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# Review of Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the present*

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# E-rea

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1. La séduction du discours / 2. A Death of One's Own

Recensions

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## **Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the present***

Oxford, Peter Lang Ltd, 2015, 258 p. ISBN-13: 9781906165321. £20

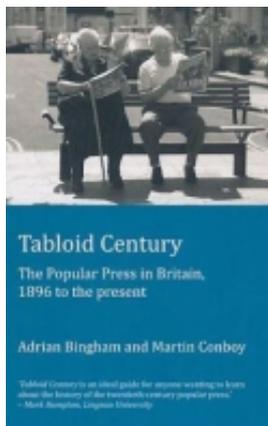
MARC CALVINI-LEFEBVRE

### **Bibliographical reference**

Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the present*. Oxford, Peter Lang Ltd, 2015, 258 p. ISBN-13: 9781906165321. £20

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***Full text***



Full size image

- 1 *Tabloid Century* is thankfully not the straightforwardly descriptive and linear history of the tabloid press that its subtitle suggests. Not that it eschews linearity nor description. Readers unfamiliar with the fledgling birth of the newspaper tabloid in the very late 19th century, its true launch in the 1930s, explosion from the 1960s, and its recent internet-driven downfall, will find the introduction tremendously illuminating. But they will see that it is not content with simply mapping the rise and fall of the main titles (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Herald*, *The Sun*) and press barons (Northcliffe, Rothermere, Beaverbrook, Murdoch) of the successive periods. It also carefully parses out the various cultural, economic, and technical drivers of the tabloid model's phenomenal success.
- 2 This balance of clear, concise mapping with subtle and illuminating analysis is a hallmark of the book and happily characterises its six thematic chapters. In these, Bingham and Conboy skilfully demonstrate the “cultural and political significance” (20) of tabloids, the particularly rich vistas they offer into British politics, society and culture in the long twentieth century. The first three chapters – War, Politics, Monarchy & Celebrity – discuss the major public events and personalities covered by the popular press, whilst the final three – Gender & Sexuality, Class, Race & Nation – explore its evolving treatment of individual and collective identities. Through each, we see how the tabloids contributed to framing both the very notions of “the public”, and “public opinion” as well as the questions at the heart of public debate.
- 3 For whom, then, did the tabloids claim to speak? Commercially driven products of an urbanised, industrialised, fast-moving age, they constantly sought to conquer new markets uncatered for by the broadsheets: lower-middle class and working-class men but also, and crucially, women. To appeal to these readerships, they adopted a crisper, clearer, more sensational style of writing and presentation, and offered up new forms of content: less politics, more people, more crime, more sports, and, infamously, more sex. From the outset, critics accused them of cheapening public debate, of dragging the tone and quality of discussion down, of promoting senseless consumerism over the public good. Readers, however, voted with their wallets and, by 1967, the self-styled “vulgar but honest” (quoted p.14) *Daily Mirror*, was selling 5.25 million copies a day.
- 4 Such success cannot be explained simply by the reading public's fascination for sordid stories about celebrities, taste for page three nudity, or appreciation of large-font titles with dubious puns ending in exclamation points. The tabloids' success was also down to the worldview that they articulated. Indeed, what emerges, beyond their commercial rivalry and political differences, is a deeper consensus about British exceptionalism (ch. 1 & ch. 6), the superiority of individualistic hedonism over class consciousness (ch. 5), and the promotion of heteronormativity (ch. 4). Furthermore, though they claimed to be speaking for all, their perspective was consistently that of a white, metropolitan, lower middle-class and English reader (ch. 6), presented as under

threat from enemies within – the condescending upper-classes, tax-happy State, politically-correct elites, and handout-greedy poor (ch. 5) – and enemies without – unassimilable immigrants and meddlesome foreigners (ch. 6). Not surprisingly, the tabloids' heyday was under the Premiership of Margaret Thatcher (ch. 2), and they have done much to contribute to the ideological hegemony of Thatcherism in British politics to this day. The latest example is arguably the stunning success of the “leave” campaign in the Brexit referendum of June 2016, which the tabloids arguably contributed to through their systematic pillorying of the European project from the 1980s onwards (ch. 6).

- 5 And yet, if the tabloid consensus continues to form a major element of British politics and culture, the tabloids themselves seem caught in a death spiral: their readership never ceases to shrink and with it, their commercial viability. It became evident that panic was setting in when, at the turn of the century, in a desperate effort to remain solvent, they increasingly narrowed their focus on celebrity culture, going so far as to hack into the phones of the rich and famous, leading to their public shaming at the hands of the Leveson inquiry (ch. 3). The cause of their demise was not, as the authors show, due to the failure of the model, but rather to its migration towards 24-hour news channels and social media (ch. 2). Print-based tabloids simply could not rival with the constant coverage of politics offered by the first nor the diversity of populist opinions to be found on the second. Neither could they beat the internet at the spreading of salacious images, sports coverage or even facile puns.
- 6 In sum, though the tabloid may be dead (or at least dying), we are very much living in our own tabloid century. Bingham and Conboy's masterful synthesis is a timely reminder that there is much enlightenment to be gained by taking this phenomenon seriously and submitting it to the same critical and analytical scrutiny as arguably more sophisticated forms of political, social and cultural expression.

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## References

### *Electronic reference*

Marc CALVINI-LEFEBVRE, « Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the present* », *E-rea* [Online], 15.1 | 2017, Online since 15 December 2017, connection on 15 December 2017. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5963>

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### *By this author*

**Laura Schwartz, *Infidel feminism: secularism, religion and women's emancipation, England 1830-1914*** [Full text]

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