

# Has the gap between qualities and tabloids increased?

## Changes in Australian newspapers 1956-2006

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**ABSTRACT:** *The dualism between 'quality' and 'popular' has run through press history. It is misleading and deficient in important ways, but is one means of exploring differences among newspapers. This article examines whether different types of Australian newspapers have adapted differently to their changed role in the total media mix. It draws on an extensive content analysis of major Australian newspapers in 1956 and 2006 to examine central aspects of their formats and structure, their story priorities, and aspects of their political coverage, to identify common and contrasting trends.*

### Introduction

The title of this article reflects the confusion and value judgements surrounding the term 'tabloid'. There is a presumption that the size of a newspaper (broadsheet or tabloid) coincides with its style of journalism ('quality' or 'popular'). But the term has become so far removed from its original physical meaning—a tablet page size that was half the area of a broadsheet page—that it has become common to refer to 'tabloid television' (Langer, 1998) and to 'tabloidisation' to connote 'decay, a lowering of journalistic standards that ultimately undermines the ideal functions of mass media in liberal democracies' (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 285). The correspondence between page size and journalistic genre was never complete: the always serious *Australian Financial Review*, for example, was always tabloid in size. But, especially, now that in Britain (the

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country in which the distinction between quality and popular tabloid journalism has had the greatest currency) nearly all newspapers have become tabloid in size, the original physical sense of the distinction is all but lost.

As the newspaper settled into a recognisably modern existence in the English-speaking world in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the gap between quality and popular newspapers became entrenched in how people thought about the press. Despite the abundant evidence that it oversimplifies a more complex reality, a dualism runs through contemporary as well as historical debates. 'Quality' and 'popular' newspapers were counter-posed on many dimensions, such as heavy versus light news priorities and serious versus sensational presentations. They were also contrasted, more problematically, on their motivations and sense of responsibility: 'educative and opinion forming' versus 'commercial and profit-making' (Mayer, 1964, p. 4), as if, despite their private ownership, quality newspapers had a public service mandate, the press equivalent of a public broadcaster.

In Britain, debates about the 'New Journalism' began in the 1880s with the rise of the penny press, such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, preoccupied with the sensations of the streets (Smith, 1979, p. 152). The journalistic contrast was with *The Times*, a paper read by the upper classes and concerned with the doings of officialdom and the Establishment, even if its independence frequently aroused the anger of various powerful groups, first and most famously in its coverage of the Crimean War (Knightley, 1975, p. 3ff).

But this dichotomy was nowhere near the full story. Moreover, the middle ground was represented by the single most important development in British journalism at that time, the so-called Northcliffe Revolution. Alfred Harmsworth, later Lord Northcliffe, founded the *Daily Mail* in 1896, and his brother, later Lord Rothermere, founded the *Daily Express* in 1900. These two newspapers are still the core of what in Britain are called middle market newspapers (Seymour-Ure, 1991, pp. 27-33; Tunstall, 1996). For the period until World War II, they were Britain's greatest circulation successes, and Northcliffe's influence extended to Australia, most directly through his tutelage of Keith Murdoch, who was dubbed with the soubriquet 'Southcliffe' (Mayer, 1964, p. 29).

The Northcliffe papers were as far from the scandal sheets of minimal credibility as they were from *The Times*. Whereas *The Times* sold for threepence, the *Daily Mail* sold for a halfpenny. Northcliffe called it 'The Busy Man's Daily Journal': 'I claim that by my system of condensed or tabloid journalism hundreds of working hours can be saved each year'.

He insisted that no story be more than 250 words (Franklin, 1997, p. 80). Their editorial attitudes were more firmly rooted in middle class morality and prejudices, and more insistent on accuracy than was the fringe penny press. Nevertheless, their treatment of stories often involved 'working it up', to use Northcliffe's favourite phrase (Tulloch, 2000, p. 137)—investing some individual event with an emotional intensity and broader significance to capture the public imagination.

Arthur Christiansen, the long-serving editor of the *Daily Express* when it was the country's highest selling newspaper in the 1930s and 1940s, peppered his staff with general injunctions about what makes good journalism: 'Always, always, tell the news through people'; 'One good home story is worth two good foreign stories'; 'One good picture is worth 10,000 words'; 'You can describe things with the pen of Shakespeare himself, but you cannot beat news in a newspaper' (Greenslade, 2003, p. 9).

These statements point to another problem with the dualism opposing quality broadsheet to popular tabloid. Not only does it oversimplify a more complex reality and have a built-in snobbery tacitly equating quality with unpopularity and vice versa (cf. Lumby, 1999), it leaves unspecified any positive goals—beyond circulation—to which popular journalism aspires.

A crisp statement of what constitutes good popular journalism was given by one of Australia's leading journalists, Adrian Deamer, the most successful early editor of the *Australian*. Previously he had been an editorial executive on the Melbourne *Sun*, a newspaper for which he never lost respect.

*The Sun was extremely competent in its coverage of news. It was short and sharp, limited background. The Sun was then a serious tabloid, not like the Sydney afternoon newspapers. Its news covered the same things as the Age but sharper. It had a very wide, comprehensive coverage of the news, although it didn't disregard trivia. It knew Melbourne better than any other paper knew its city. It presented Melbourne to Melbourne. It was very close to its readers. A remarkable association. (Tiffen, 1987, p. 342)*

This begins to specify the appeals of popular journalism beyond such negative descriptions as 'sensational' (cf. Tiffen, 1989, p. 53). On the other hand, closeness to its community hardly accounts for why tabloid journalism attracts such 'viscerally negative responses' (Rowe, 2010, p. 350).

The rise of Rupert Murdoch's London *Sun* gave a new urgency to debates about the standards of the British tabloids. Its page three topless girl was the most infamous of its attention-grabbing strategies. It broke new ground by marketing itself with competitions and advertising on television. Its presentations were even more sensational than those of its competitors, and it emphasised sport and show business stories to an unprecedented degree. Its main competitor, the *Daily Mirror*, followed suit. Coverage of sport and show business comprised 31 per cent of the *Mirror's* editorial space and 33 per cent of the *Sun's* in 1968. By 1998 the two figures were 52 per cent and 63 per cent (Rooney, 2000, p. 103). The converse of these increases was the downgrading of traditional notions of news.

The *Sun* also led a re-emergence of extremely vociferous partisanship. In the decades after World War II, the British dailies, although still overwhelmingly on the Tory side, had become progressively more impartial in their coverage (Tunstall, 1983, p. 9). The *Sun*, with its embrace of Thatcher and aggression towards her opponents, reversed this dramatically. Beyond simple partisanship, several scholars have charted the conservative ideology that marks most of the British popular press. Conboy (2006) has dissected their constructions of race, nation, and class, while Franklin (1997) has analysed how the Newszak of the tabloids contributes to political conservatism.

The other aspect that excites controversy about the tabloids is less their content, than the way they get the news. Professional misdeeds in the pursuit of competitive advantage have been highlighted in Britain's long-running scandal about phone tapping by the *News of the World*. In a case of the hunter being hunted, the *Sun* was subjected to a tabloid-style exposé by Chippindale and Horrie (1990). Their title *Stick it up your punter!* is a play on one of the paper's most famous headlines during the Falklands War, *Stick it up your Junta!* More recently, Sharon Marshall has offered an insider's account of working for leading Murdoch titles in her book *Tabloid Girl* (Burrell, 2010; Marshall, 2010).

While most of the controversy concentrates on the 'excesses' of the tabloids, what constitutes 'quality' is too often presumed rather than explored. Apart from anything else, this vacuum makes it difficult to chart changes in how ideas of quality evolve. There has been at least as much movement at this end of the journalistic spectrum (Greenslade, 2003, p. 626f). During the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal of 1998-1999, some critics asserted that there had been 'a journalistic standards meltdown', and that 'the mainstream press and the tabloids were moving closer together than ever before' (Sparks, 2000, p. 3).

The Australian debates counter-posing qualities and tabloids are a pale reflection, and highlight the need to make distinctions between the extremes. The transfer of British notions to Australia is problematic because Britain has a national, London-based press, while the Australian press has consisted of city states, more like the American and Canadian model. As a result, British newspapers manifest greater journalistic extremes than is evident in the Australian metropolitan markets. This is principally due to the logic of competition and market segmentation, and to the way journalistic traditions then become self-sustaining. It is possible that other factors, such as greater class stratification (Tunstall, 1996, p. 9), also contribute.

In situating Australian newspapers as precisely as possible on the larger journalistic spectrum, we can draw on the work of Sparks (2000) and Paletz (1998), who go beyond a simple dualism and distinguish five and four levels respectively. Both give a similar label to their bottom level: supermarket tabloid press. This is to capture such titles as the *Enquirer*— 'a pariah publication', according to Ricchiardi (in Sparks, 2000, p. 3)—and a genre that defines the use of the term 'tabloid' in America. Sparks's next level up is the newsstand popular press. This corresponds with the afternoon papers that used to exist in Australia, and that relied essentially on street sales rather than subscription. Their banners and front pages were designed to attract the attention of commuters. Especially in Sydney, one of the few cities in the world that had competing afternoon newspapers, their sensational banners and front pages were designed to attract attention. This, and their need for very fast production, made for less emphasis on accuracy (Tiffen, 1989b).

Australian metropolitan tabloid newspapers would probably fall into what Sparks calls the serious-popular press and Paletz, the popular. This forms a very broad category, however. *The Courier-Mail* and *West Australian* would feel affronted at being in the same category as the

London *Sun*. At the top of the range, Sparks has the serious press and Paletz the elite press. For Sparks, the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* are in this category, but—demonstrating the subjectivity of such judgements—he puts the *Times* and the *Guardian* in his next level down, the semi-serious press, and what Paletz labels the prestige press.

Presumably, Australian broadsheet papers would fall here, although many would argue towards the bottom of the category. It is common for observers to say how the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Age* fall short of the standards of ‘real’ quality papers such as *The Times* or the *Guardian*. It should be remembered, however, that, while the five British quality papers combined comprise just one fifth of their market, and the *Guardian* alone, for example, has only around three per cent (*Press Gazette*, 2011), the *Sydney Morning Herald* has around 40 per cent of its market.

## Argument and hypotheses

The central concern of this article is to trace the changes in Australian daily newspapers in the half century following the introduction of television in 1956, and in particular to chart commonalities and contrasts in how different types of papers have changed. In 1956, newspapers were the most important source of news for the public. Half a century later, they play a more marginal role in the news media mix. Certainly, for most major running stories, they are not the initial source of news for their audiences.

The central argument is that, denied their previous role of being first with the news, ‘quality’ and ‘popular’ newspapers have adapted to this changed role in different ways, the qualities going more into analysis and the ‘popular’ press more into entertainment. Neither type of paper is any longer a headline service, so both have to find new appeal to their readerships. Quality papers more often go into the how, the why, and the ‘so what?’ of the news stories, while the popular papers have found ways to be brighter.

With the exception of two national daily newspapers—*The Australian* (founded in 1964) and the *Australian Financial Review* (founded as a weekly in 1951, becoming a daily in 1963 (Souter, 1981, p. 275, 392))—the most important newspapers are those published in the state capital cities. Only in Melbourne and Sydney are there competing locally published daily newspapers—a broadsheet ‘quality’ and a tabloid ‘popular’.

Elsewhere, local monopoly reigns. Such regional monopolies may have different market incentives than the segmented markets of Sydney and Melbourne. It should be noted in passing that all these regional monopolies are now tabloid in size. The *Advertiser* in Adelaide converted in 1997, while Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* did not do so until early 2006. Often such a change in size is accompanied by an intensive marketing campaign, with some less tangible changes in journalism. (See, for example, Rowe's (2000) study of when the *Newcastle Herald* changed to what it called a 'compact' design.)

In order to examine changes in Australian newspapers then this research yields three main types: metropolitan and national broadsheets or 'qualities', metropolitan tabloids, and regional monopolies. The research then concerns how newspapers in these different market situations have changed. The research design does not depend on resolving the contested and problematic notions of quality, or of tabloidisation, although these form the larger discursive framework that informs it.

## Research design

The current research addresses these large questions of change and continuity, of commonality and difference, in newspapers by undertaking a quantitative content analysis. By examining newspapers systematically and subjecting observations to the discipline of a structured coding scheme, changes that might remain invisible, impressionistic, or contested are able to be charted with greater precision and certainty. For some of the data files (see below) only the two years—50 years apart—are chosen, so that contrast between the start and end of the half century is the focus. For others, there is also data on intervening years a decade apart, which gives more insight into the timing and stages of changes.

The data in this research cannot address all the aspects of the debates over the changing standards of the press. Content analysis cannot address the charges of underhand practices, or lack of editorial integrity, or resolve disputes over accuracy. It can only partially and indirectly address normative issues about changing standards.

It can, however, document aspects of news coverage that can anchor and contribute to debating such issues. In particular, this article will compare the paper types in four aspects.

1. Size and structure.
2. Presentation.
3. Story priorities.
4. Story length and source structure.

### ***Constructed week sample***

For each newspaper for each year, six days forming one constructed week were sampled. This is a method of stratified random sampling, where each of the days (Monday through Saturday) is chosen once, and one chosen from every second month between February and December. This gives a good spread of dates through the year, minimising the idiosyncrasies of what might have been in the news at one particular time. It also guards against biases stemming from particular days of the week or times of the year.

While this is the best means of ensuring that data for each paper is as representative as possible, six days is still a limited basis for generalising a year's content. As a trade-off between resources and coverage, it is an acceptable, probably optimal, design, but it should always be remembered that, in a sample of six days, the peculiarities of a few days can have an undesirably large impact on results.

### ***Data files***

The total content analysis generated the following files:

1. Size and composition of pages. In this file, the unit of analysis is the page of each newspaper. The data is based upon one constructed week each for the years 1956-1966-1976-1986-1996-2006 for the newspapers *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH); *Daily Telegraph* (DT); the *Age*; the *Sun News Pictorial*, later retitled the *Herald-Sun* (Sun/HS); the *West Australian* (WA); and *The Australian* (Aust) (1966 on). This yields a total sample of 15,502 pages.
2. Size and composition of each day's paper. The unit of analysis is the daily edition of each newspaper. The same years and papers as in File 1 are analysed. This yields a total sample of 210 papers analysed. This comprises 36 days each for five papers, plus 30 days for *The Australian*.
3. Composition of stories. The unit of analysis is the individual story. Only the years 1956 and 2006 are studied. Six papers are studied in each year (the papers listed above except *The Australian*). There are two files. The first contains basic data on all editorial matter in the 72 papers (total number of articles = 14,621). The



second contains a more complete analysis only of those that are news stories, whose content is not wholly sport, entertainment, weather, or lifestyle. This generated a file of 4,795 stories.

4. Deaths in the news. The unit of analysis is all individual stories which have a more than incidental reference to a death. Only the years 1956 and 2006 are studied, with all six papers in 1956 and seven in 2006. This yields a sample of 786 stories across the 78 papers examined. In addition, there is a small file of stories in the two years that examined stories where the focus was on patterns of death rather than individual fatalities (n = 33).
5. Political news. The unit of analysis is political news stories. The years 1956 and 2006 are analysed for six and seven papers respectively, while the intervening decades 1966-1996 are analysed for the SMH, DT, and CM. This produces a sample of 2,131 stories in the first file and 3,129 in the second.
6. International news. The unit of analysis is stories located overseas. The sampled newspapers are the same as for political news. This produced 2,036 stories in the 1956-2006 files, and 2,568 stories in the file for three papers covering all decades.
7. Australian-based international stories. The unit of analysis here is stories based in Australia but concerning other countries or nationals from other countries. The sampled newspapers are the same as for political and international news. This generated 930 stories in the 1956-2006 files and 1,068 stories in the file for the three papers covering all the decades.

### *1. Size and structure*

All newspapers expanded greatly over the half century. In terms of the mean number of pages in a day's paper, the newspapers in 2006 were four times as big, up from 31.7 pages to 128.9 pages (Tiffen, 2010). Notably, even in the final decade, a period in which the sense of gloom about the future of newspapers was already apparent, their average size still increased by over 30 pages, from 96.7 to 128.9.

In terms of pages, the broadsheets increased more, but in terms of area, the difference is not as pronounced, as the broadsheets increasingly have inserts of tabloid and magazine-size pages. Indeed, in the 'broadsheet' *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, only one-third of their pages were of broadsheet size in 2006, while nearly all had been in 1956. This is testimony to the growing segmentation of the newspapers into discrete sections, more pronounced in the broadsheets, but also substantial in the tabloids.

The papers have actually converged in their sources of income. It used to be that popular papers gained a greater proportion of their income from sales, and less from advertising. Within advertising, they relied almost entirely on display rather than classified advertising. The joke was that the afternoon Melbourne *Herald* was printed on the back of Myer ads.

Although the data here is on content rather than revenue, it points to some convergence in the areas devoted to different types of advertising, and to contrasting trends in display and classified advertising. In 1956, there was a big divergence in the proportions of total space taken by advertising. In the papers overall, it comprised almost exactly half (Table 1). This crept up slightly in subsequent decades, but—perhaps surprisingly to many—it then dropped substantially, down to 37.5 per cent in 2006. In 2006, only the regional monopoly, the *West Australian*, still had more than half its space devoted to advertising. All the newspapers had a substantially lesser proportion of their area devoted to advertising in 2006 than 1956.

*Table 1. Advertising*

% of all newspaper space taken by advertising							
Year	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	WA	Aust
1956	51.3	62.5	37.2	54.5	42.5	61.5	--
1966	50.9	61.5	49.5	55.7	54.7	63.5	20.7
1976	53.8	58.0	42.7	56.7	61.3	71.2	28.3
1986	52.8	58.3	44.3	59.7	54.2	66.5	34.0
1996	41.2	49.5	38.7	46.0	35.0	53.8	24.0
2006	37.5	46.0	33.2	37.0	33.5	54.0	21.3

As Tables 2a and 2b demonstrate, display and classified advertising have shown contrasting trajectories. Display advertising steadily increases in all papers, although somewhat less so in the two metropolitan tabloids. In contrast, the area taken by classified advertising increases in most papers until 1986, but then decreases, most precipitately in the *Age*. The drop in volume is a sign of the financial problems confronting the two Fairfax quality newspapers as classified advertising moves to the Internet. The data also indicates how they have tried to combat this with increased emphasis on display advertising (and this somewhat accounts for the growth in supplements and increasing segmentation of these papers—see Tiffen, 2010). In 1956, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had three times the area of classified as display advertising; in 2006, it had twice the area of display as classified.

*Table 2a. Area of display advertising*

Mean thousand sq cm per day							
Year	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	WA	Aust
1956	11.5	9.5	8.2	9.4	14.4	15.9	--
1966	18.6	18.8	17.8	20.7	25.4	22.5	6.0
1976	22.6	12.9	11.7	30.4	32.2	40.9	7.7
1986	36.9	41.9	15.9	52.7	35.1	61.2	14.3
1996	38.5	53.8	28.9	51.8	21.9	55.1	19.6
2006	49.8	74.3	31.5	58.8	38.0	76.3	20.0

*Table 2b. Area of classified advertising*

Mean thousand sq cm per day							
Year	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	WA	Aust
1956	15.4	29.7	5.6	31.9	2.6	10.5	--
1966	17.8	42.2	4.3	33.5	8.3	16.9	1.7
1976	26.2	44.8	6.5	54.8	16.3	27.1	7.7
1986	34.4	55.5	17.4	66.2	15.7	34.3	17.4
1996	26.8	48.9	12.0	35.3	12.7	43.7	8.4
2006	23.4	35.5	10.9	31.7	9.1	43.0	10.9

## 2. Presentation

In looking at size and structure above, the overwhelming tendency is for all types of paper to move in common directions. The trends in presentation are also largely in the same direction, but there are more pronounced differences.

The front pages of these newspapers looked very different in 2006 from the way they did in 1956. One difference was that there were fewer articles. The average number of articles on the front page across all papers in 1956 was 8.2, but this was down to 3.2 in 2006. Even though their starting points already show a substantial difference, the tabloids reduced the number more radically. The *Sydney Morning Herald* declined from 12.8 stories on average on page one down to 4.5, while the *Daily Telegraph* went down from 4.2 to 1.5 (Tiffen, 2010).

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Quality and tabloid newspapers have also gone in contrasting directions in the amount of the front page taken up by headlines. Taking all the papers as a whole, the percentage of the page devoted to headlines has barely moved—from 18.1 per cent to 20.4. The three broadsheets all have declining proportions—for the *Sydney Morning Herald* it is down from 13.1 per cent to 9.5 per cent, for example. But the tabloids have increased. The *Daily Telegraph* is up from 13.3 to 22.2 per cent, and the *Herald Sun* devoted half its front page (52 per cent) to headlines. The regional monopoly, the *West Australian*, moved only slightly, from 13.2 to 15.5 per cent.

Not only on page one, but throughout, the 2006 papers look different from the 1956 ones. Here the overwhelming trend is of all papers moving together in the greater use of visual aids—maps and illustrations, tables and graphs, and photographs. The most dramatic change has been since the introduction of colour. The average number of photographs per day has shot up from 27.8 per day in 1956 to 170.4.

One way in which stories look different also signifies a change of power internally. In most reporting in earlier ages, the reporters remained anonymous. This meant that they had no public profile of their own (Curran & Seaton, 2010, p. 41). It also perhaps made them less sensitive to how their copy was changed during the production process.

Table 3 shows that across all stories carried in the newspapers in 1956, only one in ten was attributed to an individual journalist, while seven in ten carried no byline of any kind. Two in ten had some other kind of description, such as attributing the story to a news agency, or an individual external contributor. By 2006, just over half of the stories in the paper had an individual byline, with more variation between papers. On political stories, the change is even more dramatic. In 1956, only four per cent had an individual byline; in 2006, 76 per cent did. There is quite a bit of overlap, but the general tendency is to support the notion that quality papers are more reporters' papers and popular papers more sub-editors' papers.

Table 3a. Bylines

Year	% of all Stories							
	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	CM	WA	
1956	No	71	76	61	79	67	66	74
	Yes, individual	10	5	11	10	17	10	8
	Other	19	20	29	11	16	25	18
2006	No	39	26	54	22	40	34	53
	Yes, individual	53	57	43	65	55	63	39
	Other	8	16	3	13	5	3	8

Table 3b. Bylines

Year	% of all Political Stories								
	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	CM	WA	Aust	
1956	No	89	92	82	87	91	91	85	
	Yes, individual	4	0	9	7	6	2	2	
	Other	8	8	9	7	4	7	13	
2006	No	20	20	42	11	30	19	24	9
	Yes, individual	76	75	57	83	61	78	75	88
	Other	3	6	2	6	10	4	1	2

### 3. Story priorities

Do the papers now tend to cover different types of news? The content analysis allocated all stories into 64 topics. Each story could be classed in one or two of these categories. Table 4 shows the results consolidated into nine broad categories.

This and following tables show the relative priority between different types of news. It is essential to remember that the papers in 2006 were much larger than in 1956. There were about 40 per cent more items in 2006 than 1956. Moreover, items are not equal between the two years, with, as we see below, the average 2006 story more than twice as long as the average 1956 story. So, if a constant figure, say 10 per cent, were found in 1956 and 2006, it would signify that the priority has remained constant, but in fact the amount of coverage would have been much greater in the later year. The first impression from Table 4 is how little has changed. The biggest movement in any direction is a decline of three percentage points in the proportions devoted to business news and to news of crime and accidents. (It should be pointed out that the encyclopaedic nature of the table minimises the impression of change.)

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Table 4. Story content

% all stories by topic areas						
	Total		SMH		Age	
	1956	2006	1956	2006	1956	2006
1. Political	4	3	4	3	3	6
2. International relations	7	5	7	7	6	7
3. Policy areas	15	16	14	16	15	15
4. Business	14	11	18	15	15	14
5. Crime, accidents	15	12	16	9	13	10
6. Human Interest	12	14	9	13	11	11
7. Sport	20	22	16	17	23	16
8. Arts, culture	3	4	4	5	4	7
9. Other, misc	12	13	11	15	11	15

% all stories by topic areas								
	CM		WA		DT		Sun/HS	
	1956	2006	1956	2006	1956	2006	1956	2006
1. Political	4	4	2	4	5	2	3	2
2. International relations	8	5	6	4	9	3	7	4
3. Policy areas	19	15	12	16	12	14	16	19
4. Business	10	11	12	12	15	8	12	10
5. Crime, accidents	18	12	16	12	15	17	14	11
6. Human Interest	13	17	9	12	17	14	13	17
7. Sport	13	17	26	23	15	33	23	22
8. Arts, culture	2	8	2	2	2	1	2	5
9. Other, misc	13	12	14	15	10	9	11	10

Within this general picture of stability, there has been differential movement among the papers, and the distinction between their respective emphases is more marked at the end of the period. In 1956, there is almost no difference between the proportions allocated to international news or to business news, while by 2006, the quality broadsheets have decidedly more of both (7 per cent versus 4 per cent and 15 per cent versus 10 per cent respectively). Coverage of crime and accidents has generally moved in the other direction, although there is some variation between papers. But the *Sydney Morning Herald* dropped from 16% to 9%, while the *Daily Telegraph* is the only one to increase, from 15% to 17%. In some ways sport shows the clearest demarcation, with in 2006 the tabloids having on average 28 per cent of their stories devoted to it, the regional monopolies around 20 per cent, and the quality broadsheets around 16 per cent. The three categories were all around 20 per cent in 1956.

However, this masks considerable variation among individual papers. In 2006, the *Daily Telegraph* devoted fully one third of its items to sport, a much higher proportion than any other paper. The *Courier-Mail* still had a much lower proportion than the *West Australian*. The greatest complication when considering change is that in 1956 the Olympic Games were held in Melbourne. This probably boosted the attention given to sport in all the papers in that year, but most particularly in the Melbourne papers, which in 1956 both devoted 23 per cent of their stories to sport, although the traditional dominance of Australian Rules Football in that city could also have been a factor. However, to be more confident about trends in the relative priority given to sport, a different baseline year is desirable.

The gross categories in Table 4 hide some interesting changes among the more detailed story topics. Table 5 shows how, within the general category of human interest stories, trends have moved in opposite directions. News stories centring on ordinary people, and their fortunes and misfortunes, have substantially declined, down from 8.8 per cent to 2.8. In the meantime, news about celebrities and prominent people has increased from 1.0 to 3.6 per cent. News about entertainment—television, films, pop music, radio and so forth—increased most sharply, from 0.9 per cent to 7.2 per cent of all stories. All the papers have moved in the same directions. The tabloids in 2006 have a higher proportion of celebrity news than the others, and they moved down from the highest figure for news about ordinary people in 1956. At the risk of reading too much into these results, they do suggest the commodification of human interest news, and perhaps a decline in one of the traditional strengths of popular newspapers, namely, being in touch with their own communities.

*Table 5. Changing focus of human interest stories*

% all stories						
	1956 Total			2006 Total		
People-centered celebrities etc.	1.0			3.6		
Entertainment-related	0.9			7.2		
Human interest, ordinary people	8.8			2.8		
	Quality	Tabloid	Regional	Quality	Tabloid	Regional
People-centered celebrities etc.	0.4	2.0	0.8	1.9	5.4	3.2
Entertainment-related	0.8	1.1	0.9	7.1	6.8	7.7
Human interest, ordinary people	7.9	10.1	8.6	2.5	3.0	2.8

#### *4. Story length and source structure*

In all newspapers the average length of stories became considerably longer in the 50-year period. Indeed, as Table 6a shows, their average number of words more than doubled. This reflected movement at both extremes. In 1956, there was much greater use of news briefs, filler articles a paragraph or two in length, which filled out the gaps on the page. Equally, in 2006, there was a greater increase in longer articles, news stories, feature stories, reviews, columns, and so forth. As Table 6b shows, the proportion of articles longer than 600 words more than doubled, up from 7% of all items up to 18%.

*Table 6a. Length of stories: Mean number of words*

	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	CM	WA
1956	225	320	244	236	159	200	196
2006	498	633	386	643	400	410	547

*Table 6b. Length of stories: % stories 600 words or more in length*

	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	CM	WA
1956	7	11	8	9	3	5	4
2006	18	27	11	31	13	12	18



By 2006, the three types of papers fall neatly into three categories, while in 1956 there was much more overlap and less of a range. In other words, the broadsheet quality newspapers have increased their story length the most and the metropolitan tabloids the least.

Greater length is often, although not infallibly, a proxy indicator of greater depth. Another aspect of depth is the number of sources cited. Tables 7 and 8 show that at the end of the period twice as many sources are cited in all stories and that this is also the case in political stories. Again, the demarcation between the types of papers is more marked at the end of the period than at the beginning. This is most pronounced in the political stories, where the quality papers in 2006 averaged around three sources cited per story, the regional dailies about two and a half, and the tabloids around two.

*Table 7a. Number of sources: all stories*

Mean number of sources							
	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	CM	WA
1956	1.0	1.1	0.9	1.0	1.2	0.8	0.8
2006	2.0	2.5	1.5	2.3	1.7	1.9	2.2

*Table 7b. Number of sources: political stories*

Mean quoted per story								
	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun/HS	CM	WA	Aust
1956	1.3	1.7	1.9	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.2	
2006	2.6	3.1	2.0	3.0	2.2	2.6	2.6	2.8

The number of sources per story is an indicator of news organisations adopting an active approach to reporting, cross checking, and balancing sources' claims, and presenting a variety of views. Table 8 approaches this issue by examining how many of the quotes in a political story come from the main source. It shows that sources got much more of a 'free ride' in 1956. Then, in 68 per cent of stories more than three-quarters of the quotes came from the main source. In only four per cent of stories was the figure less than one-quarter. There was no clear difference between types of papers, with at that time the two Sydney papers being the least dependent on the main source. By 2006, only one in three stories had three-quarters of their quotes from the main source. Moreover, now there was a clear difference between the

types of papers, with the quality broadsheets the least derivative and the tabloids the most derivative.

*Table 8. Quotes from main source*

*In stories including at least one source, the % of total quotations attributed to the primary source*

1956	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun	CM	WA	Aust
75+	68	57	54	73	71	68		
50-74	19	23	20	21	18	18		
25-59	10	14	19	5	8	8		
<25	4	6	8	1	3	5		

1956	Total	SMH	DT	Age	Sun	CM	WA	Aust
75+	32	26	43	26	43	30	31	33
50-74	25	31	23	24	27	18	31	24
25-59	25	24	22	30	23	24	31	21
<25	18	19	13	19	7	28	8	23

## Conclusion

Although the timing for this research period was framed around how newspapers changed during the first half century of television, there were, of course, many other drivers of change. The technologies of newspaper production changed greatly. Advertising markets changed substantially. Readers' habits changed because of different commuting, work, and housework patterns. There were professional, as well as commercial, reasons for changes in journalism. So some changes will be in common and others in contrast.

All the newspapers offered their readers much more in 2006 than they had half a century earlier. They had more pages and more stories, and their proportion of space devoted to advertising had declined. The decline of classified advertising, but the continuing growth of display advertising, is also clear. All the newspapers have changed substantially in appearance, but the tabloids have gone further towards more dramatic presentations, at least as measured by the size of headlines.

All the other measures confirm the hypothesis of a growing gap between the types of papers. This is a matter of shades of grey rather than black and white. On story selection, for example, there is still more overlap than in Britain. The Australian tabloids have not gone nearly as far towards show business and sports news, as the *Sun* and *Mirror*, for example (Rooney, 2000). Nevertheless, all these measures show a greater clustering of distinct types at the end than at the beginning of the period.

Similarly, all the basic measures of depth used here—length of stories, number of sources used, reliance on the principal source in a story—suggest that the quality papers have moved more in this direction than the others.

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