At the centre of media controversy, tabloids continue to be the best-read newspapers in the UK. But in spite of their popularity, these papers are often accused of debasing democratic communication. Indeed, tabloid journalism in the UK and elsewhere has been placed at the forefront of a ‘dumbing down’ of the media, whereby popular, commercial media fail to measure up to Habermas’s seminal idea of the public sphere as a forum for debate on matters of public interest.

Underpinning the criticisms of tabloid newspapers are assumptions about their influence on readers. Yet, as empirical research on the subject is virtually non-existent, assertions about the relationship between tabloid journalism and public sphere discourse are, at best, educated guesses. This chapter seeks to provide some original insights into the functions of tabloid newspapers in the lives of readers. Can tabloid news contribute to a public sphere as derived from Habermas? To answer this question I have interviewed young adult readers of the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*, the two circulation leaders among the popular tabloids. Readers’ responses to traditional public affairs news, and to tabloid focuses such as celebrity stories shed light on tabloid newspapers as possible grounds for a public sphere.

**Tabloids and ‘tabloidization’**

There is little doubt about the centrality of tabloid journalism to debates about media standards. While sometimes considered ‘unworthy’ of academic attention (Langer 1998: 8), tabloid newspapers and their historical predecessors, such as the ‘penny dreadfuls’, have always stirred controversy among those anxious about the impact of populist journalistic traditions (see e.g. Conboy, 2002: 1–30). A contributing reason for such concern is the sheer numbers these news forms often attract. In the UK, the tabloid press dominates the national newspaper market, with the popular tabloids (the so-called ‘red-tops’) holding a majority share of the total newspaper circulation. These have further developed a highly contentious brand of journalism characterised by...
the typically sensationalist news style and blurring of boundaries between private and public, politics and entertainment, as well as by a partisan political engagement, a celebrity-orientated and sexualised news agenda and the use of cheque-book journalism and paparazzi coverage.

The *Sun*, launched as a tabloid by Rupert Murdoch in 1969 and a best-seller since 1978, is often regarded the most hard-hitting in all of these respects. Dubbed the ‘rottweiler of British journalism’,¹ it has developed cut-throat competition with other tabloids, particularly for the same down-market readers as the *Daily Mirror* (launched in 1903). Today, these two publications share characteristics of format, style, content and readerships. It is however worth noting that the *Sun*, despite backing the Labour party in three consecutive elections, generally takes a conservative stance on social issues such as crime and immigration, whereas the *Mirror* has a history as a socialist newspaper and continues to place itself within a left-wing context. In 2003, the *Mirror* was re-branded the more ‘serious’ of the two, which meant increased attention to issues such as the Iraq war – although it subsequently went back to a tabloid focus on showbiz (see Engel, 1996, Chippendale and Horrie, 1999, Conboy, 2002 and Horrie, 2003 for histories of the tabloid press).

A main framework for the analysis of tabloid newspapers today is the much-discussed ‘tabloidization’: (news) media increasingly and generally turning to entertainment, sensationalism and the realm of private affairs (see Sparks, 2000, for a full discussion). Here, tabloid priorities are seen to have a devastating influence on public life, simplifying important issues and turning media audiences away from news of political relevance (e.g. Franklin, 1997). Tabloid newspapers, further, have themselves been observed to undergo changes which then would mean a greater than ever adverse effect on readers. An example is Dick Rooney’s (2000) content analysis of the *Mirror* and the *Sun*, where he found a sharply decreasing percentage of editorial space devoted to ‘public affairs’, between 1968 and 1998. Rooney concludes:

The *Mirror* and the *Sun* do not have a public-sphere editorial agenda. Their readers probably do not have any interest in the workings of the establishment or establishment organizations and do not wish to monitor them. (ibid.: 107)

Thus, tabloid content is claimed to be directly linked to the interests of readers, in a downward spiral of trivialisation and political apathy.

As is evident in Rooney’s analysis, underpinning much of the critique of tabloids and tabloidization is the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. As pointed out by Martin Eide and Graham Knight, the public sphere as ‘a normative ideal essential to a well-functioning democracy’ (1999: 535) has had most currency among media scholars. Tabloid newspapers have been judged to fail this ideal, paralleling Habermas’ (1989) own criticism of the commercial mass media as replacing rational–critical debate with individuated, apolitical