formal transformations (Lindlof, 1995, p. 22).

The literature review points out the lack of qualitative studies on tabloids and their interplay with mainstream newspapers. There are a number of studies about

tabloidization's effect on and association with media and news, but the majority have been done on foreign media, in countries other than the United States. By focusing on a single case, this study will attempt to describe and explain the way a story that has strong tabloid elements plays out in both the tabloid and mainstream press.

This study is significant in several ways. First, this study will further research concerning tabloidization's effect on news media. Second, it will add to the body of American research in the field of American print media, specifically newspapers, supermarket tabloids and tabloidization. The findings of this study may also prove useful to the considerable current debate over the emergence of tabloidization. Finally, by investigating the relationship between supermarket tabloids and the content of U.S. "serious" newspapers, this study will attempt to explain and investigate the phenomenon of tabloidization. There are a number of studies about tabloidization's effect on and association with media and news, but the majority have been done on foreign media, in countries other than the United States.

My research questions are as follows:

R1: Does newspaper or tabloid coverage of the "Runaway Bride" utilize traditional "tabloid" formatting and reporting tactics?

R2: What similarities or differences were there in placement and headlines of stories in the tabloid and traditional newspapers?

R3: What sources were cited in the stories?

R4: Did traditional American newspapers and American supermarket tabloids contain similar coverage of the "Runaway Bride" story?

R5: What kind of illustration or photography is used in relation to the articles and how are they used?

According to Frank Esser, an important "aspect in the discussion on 'tabloidization' is whether there is a spill-over of tabloid news values – such as entertainment, gossip, sleaze, scandal and sensation – into the prestige press. A good way of studying such effects is by looking at the content of newspapers" (Esser, 1999, p. 305). This study did just that, in a way that until now, seems not to have been done before. To answer these research questions, this study employed methods of textual analysis in a case study. A case study is simply an in-depth look at a single event, people, or social unit often used in order to shed light on specific conditions (Reinard, 1998, p. 351). It is hoped that this extended examination of news coverage of a specific news event has shed further light on the condition of tabloidization within the American print media.

An ethnographic content analysis (or ethnographic textual analysis, as it is sometimes called) was done of tabloid and newspaper coverage of the recent "Runaway Bride" case. Ethnographic studies rarely aim to produce results or findings that will then be generalized across the board, another trait shared with most qualitative studies. The main difference between the qualitative analysis and the ethnographic analysis, however, is the interactive centrality of the researcher in relation to the study, rather than the use of protocols.

In devising the most appropriate sampling strategy, it is important to choose one that will allow comparisons and contrasts. Information and details may be interesting in and of themselves, but they do not provide a more general or broad understanding of the

facts. Two of the easiest ways to do this, according to Altheide, are by comparing documents from different sources, such as different television networks or different newspapers, or by studying different media or time periods, likely the start and the end of the event in question (Altheide, 1996, p. 33). With this idea in mind, the tabloids *National Enquirer*, *Star* magazine and the *New York Daily News*, and the mainstream newspapers *New York Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Tampa Tribune*, and *Charlotte Observer* were compared for "Runaway Bride" reporting. The *National Enquirer*, *Star* magazine and the *New York Daily News* served as this study's representative for tabloid coverage, while the *New York Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Tampa Tribune* and *Charlotte Observer* were examined for "serious" newspaper coverage. The *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine were assessed via actual back issues of the tabloids containing coverage of the "Runaway Bride," and newspaper coverage was examined in the same way, via back issues of the *New York Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Tampa Tribune*, and *Charlotte Observer* encompassing a similar time period. In an attempt at "tracking discourse," *New York Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Tampa Tribune* and *Charlotte Observer* newspaper coverage for the same time period was also gathered via the LexisNexis print media database and respective newspaper websites in order to more easily search for important commonalities in wording and language that occur between the three papers.

Each publication was chosen as among the best representatives for "Runaway Bride" coverage, content and perspective, with the widest reach among consumers. The *National Enquirer*, *Star* magazine and the *New York Daily News* are some of the largest, most influential and most widely read tabloids currently published in the United States.

While the *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine are of the "supermarket tabloid" variety, they are arguably two of the most recognizable and popular tabloid publications. The *New York Daily News* is distributed primarily via newsstand, subscription and vendor sales, as are most other mainstream newspapers, giving it access to an audience that may not be reached by the typical tabloid. All four newspapers offer their own respective circulations, representing coverage on the nationwide, regional, and city-specific vicinities. As mentioned earlier, the *New York Times* is recognized as one of the premier elite newspapers in the United States, distributed nationally with a large readership. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* represents the primary source for the "Runaway Bride" saga, given its close proximity, extensive resources and familiarity with the cities and residents involved. The remaining newspapers – the *Tampa Tribune* and *Charlotte Observer* – represent key locales in the southeastern region of the U.S., effectively informing and characterizing elements of the coverage and response of the southern constituency. These papers also offer further comparison to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*'s primary coverage of the "Runaway Bride" case. Finally, the use of all seven publications gives a more complete view of "Runaway Bride" coverage across both the serious and tabloid news genres.

Due to the difference of circulation frequency between the *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine (once a week), the *New York Daily News* and daily newspapers, coverage periods were as follows: *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine coverage began Monday May 2, 2005, the week following the April 26, 2005 start of the saga, and ended with the Monday June 28, 2005 issue. While the *New York Daily News* is a member of the tabloid class, its daily distribution frequency is comparable to that of a newspaper and was

assessed accordingly. Newspaper and *New York Daily News* coverage began April 28, 2005 with the earliest instance of "Runaway Bride" coverage in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and ended Thursday June 30, 2005. The ethnographic content analysis followed the general design as designated by Altheide, consisting of twelve steps:

1) Pursue a specific problem to be investigated
2) Become familiar with the process and context of the information source. Explore possible sources (perhaps documents) of information.
3) Become familiar with several examples of relevant documents, noting particularly the format. Select a unit of analysis (e.g., each article) which may change.
4) List several items or categories (variables) to guide data collection and draft a protocol (data collection sheet).
5) Test the protocol by collecting data from several documents.
6) Revise the protocol and select additional cases to further refine the protocol.
7) Arrive at a sampling rationale and strategy – for example, theoretical, opportunistic, cluster, stratified random. (Note that this will usually be theoretical sampling).
8) Collect the data, using preset codes, if appropriate, and many descriptive examples.
9) Perform data analysis, including conceptual refinement and data coding. Read notes and data repeatedly and thoroughly.
10) Compare and contrast "extremes" and "key differences" within each category or item. Make textual notes. Write brief summaries or overviews of data for each category (variable).
11) Combine the brief summaries with an example of the typical case as well as the extremes. Illustrate with materials for the protocol(s) for each case. Note surprises and curiosities about these cases and other materials in your data.
12) Integrate the findings with your interpretation and key concepts in another draft. This step involves summarizing each of the categories in a paragraph, using illustrative materials where appropriate, including descriptions and quotations. (Altheide, 1996, pp. 23-44)

These twelve steps were processed through the following five stages: (a) documents, (b) protocol development, (c) data coding and organization, (d) data analysis, and (e) report (Altheide, 1996, p. 23). Illustrations or photographs encountered along with coverage of the "Runaway Bride" were examined in accordance with Altheide's method, after all other coding has concluded and on a more limited scale, keeping the number of coding categories as low as possible.

By undertaking this study in this manner, data involving tabloidization have been expanded, providing another set of much needed, more current, and likely unique findings. Unlike most other similar investigations, this study implemented a qualitative ethnographic approach to textual analysis. A lengthy examination was undertaken of any common themes and ideas between serious American newspaper and tabloid coverage, as well as the presence of various cultural themes within the allotted newspaper coverage.

Chapter 4

Findings

The results of the ethnographic textual analysis of the "Runaway Bride" saga as reported in the tabloids *National Enquirer* (*Enquirer*), *Star* magazine and *New York Daily News* (*NYD* or *Daily News*) and "serious" newspapers *New York Times* (or the *Times*), *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (*AJC*), *Tampa Tribune* (or *Tribune*) and *Charlotte Observer* (*Observer*) provide answers to the five research questions under consideration. First, all publications showed definite elements of traditional tabloid formatting and reporting tactics present in both the tabloid and newspaper representative publications utilized for this study. Next, headlines and story placement were integral parts of each article's desired impact on the reader, along with the use of illustration and photography. A myriad of sources (some expected, some unlikely) were also used in both a recognized and anonymous capacity. Overall, remarkable similarities in many of the coverage aspects, as well as several distinct differences existed between each publication's account of the "Runaway Bride" case. Due to the strong association that traditional "tabloid" formatting and reporting tactics have with story and headline placement and the use of different types of sources, it seemed best to address research questions one through three

concurrently. Research question four was addressed with an incorporation of the previous questions' findings, as well as its own. Finally, question five, regarding tabloid and newspaper photographs, diagrams and illustration, is more able to stand on its own and was discussed in a separate section below.

As mentioned in the literature review, typical examples of tabloid formatting include "screaming" headlines, detailed reenactments and dominate illustration, while tabloid reporting may consist of short stories, snappy headlines, unidentified sources, celebrity details and sensational wording. With regards to research questions one and two – R1: *Does newspaper or tabloid coverage of the "Runaway Bride" utilize traditional "tabloid" formatting and reporting tactics?* and R2: *What similarities or differences were there in placement and headlines of stories in the tabloid and traditional newspapers?* – a description of findings begins with this study's tabloid representatives: The *National Enquirer*, *Star* magazine and the *New York Daily News*. The *Enquirer* and *Star* magazine (not surprisingly) proved to be most adept at tabloid formatting and reporting techniques, including creative use of headlines and story placement. Stories in each tabloid were generally rather short, as is the traditional tabloid style, and appeared on colorful pages crammed with enormous headlines and large photographs. This was especially true in coverage from *Star* magazine; articles contained less than 100 words and were dominated by photographs larger than the articles themselves. In the only two-page spread featured in the *Enquirer*, the words "The *National Enquirer* exposes a history of cold feet plus how she flirted with Vegas gamblers as her family prayed for her life" was added as a running headline. The actual article, however, could have fit several times over on one page. The majority of the two pages were taken up by a huge textbox

headline and three large pictures. *Star* magazine had no articles that covered more than one third of the available page space. The *New York Daily News*, in contrast, presented its coverage in a more conservative fashion in keeping with its newspaper-like format. Most stories hovered around the 400-word range, with the smallest article consisting of 277 words. Pictures in the *NYD* were also of the typical newspaper size, as were the average font sizes used in its headlines.

As stated previously, due to their once-weekly distribution schedule, the *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine began their coverage of the "Runaway Bride" saga on May 2nd, after the disappearance and recovery of Wilbanks and the disclosure of her true activities during her absence. The *Daily News*' earliest of six daily articles regarding the "Runaway Bride" was published in the Sunday, May 1st, issue, giving a more immediate report on the case; this again was unlike the typical tabloid reporting style. Stories contained in the *New York Daily News* were much more akin to the style of mainstream newspapers, a fact that was rather surprising, considering this publication's classic tabloid size and cover. While the "Runaway Bride" story was never highlighted on its front page (its highest position was page three), the *NYD* utilized distinctive tabloid cover page formatting, with extensive use of large block headlines, huge pictures and an abundance of color. The stories were not exceptionally sensational, nor did they include much of anything that was neglected or unmentioned by the mainstream newspapers in this study. *NYD* articles on the "Runaway Bride" could seemingly be substituted for any of the southern papers (and perhaps the *New York Times*) without incident. As stated earlier, and aside from the front page, headlines consisted of the typical size font often

found in newspapers. Headlines in this publication were also unremarkable, with no sensational wording or imaging.

Aside from the attention-grabbing headlines, sensational or snappy wording in the *Enquirer* and *Star* was mainly confined to the unexpectedly tame description of Ms. Wilbanks' fabricated sexual assault at the hands of her "kidnappers." Words such as "lurid sexual fantasies" and "X-rated sex and bondage tale" comprise the extent of both the *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine's abbreviated coverage of this case detail. The overall tone of each report was quite professional, and apart from the rampant use of anonymous resources, each tabloid's reporting would likely be largely indistinguishable from that of the mainstream newspapers to the conventional reader. There also did not seem to be the notorious wild and fanciful element that is regarded by many as being intrinsic to the tabloid code of conduct. Each supposition advanced by the tabloids actually seemed credible (whether it actually was true or not) and core details did not appear to stray far from facts printed in serious newspapers. This discounts the general belief that tabloids print only speculation and unconfirmed gossip.

The one instance of flashy wording in the *New York Daily News* occurred in an article entitled "No altar-ing his wish. 'Haven't we all made mistakes?' Jilted groom defends fiancée." In classic David Letterman fashion, *NYD* staff writer Adam Lisberg gave the following "5 reasons why John Mason wants to marry her" and "5 reasons why John Mason shouldn't marry her:"

5 REASONS WHY JOHN MASON... WANTS TO MARRY HER:

1) She's not really like that, he says. "She's a victim here as well."
2) She makes him "happy," he said. She just "needs some help."
3) He wants her to be his babies' mama: "Her mom always says she was put on this Earth to be a mother."

4) She didn't just leave for kicks, he said, even though she "did end up in Las Vegas."
5) They've not done it yet: "In God's eye, our relationship is still very pure."

SHOULDN'T MARRY HER:

1) She skipped out on you before the wedding, setting off nationwide search.
2) She skipped out on you before the wedding, setting off nationwide search.
3) She skipped out on you before the wedding, setting off nationwide search.
4) She skipped out on you before the wedding, setting off nationwide search.
5) She skipped out on you before the wedding, setting off nationwide search. (Lisberg, 2005, p. 3)

References to Julia Roberts or the film "Runaway Bride" were also kept to a minimum, with only one mention of the link between the Wilbanks case namesake and the popular romantic comedy. The lack of anonymous sources, blind assertion and celebrity spotlighting truly distance the *New York Daily News* from the other tabloids used in this study.

Answering research question three, an examination of the *Daily News* found no anonymous sources, outlandish claims or unsupported assertions. Sources used by the *Daily News* were of the typical newspaper variety, such as Duluth Police Chief Randy Belcher, Reverend Tom Smiley and Katie Couric. Both the *Star* and the *Enquirer*, on the other hand, contained very little information assigned to any particular source, as the majority of sources used went unnamed and their claims unsubstantiated. In the few cases where sources were partially identified in the *Enquirer* and *Star*, they were of the typical tabloid variety: a "pal," "family insider" or a "source close to the couple." Other sources used by *Star* magazine and the *Enquirer* included anonymous "docs," Hollywood Hills psychotherapist Suzanne Lopez and Shelley Ray, one of Jennifer's disappointed bridesmaids.

Both tabloids also capitalized on the celebrity connection to this case's namesake, "Runaway Bride," a favorite tactic used by the tabloids to attract the consumer. Numerous mentions were made of the 1999 film of the same name starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, with each tabloid pointing out the similarities between the movie's female star and Jennifer Wilbanks. In the film, Roberts (also a Georgia native) plays Maggie, a woman so intensely afraid of commitment that she leaves a string of fiancés at the altar. According to unnamed "friends," Wilbanks is obsessed with Roberts, desperately wants to be her, and may have acted out scenes from the star's own movie roles and personal life when she ran from her impending wedding. "In 'Sleeping With The Enemy,' Julia's character cuts her hair, leaves her [wedding] ring and belongings behind and escapes by bus…In real life, Julia also got cold feet and broke up with fiancé Kiefer Sutherland before their planned 1991 wedding" (Gentile, 2005, p. 48). If true, Wilbanks' supposed actions provide an interesting parallel to the Marxist idea explained earlier – that the ruling classes use cultural forms such as literature, the press, film and television as a means to assimilate and control the masses. By mimicking the actions of Roberts' character, Wilbanks, by this theory, became mesmerized by Julia Roberts' status as member of the White, wealthy and celebrity ruling class, effectively dictating the way Jennifer should live her own life.

As expected, the supposedly moderate newspapers *New York Times*, *Tampa Tribune*, *Charlotte Observer* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* did in fact contain examples of tabloid formatting and reporting, a practice shared with their tabloid counterparts. Beginning with research question two, statistics from papers outside of Atlanta differ somewhat with those of the tabloids. The *Observer* ranked 2nd in the

amount of newspaper coverage with 15 articles, the *Times* was 3rd with 10 articles and the *Tribune* took 4th place, publishing seven articles. Both the *Times* and *Observer* began their coverage on April 29th, while the *Tribune* first addressed the case on May 3rd, all before coverage began in either the *Enquirer* or *Star*. The *Tribune*, however, was outpaced by the tabloid *Daily News*, who as mentioned earlier, began its coverage on May 1st. The majority of the articles in all three publications were of small to medium size, with no story comprised of less than 175 words in the *Tribune* or *Observer* and 70 words in the *Times*. Several instances of brief mentions of the "Runaway Bride" were found in nationwide regional reports, or "life" digests. "Runaway Bride" stories in the *Times* reached a top position of page 11 in the "National News Desk" section and page six in the "Style" section and *Tribune* rankings topped out at page one in the "Baylife" section and page two in the "Nation/World" section. The *Observer*'s "Runaway Bride" standings were also similar, with the highest position of page 2A in the "Main" news section and 1B in "Metro." There was no particular evidence of favoritism given to this subject, which is reflected in the generic page placement and lack of front-page status in each of these publications. In accordance with the importance each newspaper placed upon the subject (and likely the large number of pages and notoriously small print present in the *New York Times*), headlines were a smaller font size in the *Times* than in the *Tribune* and *Observer*. Stories were also more spread out in the *Tribune* and *Observer* than in the *Times*, where articles were squeezed and shrunk to fit a cramped space befitting a less important story.

The three papers' overall take on the case was quite similar, perhaps with the smaller, out-of-town, regional *Tribune* and *Observer* taking the lead from large nationally

distributed newspapers like the *Times*. The tone present in the *Tribune* seemed to be much more opinionated than the *Observer* or more laidback *Times*, and details in the *Tribune* and *Observer* also had a "borrowed feel" that was not apparent in the *Times*. While there were no official *Tribune* attributions to sources like the Associated Press for any information or photographs, the lack of an Atlanta dateline and the inclusion of what seems to be "borrowed material" made it unlikely that any *Tribune* reporters actually made the trip to the Atlanta area to cover the story. The *Observer*, by contrast, was full of Associated Press credits; 10 of the 15 articles present were written by reporters with the Associated Press, with an additional article written by a columnist for the *Myrtle Beach Sun News*. Atlanta datelines were also absent, making the presence of the *Observer* in the Atlanta area extremely improbable.

Two notable articles featured in the *Tampa Tribune* and *Charlotte Observer* provided further examples and support of this study's finding of traditional "tabloid" formatting and reporting tactics in mainstream newspapers. Article one consisted of a rather opinionated conversational piece entitled "Why So Mad? She Didn't Run Away From You," featured in the May 6th edition of the *Tribune.* Enthusiastic staff writer Daniel Ruth sarcastically scolded the reader, saying, "Wilbanks turned out to have cold feet rather than a toe tag. Oh, the gall" (Ruth, 2005, p. 2). Ruth's catty remarks and colorful wording could easily find a home in a conventional tabloid or more modern tabloid-magazine hybrid like *Star* magazine; Ruth's sensational imagery was quite similar to typical *National Enquirer* fare. Other zingers included a description of fiancé Mason as "a nice enough chap, but also is more out to lunch than a James Bond bimbo," Jennifer's distaste for marrying Mason, so strong that "she would rather shove shards of

broken glass up her nose than get hitched" and Ruth's estimation that the "Oprah nation…being denied its expected happy ending" is a "popular culture capital offense" in the "tabloid television world we live in" (Ruth, 2005, p. 2). It's important to note this dig at television media, which appeared to be a fundamental part of the newspapers' fight against "ethically compromised" television and a shield against criticism of the newspapers' own coverage of tabloid-esque stories. Rather than admit their own part in the growth of tabloidization, newspapers throughout this study were found continuously attempting to blame the sensational coverage of the "Runaway Bride" story on other media outlets, television in particular. Finally, Ruth presented a definite departure from the standard speculation and hypothesizing as to the reason for Wilbanks' secret escape; said Ruth:

> You don't have to be Dr. Ruth to surmise that Wilbanks reviewed her life and concluded: Holy $#@!&^! I've got 600 people showing up, along with 14 bridesmaids, to watch me get married to Gomer Pyle over here. I'm about to enter into a life-time commitment with a nice guy maybe, but I don't feel like waking up next to Jed Clampett for the next 40 years. (Ruth, 2005, p. 2)

The second article entitled "Runaway Bride to Pay, Big-Time; The Ultimate Price: China, Silver, Crystal All Has to Go Back" appeared in the *Observer* May 15th. Writer Celia Rivenbark poked fun at fiancé John Mason's forgiving response to Jennifer Wilbanks' abandonment in a mocking tone reminiscent of the barbed, acidic speech found in any popular gossip column. Said Rivenbark, "I've heard the phrase 'unconditional love' all my life, but I thought it only applied to dogs" (Rivenbark, 2005, p. 4Y). Referring to Wilbanks as John's "wacky fiancée" and "an abysmal choice of lifetime mates," Rivenbark proceeded to paint Mason as a love-drunk fool in complete denial:

> Hons, I am in awe of this man – although he probably should have seen some of the warning signs. Jennifer had that crazy, bug-eyed look, for one thing. It's not a stretch to imagine, when looking at those endless photos of their courtship, that, one day, she'd freak out and end up wearing a striped beach towel over her head in a New Mexico airport. (Rivenbark, 2005, p. 4Y)

"At first," wrote Rivenbark "a nation rejoiced that this wasn't Laci Peterson all over again" (Rivenbark, 2005, p. 4Y), relief fading, of course, once the truth was revealed. She went on to point out that the restitution demanded by the public and those who spent money searching for Wilbanks wouldn't be hard to find: the 600+ wedding gift booty could be returned (or possibly sold) to raise the needed funds. "Somewhere in Georgia, there's a Southern mama with a living room overflowing with fine china, sterling silver and crystal. It's all going to have to go back"…"Penance must be paid, and this will surely be the most painful way a Southern bride can be taught a lesson" (Rivenbark, 2005, p. 4Y).

What these newspapers papers lacked in huge, vibrant and attention-getting headline fonts, they made up for in one-liners and witty headlines suitable for tabloid "trash." From the *Tribune*'s "Couric Lands Runaway Bride For 'Dateline.' How Conveeenient," the *Times*' "Wedding Bells? That's the Bride's Getaway Car," and the *Observer's* "We're Not Going to the Chapel Anymore," each paper made an effort to amuse and draw in the consumer. Wording such as "Devil Made Her Do It" and designating the film "Runaway Bride" "as bombs go" as "the Fallujah of flicks" in the *Tribune*, "jilted," "dumped," "freak out" and "ditched" in the *Times*, and the *Observer*'s "Hons" (short for "honeys"), "heck" and "psycho" took on the more casual slang and conversational style that tabloids are known for. In fact, the largest articles regarding this case in both the *Times* and the *Tribune* appeared in the recognized site of "soft news" and

gossip in the serious newspaper – the lifestyle section. The *Observer* differed slightly, with the largest article (610 words) placed in the "Main" news section and its runner-up (608 words) featured in the "Garden" section.

It is important to note – in response to research question three – that despite using material that was not originally gathered by the newspapers themselves (or perhaps because of it), no anonymous sources were found in the *Times*, *Tribune* or *Observer*. Sources included would-be brides who called off their nuptials or were "jilted" by heartless fiancés, all aligned with Jennifer, and designated as the resident experts, along with therapists, wedding planners, shoe dyers and dress store owners (all discussed further below). The "lifestyle" articles in the *Times*, *Tribune* and *Observer* ostensibly began with a quick rundown of the "Runaway Bride" story, quickly expanding to a discussion of the trials and tribulations involved with weddings and marriages. Rather than the customary accusatory and shameful tone generally directed at Ms. Wilbanks, her case was suddenly afforded a heartily sympathetic response. With a celebrity tie-in typified by tabloid coverage, there were several mentions of film star Julia Roberts, as well as other celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Jessica Simpson and Tori Spelling and their respective wedding anxieties. The *Tribune* (May 6th) and the *Observer* (May 4th) even included "how-to" guides from WeddingChannel.com editor Marilyn Oliveira and theregoesthebride.com, with the best ways to go about canceling a wedding. Karen Sandau, owner of the Beverly Hills, California company WedSafe, was also featured as a source by both the *Tribune* and *Observer* (May 6th and May 9th respectively). Wedsafe offers insurance to engaged couples to safeguard their wedding ceremony – cold feet notwithstanding. These commonalities – unpublished in any of the other publications

analyzed within this study – further validate the existence of "borrowed" material within the two papers and the type of coverage that began in the classic, traditional tabloid.

Despite these instances, the *Tampa Tribune, Observer* and *New York Times* in particular occupy the low end of the tabloidization spectrum when compared alongside the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Regarding research questions one and two, the *AJC* contained the largest number of tabloidization cues by far outside of the tabloids themselves. Even with the added consideration that the *AJC*, being the hometown newspaper that was closest to the "Runaway Bride" story, had the greatest access and accordingly the largest number of articles on the subject, the fervor with which the paper seemed to have tackled this story was statistically unmatched by any other newspaper or tabloid nationwide. Not counting the articles repeated between the main news and Gwinnett county news sections, the *AJC* ran 59 stories on the "Runaway Bride" between April 28th and June 22nd, far outnumbering all other study publications coverage combined. The deference shown this story was amazing, with the *AJC* giving the "Runaway Bride" front-page status on 10 different occasions with choice top-half, right side, left side or middle of the page locations. Most articles were of medium to large size, with no article comprised of less than 100 words, and were generally paired with some manner or photograph or illustration. However, it was the numerous tabloid-like qualities of the *AJC*'s coverage that spoke to the influence of tabloidization.

One of the most noticeable characteristics that the *AJC* shared with the tabloids in this study was the abundance of large and snappy headlines. On numerous occasions and especially when located on the front page, "Runaway Bride" stories were easily located due to a bold, large and often page-wide headline. Thick block capital letters seemed to

be the font of choice, with extended use and different headlines on subsequent pages. The majority of headlines were of a typically clipped newsy nature, with the exception of a few more novel titles: "Runaway Schadenfreude*" (malicious satisfaction in the misfortunes of others), "Got cold feet? 'High Tailin' hot sauce just what you need" and "Q100 host sets out to trip runaway bride."

The *AJC* also included a reenactment, engaged in self-criticism and assessed the media's response at large to the "Runaway Bride" case, all classic means to question and report added details often given by other competing, less traditional or less elite media outlets. The reenactment is a fundamental feature of tabloid television shows like "Current Affair" and "Inside Edition," used to increase dramatic appeal. Once again, newspapers such as the *AJC* were found to utilize tabloid formatting and reporting techniques, all while protesting tabloidization as a problem created and perpetrated by tabloids and television. A large diagram (discussed further below) was also included, detailing the route taken by Wilbanks during her disappearance. Self-evaluation regarding media coverage of the "Runaway Bride" saga was both positive and negative according to the *AJC*'s staff writers. On the negative side, staffer Steve Murray's article entitled, "TV MEDIA: Two categories of journalism: What we need to hear…[and] this stuff that pays the bills" gave what amounts to be a textbook judgment for the self-loathing journalist. In the modern 24-hour news cycle, said quoted media expert Robert Thompson, "stories don't have to be important, but they do have to be titillating" (Murray, 2005, p. A12). However, this statement was a positive one for the *AJC*, due to the fact that Thompson's criticism was not aimed at the *AJC* or other newspapers at all, but once again at the CNN and Fox News types of the television world. The *AJC*

continued to accuse television shows and cable news of sensationalism and tabloidization, still refusing to admit its own part in the round-the-clock coverage of the "Runaway Bride."

Extensive criticism was launched at all other media outlets while carefully avoiding any questionable action perpetrated by the *AJC*, again adding opportunities to report on other media accounts. Print publications such as the *New York Post* and *People* magazine were subject to ridicule by the *AJC*, as was the Internet, due to the profusion of wacky "Runaway Bride" trinkets and memorabilia up for bid on Ebay.com, the sale of the "Runaway Bride" action figure and "High Tailin' Hot Sauce" online and CNN.com's lengthy description of the Wilbanks-Mason online wedding gift registration list. Television news was hardest hit, however, for its supposedly "over-the-top" coverage of the case, with the *AJC* citing Fox News, CNN, MSNBC and Court TV for "aggressively pursuing leads and sometimes asking the kinds of questions police usually do" (O'Briant, 2005, p. 12A). Greta Van Susteren, host of Fox's "On the Record" was portrayed as a clear media villain, evidently for the "accusatory and tasteless tone" she took in an interview with John Mason and the designation that she (and others like her) are simply looking for a story to replace the Laci Peterson case, a late media staple. "Wilbanks story a natural in era of 24-hour newscasts" by Angela Tuck added the following scathing critique of television news:

> Duluth's runaway bride is the latest example of runaway news coverage fueled by tabloid journalism, 24-hour news channels and legal shows in desperate search of the next titillating story with a soap opera twist. …It's no secret that television ratings and newspaper sales are boosted by such stories. (Tuck, 2005, p. 11A)

She went on to say that this "voracious appetite for non-stop news about other people's problems" has been ever-present since the O.J. Simpson trial was televised live on Court

TV, quoting yet another media expert (a media studies professor at Kennesaw State) who stated "Even if you think the story is insignificant, it's hard not to [pay attention] because of the human interest [read: soft news] side" (Tuck, 2005, p. 11A). She excused the *AJC*'s own extensive coverage of the "Runaway Bride" case, saying that the story was picked up due to its status as a local story that just happened to have a "dramatic twist." Tuck included a statement from the *AJC*'s own Gwinnett News editor, Thomas Oliver:

> I think we covered the story in depth, but with reserve…This was the story of a local woman whose groom-to-be came from a family with deep community connections. She planned a big wedding, then went missing. Everyone was talking about it. (Tuck, 2005, p. 11A)

It seems that while basking in its *own* 15 minutes of fame, the *AJC* used its exclusive proximity to the story and the typical excuse that "everyone was talking about it" to produce its own brand of 24-hour newscast, while continuing to criticize television for doing the same. No responsibility was taken by the AJC for its own extensive coverage. The article continued with more digs at drama-hungry cable hosts like Greta Van Susteren and a comparison of the Wilbanks case to the Laci Peterson case, both of which began on the local level before reaching worldwide status. Finally, Tuck made the assertion that local news media abandoned "more relevant news" in the face of the Wilbanks saga, saying "It's time to let the wide-eyed bride-to-be get the counseling she seeks and move on to stories that have real bearing on our lives" (Tuck, 2005, p. 11A), then ironically revealing that the story generated double the usual overall hits on ajc.com Saturday April 30th. Further, stories and photographs concerning the "Runaway Bride" increased ajc.com's audience by a whopping 1 million page views over the aforementioned weekend. Again, the *AJC* took the hackneyed stance of the "elite"

newspaper looking down its nose at the "other" media, while at the same time managing to profit from aggressively covering the same story.

Additional unflattering reviews were sent television's way via an editorial, touting the excesses of judgmental programming with the words "unlike the breathless cable TV talk show hosts who had already condemned Wilbanks' fiancé, don't jump to conclusions. Wait for the facts" ("Our opinions: Don't shower bride with ridicule", 2005, p. 14A). In a May 8th editorial, staff writer Cynthia Tucker issued an industry-wide criticism of "Runaway Bride" media coverage. Said Tucker, "Heaven knows, my industry ought to come in for a heaping dose of criticism for the sensationalist coverage given to one small drama --- the Wilbanks disappearance --- without broader societal implications." She then took a surprising turn by adding, "But the fact is that the runaway bride soap opera, like the tragedies involving Peterson and Hacking, attracted loads of interest from readers and viewers" (Tucker, 2005, p. 6E). Once again, criticism of the *AJC* was turned aside, with yet another jab at Ms. Van Susteren and cable television news, even after an actual admittance of "sensationalist coverage given to one small drama" via Tucker's profession. It is important to note, however, that Tucker did not specifically name the *AJC* at any point, choosing instead the broader term of "my industry." Staff writer Rick Badie rounded things out with one last stab at cable news with the statement, "Jennifer Wilbanks' disappearing act caused a sensation that the national media shamelessly exploited (think Fox News)" (Badie, 2005e, p. 3JJ), and a bunch of general grumbling about the Wilbanks-Mason interview with Katie Couric on NBC from both the *AJC* and *Tribune*.

Continuing with typical tabloid reporting and sourcing practices, and addressing question three, the *AJC* made extensive use of public records as source material. Through a perusal of police records, it became known that Wilbanks has a prior criminal record, after being arrested twice in 1996 and once in 1998 for shoplifting. Because she was not convicted of a felony in those cases, Wilbanks qualified as a first-time offender, which helped her gain a lighter sentence in the current case. The contents of Wilbanks' criminal record were reported by both the *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, with a brief mention in the *Tampa Tribune* and *Charlotte Observer*, however the frequency with which it was done differed between publications. While the *Times* referred to the charges on only one occasion, the *AJC* went into much greater detail within two articles, giving the locations where the crimes took place, the monetary amounts stolen on all three occasions, as well as the punishment given in each case, all while being careful to repeatedly cite "city court records" as the information's source.

Various "experts" were also consulted by tabloids and newspapers alike, such as the *Enquirer*'s Hollywood Hills psychotherapist Suzanne Lopez, the *AJC*'s Dr. Charles Raison, professor and psychiatrist at Emory University, and the *Tribune*'s Charles Spielberger, professor and director of the Center for Research in Behavioral Medicine and Health Psychology at the University of South Florida. In her article, "Our opinion: Media blackout for this bride," *AJC* writer Cynthia Tucker spoke with "expert" Emory University psychology professor Drew Westen on the realities of American disinterest in regular people of color and the contrasting concern shown for those of Caucasian descent and the rare celebrity minority. According to Westen, there are now "clear data that show that when seemingly low-prejudiced Whites see Black faces, there is an automatic

association with negatives" (Tucker, 2005, p. 6E). This finding seems likely, given the ongoing racial issues that exist in American society. The rule, however, does not apply to those few minority members who are wealthy, powerful, and/or possess celebrity. Said Tucker,

> There are, no doubt, black and brown celebrities whose travails draw intense interest. Think O.J. and M.J. …And if Halle Berry or Rosario Dawson disappeared, Fox News' Greta Van Susteren and CNN Headline News' Nancy Grace would go into overdrive, sending out their rapid deployment teams. In this country, celebrity trumps everything else. (Tucker, 2005, p. 6E)

Fellow *AJC* staffer Angela Tuck agreed, but just as Tucker avoided pointing the finger at her own particular media outlet, Tuck laid the blame for this injustice squarely at the feet of the "other" media in her article "Wilbanks story a natural in era of 24-hour newscasts." According to Thomas Oliver, Gwinnett News editor for the *AJC* (and relayed by Tuck), the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is committed to unbiased reporting, and would have "covered the story in the same manner, regardless of the race or class of those involved." This commitment, said Tuck, is completely unlike the tabloids, cable news shows, or widespread media who aren't likely to focus "on a person of color who isn't a celebrity or athlete" (Tuck, 2005, p. 11A). Commentary such as this takes on the familiar newspaper ploy of criticizing other news media reporting practices, thereby adding further – often sensational – details to their own stories without incurring blame for these details. Professionals in the wedding business were also called upon as unofficial "experts," allowed to sound off on many different aspects of the "Runaway Bride" case.

Area residents were also a favorite source of opinion for the newspapers in particular, used in a variety of ways. Regarding the possible punishment and sentencing phases of the story, regular citizens were often polled. Asked her feelings about the

"Runaway Bride," by the *AJC*, Meg Marston of Snellville replied, "What a shame character is no longer rewarded in our society. But bad behavior? It reaps bountiful rewards" (Badie, 2005a, p. 3JJ). Duluth resident Penny Masters was a bit more sympathetic toward the "Runaway Bride" and her alleged mental issues, saying, "I feel sorry for her. She definitely needs help. I have no conception of why she did what she did, but there are options she could have taken" (Badie, 2005d, p. 3JJ).

In answer to research question number four, American tabloids and American newspapers within this study generally contained similar coverage of the "Runaway Bride" story. There were, however, some exceptions, primarily found in the smaller details of the story. The primary difference between the three publications' coverage was the point at which each paper took up and concluded its coverage. Between the article sample dates of April 28 and June 30, 2005, the *Times* began reporting on the Wilbanks' case on April 30th, surprisingly early, given the paper's designation as the premier elite American newspaper and the story's tabloid feel. There is no indication as to why the *Times* picked up the story at this time; perhaps it is a testament to the rampant popularity of the case and the ever-present necessity to compete in today's media marketplace. The *Times* also ended its coverage rather early with the sentencing of Ms. Wilbanks on June 3rd. The *Observer* had a similar timetable, beginning coverage April 29th and ending June 3rd. In contrast, the *Tribune* was a latecomer with a coverage period more similar to the *Enquirer* and *Star* than the other newspapers. *Tribune* coverage picked up the story on May 3rd, three days after Wilbanks turned herself in, and left off on June 28th, one week after the "Dateline" interview.

In terms of tabloid coverage, one bit of information in the *Daily News* not mentioned in any of the other publications (tabloid or newspaper) was that Jennifer Wilbanks had bought her getaway bus ticket one week prior to leaving using a fake name. The name itself was not disclosed, however the very mention of this false moniker was absent elsewhere (Lisberg, 2005, p. 3). Both the *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine stories also differed from those of the mainstream newspapers in one central respect: While brief, the *Enquirer* and *Star*'s stories were packed full of exclusive and juicy tidbits, very few of which were echoed in any of this study's mainstream newspapers. Take, for example, the following rundown of shockers contained within the *National Enquirer*'s May 16, 2005 article entitled "Runaway bride walked out on two other lovers:"

> The *National Enquirer* has learned from sources that Jennifer:
> - BOUGHT a bus ticket to Las Vegas on April 19 – one week before she disappeared.
> - LOST all her money in Vegas on the blackjack tables
> - FLIRTED and joked with a group of male gamblers
> - CONNED the Treasure Island Casino Hotel by using her fiancé's last name
> - BROKE off an engagement when she was in her 20s
> - DUMPED another boyfriend when she heard he was about to propose (Mowling, 2005, p. 16)

Star magazine also provided exclusive mug shot photos of Wilbanks, a feature absent from all other publications examined in this study, including company-mate *National Enquirer*. In addition, *Star* magazine named Jennifer Wilbanks as the recipient of the May 30th weekly award for "Worst Mugshots" and the co-winner of the "Scary Eyes Award" for the week of June 20th. According to the *Star*, Wilbanks had five prior arrests, not three as reported by the newspapers ("Runaway bride caught in the headlights!" 2005, p. 30) ("Crazed gazes!" 2005, p. 33). Finally, both the *Enquirer* and

the *Star* made mention that Ms. Wilbanks stayed for one night at the Treasure Island Casino Hotel in Las Vegas under the name "Jennifer Mason," a key detail that was also not printed in any of the newspapers profiled in this study. This may have been an important point of reference to establish Jennifer's actual whereabouts during the time she was missing.

Within this study's group of newspapers, the *AJC* was also the only publication, newspaper or tabloid, that included a minute-by-minute account of Jennifer Wilbanks' 911 telephone call from Albuquerque. While it is possible that this inclusion was simply due to the *AJC*'s local status concerning this case, the fact that this telephone call was not included in any of the other publications should be noted. Despite the availability of this information to other media outlets, it somehow went uncovered by any of this study's other print media. The *AJC* also pointed to the apparent "shortcomings" of other print media, setting itself further apart from other papers and tabloids. Calling them "New York's attack sheets," the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Post* were sardonically reviewed by the *AJC*, citing a picture of the *Daily News* website featuring the words, "Aren't we all messed up?" along with a picture of a blanket-covered Wilbanks. The "slightly more flamboyant and less reputable" *Post*'s headlines "FLEE-ANCEE" and "COLD FEET, HOT WATER," were also mentioned, with the *AJC* poking fun at "half-lupine" *Post* columnist Andrea Peyser. Peyser incurred the *AJC*'s wrath after writing an article on the Wilbanks saga, bashing southerners in general and Wilbanks in particular. The "nasty" nature of the *New York Post* was also underscored with the words, "It's usually only a subway stop between clever and nasty on the *Post*'s front page, and the tabloid got plenty mean later in the week" ("Runaway schadenfreude*",

2005, p. 3E). A *Tampa Tribune* article "Runaway Bride; A product of our culture?" (to be discussed later), was also referred to as an "obligatory bit of self-flagellation among various columnists nationwide who worried that "society" or "the culture" were responsible for what happened to Wilbanks" ("Runaway schadenfreude*", 2005, p. 3E). *People* magazine was also mentioned, allowing the *AJC* to yet again recycle and report sensational tidbits, this time first delivered by *People* magazine. In the article "Bride carried baggage from the past," writer Mark Davis stated, "One friend told *People* magazine that Wilbanks has had breast augmentation surgery." In the same article, according to Davis, "friends said that the bridesmaids, who were to wear black gowns for the evening wedding, were angry that Wilbanks had skipped town" (Davis, 2005a, p. 1A).

The *Observer* had information on the Mason family response – "Wilbanks' fiancé, John Mason, has said he still wants to marry her, but his father has advised his son to take it slow" (Haines, 2005a, p. 6A). This idea was alluded to by John South's article "Jilted John is set to be Jennifer's runaway fiancé" in the *Enquirer*. Using yet another unnamed source "close to the couple," South quoted, "'At first, he wanted to do the right thing and stand by her. But then his family and friends started to ask him 'Are you crazy?' They told him he should be the one running for the hills'" (South, 2005a, p. 20). The *Observer* was the only publication in this study to refer to the actual response of John Mason's father. Fernando Mateo, president of Hispanics Across America, was also featured in the *Observer* article, "Hispanic group wants apology," giving harsh criticism to the "Runaway Bride." Unlike other publications, Mateo was quoted in the *Observer* as briefly referring to Wilbanks' alleged mental problems, disregarding them as an escape

for her actions: "While I understand this is a troubled woman, we cannot and will not stand for any racial stereotyping of Hispanics as criminals and thugs" (Haines, 2005a, p. 6A).

Despite these differences, an examination of the *National Enquirer*, *Star* magazine, *New York Daily News*, *New York Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Tampa Tribune* and *Charlotte Observer* revealed an almost identical reporting of the central facts of the case. All seven publications reported on Wilbanks' disappearance and return, as well as the true details of her flight from Georgia to Albuquerque, New Mexico, with an overnight stop in Las Vegas. Attention was also given to Wilbanks' indictment on felony and misdemeanor charges and her sentencing terms. Additional common data included Jennifer's buying the Greyhound ticket to Las Vegas a week before making her escape, her describing her imaginary male Hispanic abductor and assaulter as having "rotten teeth," Wilbanks' checking into a mental treatment center and the details of her eventual sentencing. Another common detail was Jennifer's prior criminal record; however, neither the *Enquirer* nor *Star* went beyond stating that she had been arrested on several occasions for shoplifting.

The bizarre quality of the "Runaway Bride" incident made it the source of constant contrasts with other strange, comparable and marginally similar cases in numerous publications. As detailed previously, numerous parallels were drawn between Jennifer Wilbanks, Laci Peterson, and Lori Hacking, all young attractive White women who went missing, whose cases received 24-hour coverage in the news media, and whose male partners became prime suspects in their disappearances. The sensational characteristics of the "Runaway Bride" case also garnered comparisons with the

Simpson-Brown murders, the Jon Benet Ramsey murder mystery, the Terri Schiavo case, and the Jessica Lunsford kidnapping and subsequent murder, all of which dominated news coverage for weeks and months at a time. Due to the fabrication of Wilbanks' kidnapping and her false accusation of a minority figure, this case was also compared to the notorious Chuck Stuart (1989) and Susan Smith (1995) cases. Stuart had killed his pregnant wife and shot himself in the stomach in order to cover up his crime, while Smith intentionally drove her car into a lake and drowned her two children. Both perpetrators claimed a Black man had committed the crimes, with Smith going so far as to help draft a sketch of the "suspect" for authorities. It was later found that both Stuart and Smith had murdered their family members themselves.

The *Observer* article "Hate to say it, but some 'stories' aren't" contrasted the "Runaway Bride" story with the Letourneau-Fualaau debacle, a notorious tabloid case receiving coverage at around the same time involving the teacher-student romantic relationship and publicized wedding of Mary Kay Letourneau and Vili Fualaau. *AJC* columnist Rick Badie even compared Wilbanks to Ashley Smith, the woman taken hostage by Brian Nichols, who convinced her captor to surrender to the police.[1] By appearing on television, selling the rights to her story and procuring a book deal for an estimated $500,000, Badie felt Wilbanks was unjustly capitalizing off of her own crime, while Smith, who actually deserved the spotlight, was keeping a low profile. Said Badie, "It's the kind of development we've come to expect. A nobody gains notoriety for

[1] Nichols, who was on trial for rape in the Fulton County Courthouse, has of this writing been charged with killing a judge, court clerk, and deputy as he escaped from the courthouse in March 2005, a month before the "Runaway Bride." During the search for Nichols, the metro Atlanta area was terrorized but caught up by the media spectacle. During his run from police, Nichols beat an *AJC* reporter and stole his car, and later killed another man and took Smith hostage before she persuaded him to surrender.

breaking the law, then capitalizes on it. There's no state law against profiting from a crime, but it speaks volumes about those who do. They're shameless and selfish" (Badie, 2005c, p. 3JJ). Most significantly, both the *AJC* and *Tribune* compared the Wilbanks case with those of other women who had faked their own abductions, such as a Wisconsin college student in 2004 and Montana businesswoman in 2003. These offenders received three years probation with a $9,000 fine and eight months of house arrest, followed by one year of nightly curfew respectively (Bruner, 2005b, p. 1A).

Concerned people were distressed across the country for a variety of reasons: angry at being duped, upset over the time and money wasted searching for the "Runaway Bride," fuming over the improvised kidnapping and assault story, etc. This widespread sentiment resulted in very similar coverage of the aftermath of the "Runaway Bride's" jaunt to Las Vegas. According to both the *New York Daily News* (M. Becker, 2005, p. 12) and *Charlotte Observer*, Reverend Alan Jones, who was to perform the wedding ceremony for Wilbanks and Mason, said that Jennifer's family and friends were happy to have her back and advocated forgiveness. Said Jones of their initial response,

> Sure, we were all disappointed, maybe a little embarrassed, but you know what, if you remember all the interviews yesterday we were praying, "At this point let her be a runaway bride." So God was faithful. Jennifer's alive and we're all thankful for that. (Aguayo, 2005, p. 5A)

"Despite her loved ones' initial relief that Jennifer was alive and well," however, the *National Enquirer* reported that they were "privately furious with her for putting them through such anguish" (Mowling, 2005, p. 16). The *Tampa Tribune* was one newspaper of many expressing its contempt for the "Runaway Bride." In an editorial entitled "No Sympathy For 'Runaway Bride,'" the *Tribune* staff declared, "Wilbanks may play the role of victim, but she will get little pity from a community and nation that prayed for her

safe return home only to learn that they had been duped" ("No sympathy for 'runaway bride'", 2005, p. 12). In another article, Errol Louis of the *New York Daily News* cautioned that letting Wilbanks go free could weaken the organizations and systems put in place to protect missing or kidnapped Americans. Said Louis,

> Sick people abuse the system, causing skepticism that could make the public shrug off future alerts. … Allowing Wilbanks to get away with the same slap on the wrist will make the public disregard police alerts the way we do car alarms - momentary noise that can be safely ignored. (Louis, 2005, p. 3)

Finally, one must take into account the existence of newswire information included in newspaper coverage of the "Runaway Bride" case, a significant factor in some of the common coverage found amongst the publications examined as part of this study. As mentioned earlier, both the *Tampa Tribune* and *Charlotte Observer* were assumed to have not had reporters present at the scene of Wilbanks' disappearance in Duluth, chiefly due to their stories' lack of Atlanta datelines and the generic feel of much of their coverage. The *Observer*, in particular, had 10 of its 15 total articles attributed to Associated Press reporters and an additional one article credited to a Knight-Ridder writer, making the extensive use of newswire material by the *Observer* a certainty. Further examination found the utilization of newswires to be widespread, with at least one example of an article being credited to a newswire writer or syndicated via newswire in each of the newspapers profiled in this study, save the *Tampa Tribune*. It is not known why the *Tribune* showed no evidence of newswire elements, yet also had no evidence of actual presence in Duluth. It may be due to stylistic conventions of the copy desk at the *Tribune*. In contrast, the remaining newspapers – the *Times*, *AJC*, and *Observer* – were found to have two, four and 11 articles with a newswire background, respectively. The

New York Daily News, a tabloid seemingly more akin to a newspaper, had two articles with newswire association, while the *National Enquirer* and *Star* magazine had no such relationship.

An examination of themes that became apparent during the analysis phase of this study provided the best means of ascertaining other more qualitative commonalities found between tabloid and newspaper coverage. When examining less tangible, but clearly incorporated, elements of the case, four common themes emerged: race, sex and sexuality and mental health. Sex and race played a prominent role in the way the media responded to this case, and they were often presented in tandem positively or negatively, depending upon the subject of their assignment. The fact that Jennifer Wilbanks, both White and a female, received such immense attention from the media elicited anger from many on several different levels, a response addressed by all seven of this study's publications. For some minorities, the media's perpetual rush to cover anything having to do with Whites, specifically White women, at the expense of other news and victims in other racial groups, was frustrating at best. "If this wasn't some pretty, White Southern belle, we wouldn't have heard of it at all," said Alldredge Oneby, an Albuquerque resident quoted in the *AJC* (Davis, 2005b, p. 6A). According to Tuck of the *AJC*, "before Wilbanks' disappearing act, local media attention focused on new state laws and the circumstances surrounding the deaths of two Warren County toddlers whose parents have an extensive case file with the state Division of Family and Children Services" (Tuck, 2005, p. 11A). This deserving story was completely knocked off the radar of the general news-consuming public by the "Runaway Bride" saga, available only to those determined

to seek it out. This skewing of American media values has been present for quite some time. *AJC* writer Cynthia Tucker's weighed in with the following:

> The frenzy surrounding Wilbanks' disappearance once again highlights a peculiar feature of early 21st-century American culture: a fixation on pretty, young, middle-class White women. While tens of thousands of American adults disappear every year --- some eventually turn up, safe and sound; some are never heard from again; some are recovered as corpses --- only a small sliver get the Wilbanks/Laci Peterson/Lori Hacking treatment. (Tucker, 2005, p. 6E)

A blistering report of a missing persons case very similar to that of the "Runaway Bride" was also given, representing just one instance of the inconsistencies found between coverage of cases involving Whites and those involving minorities. According to Tucker, in 2004, a young Black female was found battered and bullet-riddled in a trash bin in Queens, New York. Like Wilbanks, Stacy-Ann Sappleton was planning her wedding and was missing for three days before she was found. The difference, of course, was that Sappleton's murder received very little media coverage, despite repeated pleas for media help by her family and friends. The crime went unsolved and police currently have no suspects in the case.

Writer Mary C. Curtis of the *Observer* commented further on the interruption of other, more deserving news, blocked by the endless stream of "Runaway Bride" chatter. Criticizing the media in general, Curtis' article "Hate to say it, but some 'stories' aren't" profiled the "criminal" account of Mary Kay Letourneau and Vili Fualaau and the "silly" tale of the "Runaway Bride." "When someone blasts the media, I'm usually the first to come to our defense. Not this time," said Curtis. "Not in the case of two stories that – in the words of a bad horror movie – refuse to die" (Curtis, 2005, p. 1E). Rather than coverage ending with the discovery that Wilbanks had fled Duluth with an extreme case of cold feet, the news media hardly paused in their ongoing concentration on the case.

Asking "Why is this a story?" and declaring her newfound aversion to the words "Runaway Bride," Curtis continued with the following:

> Every day, there are truly important stories that don't lead news shows. Here are a few that merited tiny briefs in recent papers: a report on post-Sept. 11 domestic terrorist threats, Navy probes charges of religious discrimination, push for female voice in Kuwait elections stalled. Imagine the important stories pushed out entirely because of the latest nondevelopment about the Duluth, Ga. Don't make me say it. (Curtis, 2005, p. 1E)

Once again, this is the same trick utilized by both Tuck and Tucker of the *AJC*. While Curtis apparently "meant well," by calling attention to the ridiculous amounts of coverage shown both the Letourneau-Fualaau and "Runaway Bride" stories, she is also provided yet another opportunity to talk about them, call the consumer's attention to them, and likely sell more newspapers because of them.

This case stung all the more, given the fact that Wilbanks accused a minority member of kidnapping and sexual assault before finally admitting that it was all one spectacular lie. In his article "Hispanics blast Wilbanks story," *AJC* columnist Rick Badie underscored this condition, saying, "I know why people are angry and upset. A White person's alleged victimization gets instant credibility. Especially females. They can bat those pretty blue (or in Wilbanks' case, brown) eyes and accuse a male person of color of most anything" (Badie, 2005b, p. 3JJ). After ending up penniless in Albuquerque, Ms. Wilbanks called 911, telling the operator "I was kidnapped earlier this week. It was on CNN."…"It was a Hispanic man and a Caucasian woman. It happened in Duluth" (Badie, 2005b, p. 3JJ). The racial makeup of Wilbanks' supposed captors was a major factor in the story's coverage, with descriptions of a short "Hispanic" or "Latino" man with "rotten teeth" and a heavyset "Caucasian" or "White" woman with frosted blonde hair mentioned frequently within each of the reviewed publications. Often

included in this description was Wilbanks' claim that her abductors (or more specifically the Hispanic or Latino man) drove a blue "painter's" van. When asked how she had come up with the description of the White woman and Hispanic man as her "would be attackers," Wilbanks' answer came across as being rather flip:

> Maybe I watched too many cops-and-robbers movies...it is scary that it came so easy for me. That scares me to death. And I'm trying to figure out why it was so easy for me. Because I did, I gave great detail. I don't know. Can you say I work well under pressure? I don't know. (Bruner, 2005c, p. 1JJ)

According to the *AJC*, law enforcement believed her actual description originated with a White and Hispanic couple she had met and befriended on the bus ride from Georgia to Las Vegas. This false account drew heavy criticism, especially from those in the Hispanic community, and earned Wilbanks the title of "racist" from staff writers and polled citizens alike. The *AJC*, *Observer*, *Daily News* and *Tribune* reported that Hispanic citizens across the country were calling for an apology from the "Runaway Bride," including the previously mentioned New York-based group Hispanics Across America. Their president, Fernando Mateo, said that he'd like the case's prosecutor to make community service in the Hispanic community a mandatory part of any sentence Wilbanks might receive. "She needs to understand that she caused a lot of harm to Hispanics in her community and around the nation," Mateo said (Bruner, 2005a, p. 4B). The idea that Wilbanks might somehow be allowed to escape any type of punishment sent people across the country scrambling for their pens, phones and computers, intent on pressing Duluth's mayor and district attorney to act. According to the *Observer*/Associated Press' Errin Haines, Gwinnett County District Attorney Danny Porter received a good number of complaints centered on Wilbanks' false accusation of a Hispanic man. Said Porter, "They're asking, 'What would've happened if the

Albuquerque police had located this fake couple?' An unknown Hispanic male all of a sudden becomes the bogeyman" (Haines, 2005a, p. 6A). "The only good news," according to Louis of the *Daily News*, "is the authorities didn't start yanking Latinos out of blue vans all over the Southwest" (Louis, 2005, p. 3).

Wilbanks' status as a woman provided another level of reference, evaluated negatively or positively depending upon the stage of the story and the identity of the evaluator. During the time Wilbanks was initially missing (which was not addressed in the *Enquirer* or *Star*), her designation as a woman elicited intense concern for her safety and an almost instant suspicion of fiancé John Mason. In the *AJC*, Wilbanks was described as a very outgoing, excited young bride-to-be, who was "not the type that would just walk out on her friends" (Bentley, 2005, p. 9JJ). In the prime of her life, Wilbanks was regarded as athletic, funny and intelligent, but a bit naïve. According to Wilbanks' aunt Marie, "She never met a stranger. If somebody stopped her, she'd be the type to think they wanted directions and she'd give them to them" (Bentley, 2005, p. 9JJ).

Despite speculation that Wilbanks may have had "cold feet," her family insisted that "Running away was not in her character" (Hart, 2005b, p. 19). While John Mason was regarded as an "honest, outstanding, Christian gentleman" by some (Stanford & Brett, 2005, p. 1JJ), his status as the male romantic partner who was also the last person to see Jennifer Wilbanks prior to her disappearance raised suspicions as to his possible involvement. Friends and family were firm in their belief that Wilbanks would not have willingly walked out on her own wedding. "As a woman," said running mate Kris King, "if you were going to do that you wouldn't leave without your purse, without your keys, with no identification, nothing. She left with nothing" (Bentley, 2005, p. 9JJ). Escalating

media coverage simply reinforced the implication that Mason may have been negatively involved in the case, particularly when Greta Van Susteren of Fox News interviewed Mr. Mason for her live cable news show. "Obviously," said Van Susteren, "this is a story of an unusual nature. Here was a woman essentially on the eve of her marriage, a time that's supposed to be one of the happiest of her life, and she disappears" (O'Briant, 2005, p. 12A). Van Susteren, an attorney who became a media commentator for CNN during the William Kennedy Smith rape accusation case in the 1991 and was a significant force in the coverage of the Laci Peterson case, effectively interrogated Mason, accusing him in a not-so-subtle way of playing a role in Wilbanks' disappearance.

After Jennifer Wilbanks' return, the caring concern afforded her case was largely replaced with disgust for Wilbanks and sheepish apology for Mason. In an effort to prove his innocence during Wilbanks' disappearance, Mason had even taken a private polygraph test, which did little to assuage public scrutiny. His refusal to submit to a police-given polygraph on the grounds that they would not video record the test merely increased many people's suspicions. "I know my first reaction was, 'Oh, he did it,'" said Duluth resident Jessica Bennett. "'I'm sure a lot of other people thought the same way'" (Hart, 2005a, p. 32). Many Duluth residents said they regretted having suspected fiancé John Mason, and had been influenced by the recent aforementioned cases of Laci Peterson and Lori Hacking, two White women reported missing who turned out to have been murdered by their husbands. Both cases received an astounding amount of press, leaving a public poised to automatically suspect the husband or significant other in the event of a missing woman. The Wilbanks case easily fit the modern foul-play mold.

A poll conducted on Monday, May 2nd at Atlanta radio station WSB-AM (750), and detailed in the *AJC*, indicated similar antipathy toward Wilbanks. The poll titled "Should Jennifer Wilbanks face charges?" elicited a 77 percent response in favor of charges, while 23 percent favored no charges (Davis, 2005c, p. 4B). While some did not believe jail time was in order, most felt that repayment of the police search costs and some form of community service were suitable punishment. Still, there were many (other women in particular) nationwide who related to her situation and "understood" her hurried escape from her upcoming wedding. "I totally get what happened," said Pam Schlabach, a Georgia resident polled by the *AJC*. "You have a big wedding, 600 guests. The sole responsibility lands on the bride's shoulders. I can understand her freaking out" (Brett, 2005, p. 1JJ). In New Jersey, a 25-year-old fitness manager who called off her own wedding in December told the *New York Times*, "I can understand. She was probably scared, and when you're scared, you don't think rationally" (Navarro, 2005, p. 6). The article "Runaway Bride: A Product Of Our Culture?" continued along this sympathetic vein, with *Tampa Tribune* writer Judy Hill relating, "She obviously felt more comfortable being viewed as a victim. So she said, in essence, that kidnappers made her do it by spiriting her away. …Our culture encourages – and excuses – such behavior in women" (Hill, 2005, p. 1). It is in this proclamation that Hill essentially supported the very thing she gently warns against further on in the article where she stated that Wilbanks would have to live with the consequences of her actions. Given the fact that the media hold such sway over cultural norms and allowances, treating Wilbanks sympathetically and announcing that such behavior is both encouraged and excused seems only to further perpetrate it. In addition, by implying that the media are culpable

in some capacity, Hill falls back on the familiar "hindsight-reflection" that has become routine in the aftermath of a sensational story.

Many were shocked, first believing that Wilbanks' disappearance was legitimate, then outraged at Wilbanks' claim of sexual assault. Wilbanks' image as an innocent, naïve southern belle was only magnified by descriptions of her and John Mason's life together. According to the *AJC*, as devout Christians, Mason said, they lived chaste lives together, agreeing not to consummate their relationship "until they said their vows in front of God and 600 friends on April 30th" (Davis, 2005a, p. 1A). While no mention was made regarding Wilbanks' sexual virtue, it is assumed that by abstaining from sex with her own fiancé, Wilbanks is not sexually active or promiscuous. Also, the declaration that she and Mason had pledged to stay true to one another, only consummating their relationship after marriage, gives their union (and Wilbanks, especially) a somewhat "holy" quality that would have been besmirched by the evil outsider. The idea that Wilbanks, a White Christian woman, had been sexually assaulted by an "other" – a member of a minority – likely intensified concern for her plight among other Whites and Christians in particular. Said Hill, "We are inundated with images that carry the message that women's bodies have more value than our brains. That women should be treated like children, taken care of and indulged" (Hill, 2005, p. 1). It seems obvious that Wilbanks used this indoctrination to her advantage, choosing her words so as to make the most compelling story she could. Referring to Wilbanks as a "32-year-old damsel," Rick Badie related, "Some accuse the runaway bride of playing the race card. ...Wilbanks attempted to make her story stick. She made it racist, too. In Gwinnett, about one in four Hispanic males could easily have fit that description" (Badie, 2005b, p. 3JJ).

Like the *National Enquirer* and *Star*, the *AJC* took note of the case's sexual element (however false it turned out to be), culminating with the headline "Wilbanks told lurid tale of abduction, sex acts." This headline was certainly comparable to "Runaway bride spins X-rated tale," the previously mentioned headline that accompanied an article in the May 30th *National Enquirer*, as well as the article's first line: "Runway Bride Jennifer Wilbanks revealed lurid sexual fantasies in a bizarre attempt to cover up the real reason she fled just days before her wedding" (South, 2005b, p. 20). After stating that Wilbanks' hands were tied with rope and the kidnappers made her to lie on her right side on the floor of the blue van, facing the door, *AJC* writer Tasgola Bruner said that Wilbanks went into detail about the "actual" sexual assault. With the inclusion of wording such as "Jennifer stated the male did not use any force but he did not use 'foreplay' either," the *AJC* took a definite step toward the sensational, but was quick to point out that the details provided in this particular story were provided by a report released by the Albuquerque police (Bruner, 2005d, p. 8JJ). As mentioned in the literature review, this is yet another ploy used by mainstream newspapers to report often shocking details without being blamed for their inclusion. While the *Observer* mentioned the falsified sexual assault on four occasions, no effort was made to sensationalize its connection to the case; it was not included in *Observer* headlines, nor was the "assault" expanded upon in any way. The *Tribune* made one mention of the false assault only in passing (while referring to the upcoming NBC interview) and the *Times* left out the "incident" completely, mentioning only the supposed abduction. This is in direct contrast with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* who, apart from the aforementioned headline, made 12 separate mentions of the reported sexual assault.

Finally, the portrayal of Jennifer Wilbanks' case was also affected significantly by her mental health status, an additional variable that played into her standing as a White woman. While certainly a factor in the beginning of the case, Wilbanks' mental issues became of paramount importance and interest following the discovery of Wilbanks' deliberate abandonment of her fiancé and family. As mentioned earlier, Ms. Wilbanks was thought of as a stable, physically fit Christian woman by many who knew her, as evidenced by comments made to various publications. It is unclear if anyone, apart from her parents and possibly close friends, knew about Jennifer's prior trouble with the law; there were no mentions made of her arrest record until after the truth of the "abduction" was revealed. Also, according to Rev. Alan Jones, the family had no inkling of fear or anxiety regarding the wedding on the part of Jennifer Wilbanks (Aguayo, 2005, p. 5A). It would seem that no one ever thought that a "happy, excited bride" would desert her fiancé, family and friends without warning, leaving them in anguish for three days. In any case, the events surrounding Wilbanks' disappearance, return, and actions thereafter definitely called into question Wilbanks' mental state. Along with the popular opinion that Wilbanks was mentally incapacitated in some way, the admittance of Wilbanks to an inpatient treatment program and her own claim of experiencing various mental and emotional "issues" made her apparent "illness" a virtual certainty. Quoted by the *Observer* on May 6th, a statement written by Wilbanks herself declared, "Each day I am understanding more about who I am and the issues that influenced me to respond inappropriately" (Yee, 2005b, p. 3A). On June 17th, the *Daily News* discussed various released excerpts of the upcoming NBC interview, with one in particular pointing toward Wilbanks' lack of mental health. Wilbanks was quoted as saying, "That night, in that

moment, it really became a life-or-death decision for me. So I got on my bus…it's the best mistake I ever made. It allowed me to realize that I desperately needed help" (Hutchinson, 2005, p. 3). Every publication evaluated in this study had some form of commentary on Ms. Wilbanks' mental issues, dedicating significant column space to discuss them. Rampant speculation ensued, a multitude of "experts" were allowed to weigh in, and Wilbanks' case was compared to other "similar" cases.

Speculation on Wilbanks' mental health revolved around two key positions: 1) Wilbanks is mentally unstable and needs psychological help; or 2) Wilbanks is simply playing the "victim" in order to avoid punishment for her crimes. A possible third (but rather unpopular stance) was 3) Who cares? Tommy Tomlinson, staff writer for the *Observer*, was one of the few in this category; Tomlinson was more concerned with fiancé John Mason. Said Tomlinson:

> The heck with the runaway bride. I'm more interested in the groom. The bottom line on the bride is simple. She went a little psycho…To explain it away, she claimed she was kidnapped. Criminal? Maybe. Temporarily insane? Undoubtedly. But people freak out all the time. Wilbanks did it on a grand scale, but what she did was a common thing. The uncommon part of this story is her fiancé, John Mason. (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 1B)

Tomlinson's high opinion of Mason's "taking a risk for love" making him the "sanest man in the room" (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 1B) was not shared by many; most people thought he should be the one running for the hills, not Wilbanks (South, 2005a, p. 20).

In any case, everyone seemed to have his or her own opinion concerning Wilbanks' mental status, making the "Runaway Bride" case a hot topic. Decisions on the matter were not limited according to publication type, or even publication, spanning a broad range of accusatory and sympathetic interpretation among both tabloids and newspapers. While the *Star* portrayed Wilbanks as an off the wall, slightly delusional

petty thief by displaying her numerous mug shots, the *Enquirer* designated her as both "obsessed" (as mentioned earlier) (Gentile, 2005, p. 48) and "selfish" (Mowling, 2005, p. 17) as well as "overwhelmed" (South, 2005b, p. 20) and "panicked" (Mowling, 2005, p. 16). The *Times* reported that Wilbanks was "nervous" (Hart, 2005a, p. 32) but quoted John Mason as telling Fox News, "Jennifer is not crazy" (Hart, 2005c, p. 20). The *Observer* referred to Wilbanks as "distressed" (Aguayo, 2005, p. 5A) and "silly Jennifer" (Rivenbark, 2005, p. 4Y). Finally, the *AJC* contained a multitude of opinions as to the mental state and competency of Jennifer Wilbanks, varying from protestations of her functional innocence to claims of premeditated trickery. In her own written statement, Wilbanks was quoted in the *AJC* as saying, "I could not wait to be Mrs. John Mason." "I was simply running from myself and from certain fears controlling my life" (Ghirardini & Stanford, 2005b, p. 1JJ). *AJC* staff writers Rosalind Bentley and Jennifer Brett offered the following take on Georgian sentiment regarding the Wilbanks case in the article "Reaction: 'She's alive and well, that's what matters'":

> Georgia residents expressed a range of opinions on the Jennifer Wilbanks case Saturday. Some sympathized with a young woman troubled enough to concoct an elaborate cover-up meant to hide a simple conceit: She was just too stressed to get married. Others complained Wilbanks could have worked out her issues without putting her family through such public heartache --- and without tying up the considerable time and resources of law enforcement and volunteers spent looking for her. (Bentley & Brett, 2005, p. 10A)

The most obvious attitude, "Jennifer needs help" was echoed from numerous sources in several different stories. The majority of people responding in this manner also expressed their sympathy for Wilbanks and her "misfortune," while some felt that Wilbanks was at least partly to blame for her own hardship. One of the most notable comments came from loyal fiancé John Mason. As quoted in the May 3rd edition of the

Charlotte Observer, Mason proclaimed his commitment to Jennifer and their marriage, *but*, "Some things need to happen first, and we need to talk about a few things and she needs some treatment, for lack of a better word," he said (Odum, 2005, p. 6A). Other respondents varied from law enforcement personnel to average residents. For example, FBI Special Agent Bill Elwell was quoted as saying "The stresses of the event, the planning and all that goes into planning this big event just got the better of her," giving both an excuse and an explanation of Wilbanks' behavior (Stanford & Bentley, 2005, p. 1A). Mayor Shirley Lasseter also gave substantial monetary leeway to Wilbanks, reported in the *Observer* as citing her possible mental troubles and the city's own eagerness to resolve the issue. "I would love to hear from the family and know there might have been a problem and know we should work with this lady on some recourse other than legally," Lasseter said (Odum, 2005, p. 6A). Originally looking into suing Wilbanks for the estimated upwards of $60,000 cost of the search, the city of Duluth ended up writing off about $30,000 in search costs and accepting Wilbanks' apology and paltry payment of $13,250. These costs do not include the reported $10,000 spent by other state and county agencies. Said Lasseter, "We're very appreciative they were willing to give us the $13,000. We would have certainly welcomed the entire amount that covered all of our employees but we are ready to get this behind us" (Yee, 2005a, p. 8A). The *Daily News* reported on May 3rd that the Duluth DA was still "mulling over" whether to file charges against Wilbanks, while "the feds simply gave Wilbanks an FBI cap to wear on the trip back to Georgia and said they have no plans to prosecute." Said an angry Errol Lewis, "This kind of leniency undermines public safety from coast to coast" (Louis, 2005, p. 3).

Compassionate overtones were suspended, however, by GBI Special Agent Carter Brank, a source quoted in the *AJC* on Tuesday, May 3rd. According to Brank, Wilbanks "maintained her innocence" when interviewed by GBI agents the day before. Said Brank, "She didn't really feel she'd done anything wrong. She was somewhat remorseful. She didn't come to a full apology" (Ghirardini & Stanford, 2005a, p. 1A). Ms. Wilbanks also did not appear to be "particularly contrite over all the hubbub dedicated to finding her" (Ruth, 2005, p. 2), in the opinion of the *Tampa Tribune*, while *AJC* columnist Rick Badie reported receiving a letter calling Wilbanks a "selfish, self-centered brat who thinks of nobody but herself" (Badie, 2005a, p. 3JJ). In an earlier article, Badie declared Wilbanks to be a criminal undeserving of the media attention, as well as the resulting monetary profit. Said Badie, the "Runaway Bride avoided the media... She hired an attorney and let a church pastor do the heavy lifting. They offered perfunctory apologies that failed to appease a community hoodwinked into thinking Wilbanks was a victim of foul play" (Badie, 2005c, p. 3JJ). Ryan Kelly, a café owner in Duluth, was likeminded, first telling the *Observer* that he was glad Wilbanks turned out to be okay: "But that being said, this is one of the most selfish and self-centered acts I've ever seen. We saw her parents, and you could see the anguish in their eyes. It was terrible" (Aguayo, 2005, p. 5A). Finally, Errol Louis of the *Daily News* summed up the nation's feelings in general: "Unless Wilbanks can prove she's abused, or insane, she ought to go to prison, if only to serve as a warning to the growing number of hoaxers who falsely report crimes" (Louis, 2005, p. 3).

Controversy regarding Wilbanks' mental stability continued into her sentencing, with a definite line separating those who supported her punishment as just and those who

felt the sentence was too harsh. Monica Mears of Duluth was quoted in the June 3rd edition of the *AJC* as saying, "If there are serious mental and emotional issues she's dealing with, it might be too harsh. I have a great deal of sympathy for those who deal with such issues. Many times they're misunderstood." In the same article, Tommy Connell of Valdosta took a firmer stance, declaring, "With no jail time, I thought she got off pretty easy. She really came out smelling like a rose" (Ghirardini, 2005c, p. 1JJ). A litany of "experts" were also called in by each of the study's publications and allowed to give their opinions on Wilbanks' mental status. While some were actual therapists, psychologists and the like, others were laymen, experienced with the stresses and anxieties that come with the wedding ceremony. Cindy Cote, a Charlotte wedding consultant, was quoted in the *Observer* article, "Florists, consultants, ministers know cold feet common wedding biz." According to Cote, "last-second cancellations and jittery grooms and brides come with the territory." While there is no "concrete proof" that more people are being abandoned at the altar, "it sure seems more likely nowadays" (Kelly, 2005, p. 4B). Cote continued,

> (Runaway) brides don't face the opposition they used to. People think it's better to say, 'I just can't do this.' Before, people would think that my parents have spent all of this money (and then get married) and be miserable for years. (Kelly, 2005, p. 4B)

The *Star* and *Enquirer* chose to use more professional types for their experts, using unspecified doctors in the *Star* and a psychotherapist in the *Enquirer*. "Docs" in *Star*'s May 30th issue hypothesized that Wilbanks might have Graves eye disease, a thyroid disorder that supposedly can make eyes appear "prominent" and "cause erratic behavior" ("Runaway bride caught in the headlights!" 2005, p. 30). On a different track, Hollywood Hills psychotherapist Suzanne Lopez spoke on Wilbanks' supposed obsession

with Julia Roberts. Lopez told the *Enquirer*, "I think she is imitating someone else instead of creating her own life. She has created a reality based on a person she wants to mimic and not taking the responsibility of being herself" (Gentile, 2005, p. 48).

This type of diagnosis was repeated many times throughout Wilbanks' newspaper coverage. The *Tampa Tribune* consulted author Charles Spielberger, professor and director of the Center for Research in Behavioral Medicine and Health Psychology at the University of South Florida, who felt that Wilbanks' wedding stress "caused her to feel anxious and angry, leading to a flight mechanism." Said Spielberger, "As nearly as I can tell, this was not a wedding but a circus" (Koehn, 2005, p. 1). Psychologist Stuart Vyse from Connecticut College and Dr. Charles Raison, professor and psychiatrist at Emory University, served as experts for the *AJC*, giving two different analyses of Jennifer Wilbanks' unusual escape and circumstances. Said Vyse, "It seems like she realized that so much momentum had been built up, money spent, invitations sent, that she knew she couldn't say, 'I'm not so sure about all this,'"..."Just taking off like she did might have seemed like the only option" (Hendrick, 2005, p. 10A). Dr. Raison had a more dire diagnosis, believing that Wilbanks had "more than just a case of cold feet." According to the *AJC*, Raison hypothesized that "if he were discussing her case or a similar one with new doctors, he would speculate she had or had come down with manic-depressive disorder, which usually strikes people in their late 20s and early 30s" (Hendrick, 2005, p. 10A). Joan Swirsky, a Long Island, NY, psychotherapist who, according to the *AJC*, harshly criticized Wilbanks via a Web posting, was "withering" in her professional assessment. "From this distance," said Swirsky in an e-mail to the *AJC*, "Jennifer appears to be an immensely self-indulgent, narcissistic woman" (Davis, 2005c, p. 4B).

The *Tribune*, *Times* and *AJC* also included remarks from unofficial "experts," such as wedding planners, dressmakers, and even ex- brides-to-be, with the *Times* forgoing the use of "professional experts" altogether. As stated earlier, these "experts" (featured in the *Times*) were largely sympathetic to the frazzled Wilbanks, saying they felt "sorry for her" and that "A wedding for 500 to 600 people, like the one planned for Ms. Wilbanks, can only intensify the stress" (Navarro, 2005, p. 6). Riza Hequibal, a wedding planner in Duluth, Georgia, also offered the following cautionary advice: "Prioritize, communicate what's important to you. If you don't, the wedding is going to run you over" (Navarro, 2005, p. 6). Ex- bride-to-be and writer Rachel Safier and Rosanna McCollough, editor-in-chief of WeddingChannel.com, were consulted by both the *Times* (May 6th) and *Observer* (May 4th) for their insight on the subject. Author of the book *There Goes the Bride*, Safier proved to be yet another sympathetic woman with a similar experience. The stress of planning a wedding can become unbearable, said Safier, whose own fiancé called off the wedding just as she was experiencing similar doubts. "I'm sure she felt lost in this whole planning process and started thinking, 'This is about hors d'oeuvres and swatches and not about me,'" she said of Wilbanks (Haines, 2005b, p. 2A). McCullough weighed in on the difficulties surrounding the cancellation or even postponement of a wedding:

> The public acknowledgement that this much-anticipated event is no longer going to be happening can be physically and emotionally exhausting, draining and embarrassing. And yet it is appropriate for it to be handled with the sensitivity it requires and with as much graciousness as possible. (Haines, 2005b, p. 2A)

Each of these observations give an explanation for what may have contributed to Wilbanks' unconventional actions, but more importantly they provide excuses for the "Runaway Bride" in asserting her supposed innocence.

With regards to research question five, photographs and illustration were also a frequent point of commonality, with similar and identical pictures featured in both the tabloids and newspapers analyzed within this study. The *AJC*, *Times* and *Star* magazine were the primary publications featuring original or exclusive photographs, while the *Observer* and *Enquirer* contained a large amount of photos attributed to the Associated Press. As mentioned earlier, this lack of variety in pictures as well as information speaks to the use of newswires, borrowed data and stock photos.

A portrait-style photo of a posed and smiling Jennifer Wilbanks was prominently displayed in five of the seven publications and was easily the most recognizable picture used throughout the "Runaway Bride" saga. In this picture, Wilbanks appears to be relaxed, casual and completely innocuous, very much the average all-American girl. This picture was presented during initial news coverage of the "missing" Wilbanks, used as an identifying image for concerned news consumers to watch out for, was featured on the "missing" posters and flyers that were exhibited throughout the Duluth and Gainesville area of Georgia and became the "stock" photo used to refer to the "Runaway Bride" case. More to the point, this picture introduced Wilbanks to the world, providing an image that has since risen to near-symbolic status; Wilbanks' face is instantly recognizable to the public, in no small part due to Wilbanks' most unusual eyes. These eyes, Wilbanks' most prominent facial feature, were repeatedly referred to in the majority this study's publications, described Wilbanks' look as "doe-eyed" in the *National Enquirer*, "deer in the headlights," in the *Tribune*, "wide eyed" in the *Star* and *New York Daily News*, "bug-eyed" in the *Observer* and "pop-eyed" in the *AJC*. This picture also seems to be utilized more often in the beginning of "missing" newspaper coverage than after Jennifer's tale

was proven to be false. The only other photograph used in both the tabloid and newspaper formats was a picture of a blanket-covered Jennifer Wilbanks being led by Albuquerque police officers through the airport to her return flight to Georgia. Within this study alone, the *Enquirer*, *Daily News*, *Times*, *Observer*, and *AJC* all featured this photograph at some point in their coverage. This photo features a stern-looking female officer and a male officer who appears to be smiling while speaking to an off-camera person. The male officer is holding Wilbanks' arm at the left wrist, while Wilbanks holds onto the edge of a pink, blue, red and orange-striped blanket, referred to as a towel in some reports. Wilbanks, then exposed as a fraud, appears both afraid and guilty, as evidenced by her desire to keep her face covered.

Various other pictures present included what appeared to be a candid couple shot of a happy Wilbanks and Mason, numerous pictures of various Mason and Wilbanks family members, and a mixture of "man/woman-on-the-street" photos of various polled Georgia residents. Along with the portrait and blanket-covered picture of Jennifer Wilbanks, several photographs and illustrations stood out as most significant, effectively providing a visual timeline of this case. These photos (most of which appear in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*) best demonstrate the use of illustration among the seven publications to both impact and inform the reader. First among these is a picture featured in the *AJC* during the search phase of the "Runaway Bride" case. The large picture, appearing on the front page of the April 28th edition, was taken during daylight hours and shows several people in the background (men and women) searching a field area. In the foreground, a wire fence and gate has a "missing" poster of Jennifer Wilbanks taped to its post. The poster features the aforementioned portrait of Wilbanks, along with a physical

description and a phone number. The *AJC* caption reads as follows: "By day's end, the volunteer force helping police search for the missing runner had grown to about 250 people." This picture aptly shows the intense concern among Duluth residents for Wilbanks' safety, so much so that after starting with a team of 12 searchers, volunteers came out in force. This photo also parallels the rush of sympathy and interest that swept across the country on Wilbanks' behalf.

Another large photograph run on April 29th, and appearing on the first page of the "Gwinnett News" section of the *AJC*, depicts the enormous influx of media attention given to this case. Taken directly outside the home where Mason and Wilbanks lived (while Wilbanks' was still thought missing) the photo shows a jumble of television cameras and tripods, news vans and reporters and a labyrinth of wires, cables and cords. The caption: "Television coverage of bride-to-be Jennifer Wilbanks' disappearance has been intense, evidenced by the number of cameras outside John Mason's home" recognizes the nationwide media interest that this case generated. One might observe that no mention was made of other non-television media's presence and response, most notably the *AJC*'s own. This exclusion reflects the now characteristic lack of responsibility the *AJC* has shown throughout its coverage of the "Runaway Bride" story, and its commitment to send all attribution for tabloidization elsewhere, preferably to television outlets. A third notable photo also included in the same issue of the *AJC* shows the emotional scene of a prayer service held for Jennifer Wilbanks at her family church. Friends and family appear in this large, centered photograph, with one young male signing the service registry in the foreground, and two women embracing each other behind him. This photo, with its funeral-like atmosphere, brings to mind the darkening

thoughts of those concerned for Jennifer – still missing, the chances of her being found alive growing weaker with each passing day. It also depicts the strong religious faith that those in the Wilbanks and Mason family possessed, and likely moved all readers concerned and religiously likeminded to pray for Wilbanks' safe return.

On May 1st, the day the Wilbanks hoax was revealed to the world, reaction among many consisted of shock, surprise and anger. One small photograph, featured on page one of the Gwinnett News section of the *AJC*, most aptly illustrates public sentiment: a large sign with the words "MISSING. PLEASE HELP!" posted to an anonymous wall was altered by an unknown person or persons. Seemingly done on two separate occasions, the word "NOT" was added above the word "missing," and the word "missing" was scratched out in marker. The resulting messages "NOT MISSING. PLEASE HELP!" and "PLEASE HELP!" are a definite gauge for the feelings of Georgia residents and people nationwide, as well as an early indicator of Wilbanks' designation as a mentally ill individual. May 4th brought yet another notable example in the *AJC*, with the inclusion of a large picture of a group of angry-looking Hispanic men standing outside the Wilbanks-Mason home, conducting a news conference. One man stands talking at a podium mounted with numerous microphones, while a line of men stand to his right. It is unknown how many people attended the conference, as the photo takes in only a small portion of the scene. The caption reads as follows: "Fernando Mateo, president of the New York-based group Hispanics Across America, calls for an apology from runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks for saying a Hispanic man abducted her." This picture is the first one included in any of the publications depicting the response of any person of color to the results of this case.

Another picture printed in the June 3rd edition of the *New York Times* brings the legal portion of this case to a close with a photo of Jennifer Wilbanks at her hearing in the Gwinnett County Superior Court. A similar photograph appeared that same day on the front page of the *AJC*. Wilbanks appears rather disheveled, flushed from crying, and dressed in a black pair of sweat pants and a matching sweatshirt. She stands alongside her lawyer, Lydia Sartain, and appears to be wearing her engagement ring. Included with the picture is a caption that reads: "Jennifer Wilbanks, in court, was accused of lying to the police," with a credit for the photo given to James Nedock of the *Gwinnett Daily Post.* This picture intimates that the justice system has handled this case, as it confirms that Wilbanks has indeed stood trial and been sentenced for her crime. One last scene appears in both the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (June 16th and June 22nd) and the *New York Daily News* (June 14th and 17th), with three photographs taken with three different angles and poses, but all in the same location – the set of NBC's news magazine show "Dateline." These are the final "timeline" photos within the dates analyzed for this study. Pictures one and two feature a formally dressed Wilbanks, Mason and Katie Couric, taken from different angles during the actual "Dateline" interview. Photo one was taken over the shoulder of Couric and shows a head-on view of Wilbanks and Mason, while photo two gives a mid-room view, with Wilbanks and Mason seated on the left side of the photo and Couric on the right. In both pictures Mason and Couric appear to be smiling, while a seemingly relaxed Wilbanks speaks. The third picture features the grinning trio of Mason, Wilbanks and Couric, who look to be standing outside of some type of newsroom. The three are dressed semi-casually and are posed standing very close

to one another. All seem comfortable in each other's company. These photographs likely added to the frustration and anger of many who felt that Jennifer Wilbanks was let off easy.

Two noteworthy instances of tabloid-like photography and sensational illustration were found during this study; one appeared in the tabloid publication *Star* magazine, the other in "quality" newspaper, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. As mentioned earlier, *Star* magazine featured the mug shot of Jennifer Wilbanks, a picture unused by any other publication in this study. The mug shot has become a classic tactic used by tabloid media, one that for some reason is largely taboo and unused by the mainstream print media; this is despite their unapologetic use of material from police reports, 911 calls and court records. *Star* magazine took the classic mug shot even further by including the mug shots of all of Jennifer Wilbanks' previous arrests, which according to *Star* magazine number at five. All photos but one include the infamous Wilbanks stare, as she is caught blinking or with her eyes closed. Wilbanks' last arrest, depicted in *Star*'s report as occurring in August 1998, actually featured an apparently happy Wilbanks, who smiles broadly for the camera. The sensational quality of such a pictorial is undeniable, given the extensive commentary regarding Wilbanks' facial appearance and the appeal of access given to something that is usually undisclosed.

Finally, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* utilizes two illustrative means that originated within the tabloid industry: the diagram and the reconstruction of events. Presented in the May 1st issue, the *AJC* featured a detailed timeline of Jennifer Wilbanks' voyage from Atlanta to Las Vegas and later to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Accompanying it was a large map of the United States, complete with dates and times of

Wilbanks' bus stops and transfer stops, which cities Wilbanks traveled through, and a color-coded map key. This tactic, which is now used media-wide, is a way to further sensationalize case coverage, providing a colorful draw to readers.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

With abundant examples of tabloid formatting and reporting found in the *National Enquirer*, *Star* magazine, and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, along with more limited – but equally valid – instances present in the *Tampa Tribune*, *New York Times* and *Charlotte Observer*, it is clear that there has been significant utilization of traditional "tabloid" formatting and reporting tactics in tabloid and newspaper coverage of the "Runaway Bride" case. While the *Enquirer*, *Star*, and *New York Daily News* were found to contain elements typical of the traditional tabloid, it is this study's newspapers – the *New York Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Charlotte Observer* and *Tampa Tribune* – that displayed the striking tendency towards tabloid reporting techniques. Classic tabloid practices such as screaming headlines, colorful large illustrations and photography, flashy wording, use of police records and the reenactment have become commonplace among those designated as "serious" publications – so much so that these tactics are now deigned by many as an acceptable and even necessary part of newspaper reporting methodology.

As mentioned earlier, newspapers within this study were found to comprehensively point toward the extensive coverage of the "Runaway Bride" by other media outlets, such as television, tabloids and the Internet, all while failing to admit their own involvement in the excessive coverage of this case. Several newspapers reported on

the "tabloid-like" elements as contained in these other media formats, utilizing a classic newspaper tactic that allows them to profit from sensational, attention-getting details without being held responsible for them. Other features used by this study's newspapers, such as discussions of Wilbanks' prior police record, the map illustration of Wilbanks' escape from Duluth and the case's comparison to other sensational cases from the past and present (providing further opportunity to draw in the consumer and gain recycled profit), each represent material once reserved for the "trashy" tabloid.

Newspapers such as the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *Tampa Tribune* created their own sensational stories through flashy wording and outrageous statements made by various staff reporters and columnists, further blurring the line between what is presented as news and what is recognized as opinion or entertainment. Of the 91 total newspaper articles analyzed as part of this study, 23 were found to be of an opinion-based nature, resulting in a 25% inclusion of editorial material among the four newspapers. This may be considered a rather large reportorial segment, given the traditional view of newspapers as the purveyors of facts, necessary information and serious news.

The findings of this study suggest a sort of shift from the strict parameters of news and entertainment to the blended product often referred to as "newszak" or "infotainment." The best examples of this conversion within this study were tabloid *New York Daily News* and the newspapers *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *Tampa Tribune*. While known as a popular tabloid and two mainstream newspapers respectively, the *NYD*, *AJC* and *Tribune* seemed to swap media roles during the coverage of this story. The *Daily News*' coverage of the "Runaway Bride" was quite conservative, providing only one example of traditional tabloid practices. While there were two editorial articles

– giving the *NYD* a 33% ranking in opinion-based articles – both were tasteful, tame and as mentioned previously, uncharacteristic of the quintessential tabloid. The *AJC* and *Tribune* on the other hand presented "Runaway Bride" newspaper coverage that was much more consistent with that of a tabloid. The *AJC* and *Tribune* published 16 and 3 editorial articles respectively, resulting in 27% and 43% opinion-based reporting for each newspaper. These percentages, like the average percentage for the total "quality" newspaper articles analyzed within this study, are considerable. The tone of the editorials contained in these two papers had a distinct tabloid-like quality, with columnists like Rick Badie and Daniel Ruth providing sensationalist commentary that could easily double for tabloid content. With the growing use of speculation, titillation and diversion, news seems to be increasingly based on entertainment or sensational values, a trend that in itself speaks toward the existence of tabloidization in the U.S. print media.

Finally, there seems to be a widespread acceptance of such tactics that were once dismissed as unethical tabloid ploys; now rather than being referred to as "tabloidization" by those who are actually using these techniques, the use of elements such as bold fonts and simplified wording are considered to be attractive to the consumer, necessary marketing stratagems, and most importantly the norm. As shown within this study, there was no newspaper that did not contain tabloidization cues in some form or another, yet, numerous referrals were made to the "excessive," "lewd" and "ridiculous" coverage of the "Runaway Bride" as contained in other mediums. Most significant is the fact that amongst all of the ongoing blaming and finger-pointing for the beginnings of tabloidization, as well as its perpetuation, there was only one instance of one newspaper

(mildly) criticizing the "Runaway Bride" coverage of another; the more disparaging remarks were reserved specifically for television and tabloid outlets.

I believe that tabloidization most certainly exists within the American print media and that the commonalities between tabloid and newspaper coverage will continue to become increasingly similar. Just as it does in television, the Internet and radio, tabloidization has taken a strong hold in the American print media that seems unlikely to fade or be cast out. However, unlike these other media, print media – more specifically newspapers – continue to play the pious disseminator of serious news and information on one hand while eagerly delving into the tabloidization trough on the other. The quest for profit seems to have taken over any reservations the print media elite might have had, and they have instead elected to boost revenue by whatever means work best. Tabloidization, while not necessarily designated as such, continues to be a real, compelling force in today's U.S. print media, as this study shows.

Limitations

Although based on information gleaned through an extensive literature review, an examination of previous relevant studies, and the application of numerous compatible theories and ideological material, the makeup of this study suggests several significant limitations. Durham & Kellner caution that theories, while providing a way of seeing, may also ignore or leave vague other important elements (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 4). For every theory that supports a desired position, there is likely another that refutes it, giving no one theory or method the definitive last word. By choosing specific theories and ideologies as a foundation for this study, there is the possibility that incorrect or biased conclusions may result.

Secondly, to quote Altheide, "Research is a social process. The social and cultural environments in which one operates as an investigator contribute to how one views research problems, data sources, and methodological approaches" (Altheide, 1996, p. 4). Due to the nature of this study, its results may be difficult to duplicate. Given the central importance of researcher interpretation, another researcher may have different results. As mentioned earlier, ethnographic content analysis, like qualitative content analysis, is rarely done in expectation of broad generalization. There is no attempt to oversimplify tabloidization's place in the U.S. mass media – this paper represents a case study only.

Finally it must be reiterated that both the designation of materials as "news" or "entertainment" as well as the examination of newswire relationships within the seven publications' "Runaway Bride" coverage was a problematic process, adding to this study's limitations. Aside from the obvious editorials and weekly columns, there were several articles in the various publications that seemed to possess both news and entertainment qualities, representing the current blurring of the line between the two sensitivities. The labeling of these articles as being either one or the other would likely change, depending upon the person making the choice. Examining articles for newswire information also proved to be difficult. While some publications (most notably the *Charlotte Observer*) prominently displayed their affiliations with a particular newswire or newswire reporter, there were others that did not. By utilizing various search engines, the articles designated within this study as being aligned with newswires or newswire information were found to include newswire credits, even though most articles did not provide this information in their original reports. It stands to reason that many of these

articles were syndicated via newswire after their initial publication; however it was not possible with the resources at my disposal to ascertain this detail one way or the other. While newswires such as the Associated Press and Knight-Ridder have searchable databases, these resources are unfortunately not available to the average person; resources such as these would have proved invaluable, particularly when examining articles with unknown resources such as those appearing in the *Tampa Tribune*.

Suggestions for future research

It is entirely possible that America's "serious" newspapers are in fact taking up tabloid-type stories and using it to sell their own non-tabloid papers, thus furthering the spread of tabloidization. Although the "Runaway Bride" saga began via serious channels, it quickly devolved into a media circus free for all. As there were no leads, nor any trace as to where Wilbanks had gone, rumor, gossip and innuendo became clues and facts…all of which smacks of the stereotypical supermarket tabloid story. Efforts by serious newspapers to attribute tabloidization to other media, such as magazines, tabloids and television were found throughout coverage analyzed within this study, making the abundant newspaper utilization of tabloid tactics all the more obvious.

With resources and time permitting, an expanded version of this study would likely shed more light on the tabloidization phenomenon. More tabloids and newspapers could be analyzed for coverage of the "Runaway Bride" case, encompassing a larger time span. An interesting follow-up question might be "Which publications continued coverage after Wilbanks' sentencing?" and "What was their coverage?" With more extensive examples of similar newspaper-tabloid coverage, tabloidization and its effects on "elite" media will gain greater acknowledgement.

Other media formats might also be analyzed for the coverage of the "Runaway Bride" case, which would provide a beneficial look at tabloidization's effect on the American media at large. Popular talk radio programming and the booming population of Internet blogs present distinctive sites for examination of the tabloidization phenomena, which are very likely to offer unique opportunities and data yet to be utilized by other researchers. Questions like "Could talk radio or Internet blogs be influenced by tabloidization?" or "Did Internet blogs or talk radio effect the either the coverage or popular response to coverage of the 'Runaway Bride?'" would likely be very informative as to tabloidization's presence in mainstream and alternative media.

If additional examinations such as these are undertaken, this will be a significant development in the battle between traditional and alternative journalism in several ways: It will be a substantial chink in the armor of supercilious journalism critics, adding legitimacy to the content and practices of the tabloid. It will add further voice to the idea of American media transference, or, the active homogenization of American media channels by the sharing of content. It will point to a further "breakdown" in the line between news and entertainment. Overall, it will advance the acceptance of tabloidization as an actual, potent force in today's media.

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Tuck, A. (2005, May 7). Wilbanks story a natural in era of 24-hour newscasts. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* p. 11A.

Tucker, C. (2005, May 8). Our opinion: Media blackout for this bride. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* p. 6E.

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Yee, D. (2005a, June 1). Bride to pay $13,250 for search costs. *Charlotte Observer,* p. 8A.
Yee, D. (2005b, May 6). Runaway bride explains, sort of. *Charlotte Observer,* p. 3A.

Appendix A

Protocol for tracking article coverage of the "Runaway Bride" case

1) Date of article:
2) Article #:
3) Location of article:
4) Size of article:
5) Author:
6) Headline:
7) Article sources/Experts:
8) Message/emphasis of article:
9) Comparison to other cases:
10) Race issues:
11) Any tabloid tactics?
    a) Sensational words/imaging/comparisons:
    b) Celebrity alignment:
    c) TV/Media mentions:
    d) Unnamed sources:
    e) Mental comments:
    f) Police record:

Appendix B

Protocol for tracking illustration/photo use in the "Runaway Bride" case

1) Photo #:
2) Newspaper source:
3) Date:
4) Location:
5) Size:
6) Photo caption:
7) Article related to photo:
8) Article sources:
9) Photo sources:
10) Photo description:
11) Scene:

Appendix C

Newspaper and tabloid articles analyzed within study*

*Articles found to be locally produced ("Local") are designated below.

*Articles found to be of newswire origin ("Newswire"), containing newswire information or syndicated via newswire have been designated below.

*Articles found to be opinion oriented or of an editorial nature ("Op-Ed") are designated below.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Local

Bentley, R. (2005, May 26). Runaway Bride: Sampling finds support for fines, not felony charge. Page 1JJ
Bentley, R. (2005, April 28). Some wedding invitees join search for woman. Page 9JJ
Bentley, R., & Brett, J. (2005, May 1). Reaction: 'She's alive and well, that's what matters.' Page 10A
Brett, J. (2005, May 1). Runaway Bride: 'Jennifer needs help'. Page 1JJ
Bruner, T. (2005, May 4). Hispanics blast Wilbanks' story; leader wants apology from runaway bride. Page 4B
Bruner, T. (2005, May 24). Porter will 'discuss' runaway bride case. Page 1JJ
Bruner, T. (2005, May 27). Runaway Bride: DA gives Wilbanks deadline to surrender. Page 1JJ
Bruner, T. (2005, May 11). Runaway Bride: Wilbanks in treatment facility. Page 1JJ
Bruner, T. (2005, May 26). Runaway bride will face music. Page 1A
Bruner, T. (2005, June 22). Wedding plans now up in the air. Page 1JJ
Bruner, T. (2005, June 21). Wilbanks fled from 'imperfect world'. Page 1JJ
Bruner, T. (2005, June 1). Wilbanks pays city $13,249; payment covers a third of expenses for search. Page 1JJ
Bruner, T. (2005, June 22). Wilbanks tells side of story; Interview contradicts statements to officials. Page 1B
Bruner, T. (2005, May 12). Wilbanks told lurid tale of abduction, sex acts. Page 8JJ
Cook, R. (2005, May 3). Finding the missing inexact science. Page 4B
Davis, M. (2005, May 2). Choice puzzles Albuquerque; 'that's the million-dollar question,' police rep says. Page 6A
Davis, M. (2005, May 3). Story of bride flight captivates nation. Page 4B
Ghirardini, J. (2005, May 14). Got cold feet? 'High Tailin' hot sauce just what you need. Page 1JJ
Ghirardini, J. (2005, June 4). Jittery bride-to-be spells green for retailers. Page 2E
Ghirardini, J. (2005, April 28). No sign of bride-to-be; search yields no clues; police go door to door. Page 1JJ

Ghirardini, J. (2005, May 10). Runaway Bride: Restitution negotiations under way. Page 1JJ
Ghirardini, J. (2005, May 5). Wilbanks hires criminal attorney. Page 1JJ
Ghirardini, J. (2005, June 3). Wilbanks reaction: Respondents split on ruling. Page 1JJ
Ghirardini, J., & Bentley, R. (2005, April 29). Anguish, mystery deepen; search widens as wedding day nears for missing bride-to-be. Page 1A
Ghirardini, J., & Bentley, R. (2005, April 30). Search halts as wedding gives way to prayer, pleas. Page 1A
Ghirardini, J., & Stanford, D. D. (2005, May 3). 'Breaking it off never crossed my mind'. Page 1A
Ghirardini, J., & Stanford, D. D. (2005, May 6). Runaway Bride: Wilbanks issues apology in absentia. Page 1JJ
Hairston, J. B. (2005, May 1). The call to the wedding singer: 'I'm just a nervous, anxious, excited bride this week'. Page 11A
Hendrick, B. (2005, May 1). Pressure: 'Just taking off like she did might have seemed like the only option'. Page 10A
Ho, R. (2005, June 16). Wilbanks, publisher say 'I do'; 'Runaway bride' stands to cash in on her cold feet. Page 1A
Mungin, L. (2005, May 1). Fallout: 'It is premature to talk about criminal charges, but I do have questions'. Page 10A
Mungin, L. (2005, June 3). Felony plea deal lets runaway bride walk. Page 1A
Murray. (2005, May 1). TV media: 'Two categories of journalism: What we need to hear [and] this stuff that pays the bills'. Page A12
O'Briant, D. (2005, April 29). Lost jogger spurs media nationwide; networks, cable, web vie for story. Page 12A
Plummer, D., & Mungin, L. (2005, May 2). Bride's flight takes toll; search 'wasn't cheap,' police say. Page 1A
Reid, S. (2005, May 1). Runaway bride: 'Nervous, tired' on plane. Page 12A
Reid, S. (2005, May 8). Wilbanks, Duluth talk money. Page 9A
Runaway bride: 'The best mistake I ever made'. (2005, June 18). Page 11JJ
Sager, B. (2005, May 2). To church, bride-to-be 'never lost'. Page 1JJ
Simpson, D. (2005, May 2). Family secluded after end to ordeal. Page 6A
Stanford, D. D., Bentley, R., & Ghirardini, J. (2005, May 1). 'She got cold feet': Found safe, bride admits kidnap hoax. Page 1A
Stanford, D. D., & Brett, J. (2005, April 29). Speculation turning grim. Page 1JJ
The 911 call: 'I was kidnapped earlier this week. It was on CNN.' (2005, May 1). Page 11A
Two charges against Wilbanks. (2005, May 26). Page 6JJ

Newswire

Davis, M. (2005, May 8). Bride carried baggage from the past. Page 1A
Eldredge, R. L. (2005, May 4). Runaway bride now a 'battle' cry. Page 2E
Eldredge, R. L. (2005, June 14). 'Today' co-host gets runaway bride to talk. Page 2E
Eldredge, R. L. (2005, June 17). Q100 host sets out to trip runaway bride. Page 2G

Op-Ed
Badie, R. (2005, June 21). Bride's morals ran away, too. Page 3JJ
Badie, R. (2005, May 3). Latinos are due a public apology. Page 3JJ
Badie, R. (2005, June 19). Making the most of fame's 15 minutes: What's right, wrong. Page 3JJ
Badie, R. (2005, May 1). One volunteer's perspective: Charge her. Page 3JJ
Badie, R. (2005, May 26). Prosecutor's action, inaction puzzling. Page 3JJ
Davis, M. (2005, May 8). Bride carried baggage from the past. Page 1A
Davis, M. (2005, June 16). Wilbanks reaction: Little pity after word of profit hits the streets. Page 1JJ
Eldredge, R. L. (2005, June 17). Q100 host sets out to trip runaway bride. Page 2G
Eldredge, R. L. (2005, May 4). Runaway bride now a 'battle' cry. Page 2E
Eldredge, R. L. (2005, June 14). 'Today' co-host gets runaway bride to talk. Page 2E
Our opinions: Don't shower bride with ridicule. (2005, May 3). Page 14A
Our opinions: Stick a Big Apple in her mouth. (2005, May 6). Page 18A
Runaway schadenfreude*. (2005, May 8). Page 3E
Song, toast carvings among odd reactions. (2005, May 4). Page 4B
Tuck, A. (2005, May 7). Wilbanks story a natural in era of 24-hour newscasts. Page 11A
Tucker, C. (2005, May 8). Our opinion: Media blackout for this bride. Page 6E

Charlotte Observer

Local
Choe, S. (2005, May 9). Policies cover everything except cold feet. Page 1D
Kelly, F. (2005, May 1). Florists, consultants, ministers know cold feet common in wedding biz. Page 4B

Newswire
Aguayo, A. M. (2005, May 1). Missing bride to be admits she wasn't kidnapped. Page 5A
Curtis, M. C. (2005, May 5). Hate to say it, but some 'stories' aren't. Page 1E
Haines, E. (2005, May 4). Hispanic group wants apology. Page 6A
Haines, E. (2005, May 4). We're not going to the chapel anymore. Page 2A
Odum, C. (2005, May 3). Jilted groom still wants to wed fiancée. Page 6A
Rivenbark, C. (2005, May 15). Runaway bride to pay, big-time. Page 4Y
'Runaway Bride' accepts plea deal, sentence. (2005, June 3). Page 8A
Wedding may become vigil for missing bride. (2005, April 30). Page 12A
Wyatt, K. (2005, April 29). Bride-to-be disappears near Atlanta. Page 14A
Yee, D. (2005, June 1). Bride to pay $13,250 for search costs. Page 8A
Yee, D. (2005, May 26). Runaway bride charged with lying to police. Page 4A
Yee, D. (2005, May 6). Runaway bride explains, sort of. Page 3A

Op-Ed
Rivenbark, C. (2005, May 15). Runaway bride to pay, big-time. Page 4Y
Curtis, M. C. (2005, May 5). Hate to say it, but some 'stories' aren't. Page 1E
Tomlinson, T. (2005, May 4). A forgiving fiancé says 'I do' to love. Page 1B

New York Times

Local
Grove, L., & Morgan, H. (2005, June 8). Rasheda Ali champions dad's cause. Page 29
Hart, A. (2005, May 1). Bride-to-be admits fleeing and making up kidnap story. Page 32
Hart, A. (2005, May 3). Georgia city may want bride to pay. Page 20
Hart, A. (2005, April 30). National briefing south: Georgia: Polygraph in case of missing woman. Page 11
Hart, A. (2005, May 6). National briefing south: Georgia: Runaway bride apologizes. Page 23
Hart, A. (2005, May 11). National briefing south: Georgia: Runaway bride in treatment. Page 14
Hart, A. (2005, June 3). Runaway bride enters plea and is sentenced to probation. Page 14

Newswire
Hart, A. (2005, April 29). Bride-to-be goes for a jog and disappears. Page 19
Hart, A. (2005, May 26). Runaway bride is indicted. Page 25

Op-Ed
Navarro, M. (2005, May 8). Wedding bells? That's the bride's getaway car. Page 6

Tampa Tribune

Local
Belcher, W. (2005, June 24). Brokaw takes whirlwind foreign tour for special on war tonight. Page 4
Belcher, W. (2005, June 20). Couric lands runaway bride for ‘dateline.’ How conveeenient. Page 4
Belcher, W. (2005, June 28th). Miss America pageant finds a home on country music network. Page 4
Koehn, D. (2005, May 6). There goes the bride. Page 1

Op-Ed
Hill, J. (2005, May 3). Runaway bride: A product of our culture? Page 1
No sympathy for 'runaway bride'. (2005, May 3). Page 12
Ruth, D. (2005, May 6). Why so mad? She didn't run away from you. Page 2

National Enquirer

Local

Gentile, D. (2005, June 20). Runaway bride's Julia Roberts complex. Page 48

Mowling, R. (2005, May 16). Runaway bride walked out on two other lovers. Pages 16-17

South, J. (2005, June 13). Jilted John is set to be Jennifer's runaway fiancé. Page 20

South, J. (2005, May 30). Runaway bride spins X-rated tale. Page 20

New York Daily News

Local

Huff, R. (2005, June 14). Errant bride says 'I will' to Couric. Page 83

Lisberg, A. (2005, May 3). No altar-ing his wish. Page 3

Newswire

Becker, M. (2005, May 1). Case of cold feet, not a cruel kidnap. Page 12

Hutchinson, B. (2005, June 17). 'Life or death decision;' bride tells why she ran away. Page 3

Op-Ed

Grove, L., & Morgan, H. (2005, June 8). Rasheda Ali champions dad's cause. Page 29

Louis, E. (2005, May 3). Runaway faker shouldn't escape law. Page 3

Star magazine

Local

Crazed gazes! (2005, June 20). Page 33

Runaway bride caught in the headlights! (2005, May 30). Page 30