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Dick Cheney is a Mermaid!

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LOCAL GIRL ADDICTED TO TABLOIDS:

"WE HAD NO IDEA," SAY NEIGHBORS

DICK CHENEY IS A MERMAID!

JESSICA PARKHURST TELLS ALL

Course:

WRT 105, Practices of Academic Writing

Instructor:

Jeffrey Simmons

Author's Note:

The prompt was to pick a word or phrase and explore its various meanings, analyzing how the word has evolved, our own relationship to it, the various values it reflects, etc. The analysis and observations should lead to a significant claim about the word that reveals a deeper meaning.

Editors' Note:

Jessica Parkhurst's piece explores the fascinating culture of tabloids with a heavy emphasis on their addicting nature. She does an effective job of clearly defining the many different roles and aspects of a tabloid, giving us valuable insight into their addicting ways.



I am a "tabloid-aholic." When I'm in the grocery line picking up milk for my mother before I go home, I get instantly excited as I pass the devilish row of tabloids. "Oprah gave birth to Tom Cruise's love child!" "Elvis and Tupac found on island, still alive!" "Britney Spears's ex-husband flies plane into Michael Jackson's Neverland!" These outlandish and outrageous stories are clearly false; however, that has never stopped me from paying the \$3.99 to devour these stories. I've never gambled, I don't spend hours glued to my TV, I'm not obsessed with World of Warcraft, I've never illegally downloaded a song,



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Illustration by Colin Fanning

love a good tabloid. I could go a week without Facebook, but a week without everyone's favorite gossip, Perez Hilton, and his daily blog would be disastrous. Perhaps having tabloids as my biggest vice should be something I count as a blessing; however, this exploration of the word "tabloid" has made me think differently.

The original meaning of tabloid was "pill," as it was a manufactured painkiller. Abuse of pills, especially painkillers, is a widespread addiction that has plagued many people's lives. Tabloid gossip magazines, like painkilling pills, have an addictive quality that can also be seen as an opiate. They take our minds off things that are bothering us and disguise our reality by distraction. It is no mistake that every doctor's office is fully stocked with the latest issues of *People* and *Entertainment Weekly* for patients to read before becoming pin cushions to the needle-happy nurses. Tabloids in their pill form act as a healer to those in pain, much like tabloids in their news form distract people with bizarre stories. Tabloids aren't about focusing on the negative aspects of people's personal lives or about numbing the pain through medication; rather, tabloids are about a taking a break from reality and finding enjoyment despite the routine aspects of everyday life.

"Tabloid," in association with journalism, connotes a negative type of media, one that invades privacy of famous individuals, spreads lies, and publishes stories just short of fantasy. What most people don't realize is that the actual word "tabloid" has a rich and long history dating back to the Bible's usage of "tablet." While stories

of Lindsay Lohan's mafia ties and the latest on Anna Nicole coming back from the dead may not be the most believable or important subjects in the news, they are what the public has interest in. In an age where reading the news is quickly becoming less popular, tabloids are still thriving as one of the most wildly successful types of media. Pop culture author Matthew Ehrlich notes that tabloid writers set out to create "a show for one's amusement" and to make "outrageousness merely for the sake of outrageousness" (Ehrlich 17). Though tabloids may not be the most prestigious or scholastic type of news out there, their growing popularity throughout American culture is hard to ignore.

Tabloid, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, means "compressed; concentrated, esp. in order to be easily assimilated; sensationalistic" (OED 1). Tabloid was first meant to connote compression in relation to medication in a pill, yet in the early twentieth century the meaning of tabloid was still applied to the idea of compression. However, it was later applied to a new industry, the media (1). The name "tabloid" began to be used to describe short, compressed newspaper stories that were intended

to be simple and easy to read, thus there was the birth of a widely popular trend, "tabloid journalism"(1).

Today, "tabloid" is often used as a way to describe gossip magazines. In my generation, the term tabloid is most commonly used to describe magazines filled with paparazzi photos and outrageous claims: magazines like *Star*, *In Touch*, and *The New York Post*. Such media calls attention to the embarrassing acts of celebrities, socialites, politicians and professional athletes, and exposes their personal lives to the public. These types of magazines, such as *Star*, are strategically stacked near checkout lines at grocery stores and gas stations with eye catching headlines like "DYING SENATOR TED KENNEDY'S DARKEST SECRETS REVEALED!" and "NO JAIL FOR FISHY PHELPS". Though these titles gave fictitious elements, they are there for entertainment, something to pick up and browse through as the cashier checks your groceries.

One of the most interesting aspects of tabloid journalism is its continued popularity. Gossip magazines/news-papers/online blogs, or "tabloids" as they've become known, give the public insight into famous people's deepest, darkest secrets and most humiliating circumstances. Exposing DUIs, drug addiction, celebrity divorces, and drunken mistakes of celebrities is news that will sell. In a sense, tabloids have such widespread appeal due to their unique "mixture of sex, gossip and human interest stories" (Ehrlich 17). The intent to expose people's lives has fueled this market's popularity and every year more and more tabloids hit the newsstands with that intent in mind. While tabloid magazines/newspapers still compress news to make it shorter, a "tabloid" also carries the subtext of embarrassing exposure and scandal. This form of journalism is easy to read and entertaining, which is why the typical target for tabloid sales audience is "aimed at a mass, less educated audience" (Bessie). The "tabloid" industry has grown vastly over the decades, and as it grows, the word "tabloid" takes on entirely new meanings.

Tabloid can be translated into different functions; for instance, tabloid can be used as an adjective, depending on the context in which it's used. Used as an adjective, the word "tabloid" has given birth to new ideas about how people look at the idea of compression to appeal to the tabloid-loving public. In a *TIME* review written in 1925 about a revival of the famous "Verdi's Aida" ballet, the idea of a tabloid comes into play (Tabloid Opera 1). The ballet in its original version was 180 minutes; however the revival lasted only 30 minutes in accordance with the writers intent to appeal to "U.S. citizens who read tabloid newspapers, [and] chew tabloid gum" (1). The unknown reviewer of this ballet titled his review the "tabloid opera" suggesting that the word tabloid and its idea of compression could be converted to other walks of life, like in this instance, ballet.

A recent art trend known as "tabloid art", consisting of bizarre and shocking art exhibits, has created an uncom

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fortable stir among art enthusiasts (Samuels 1). A recent Yale senior art project consists of a young woman named Aliza Shvarts “inseminating herself and taking abortifacient drugs, filming her miscarriages, and then smearing the blood on a big plastic cube,” causing uproar in the art community about the legitimacy of this artist and her artwork (1). Speculators seem to agree that Shvarts did this to bring shock and to get her 15 minutes of fame. Her work is considered “tabloid” art because its subject matter is so disgusting and outrageous that it seems she did it for the shock value in a tabloid-loving society. Shvarts is not alone in her quest to shock the public with her tabloid art. A Nicaraguan artist named Guillermo Habacuc Vargas starved a stray dog as an exhibit, which caused uproar for animal rights activists and animal lovers everywhere (1). These artists created controversial pieces that sparked media attention due to their vulgar nature. A red cube and a thin dog are not necessarily shocking sights; however, the story and coverage behind these specific pieces of art created a sensationalistic quality in the artwork consistent with tabloidism. Tabloidism once again has proven that the word tabloid can be interpreted to fit the needs of people in multiple industries and can be given a new meaning based on that interpretation. In this case, tabloid art is meant to shock, stun, and surprise the public.

Like any other addiction, tabloids consume time that could be spent doing more productive activities.

Though “tabloid” can be used and transformed in many different genres, the word is not always used in a positive light. Generally, when people use the word “tabloid,” they refer to this particular type of journalism that is invasive to people’s privacy and not considered academic, making the word become negative. As an industry, tabloid journalism’s “primary objective is to tell a good story, not to search for the truth,” thus the content of a tabloid is often more novel than realistic. In a poll taken in Great Britain in 2003, 68% of adults aged 16+ said that tabloid newspapers do not generally behave responsibly (Tabloid Newspapers 1). Though this statistic is just the opinion of the few thousand that were polled, it does give a glimpse into the relationship between public and their idea of “tabloid.” When the average person hears the word “tabloid,” they often don’t realize the rich history of the word and its evolution to mean “compression” or “shortening,” and instead relate the word to mean “invasive”. This negative connotation of the word creates tension in its usage. Whether tabloid is being used as a noun or adjective, its negative connotation is derived from the eye of the beholder. The word isn’t necessarily an important word in the grand scheme of things; however, tabloid does have a complex meaning. It cannot be used in a derogatory sense or be considered vulgar, but tabloid has its eccentricities that make it more unique than other offensive words like “fuck” or “cracker”.

In context to tabloid’s meaning as a pill, the idea of addic-

tion is clear. The addictive quality of tabloids becomes a more realistically feared addiction when put in the context of pill, yet in any form of tabloid the fear of addiction exists to those who find tabloids, either pill or journalism, to be a consuming commodity in their own lives. For instance, in 2007 an Angelo State student named Dora published a piece in her school’s newspaper about being a self-proclaimed “tabloid-aholic” (Huffman 1). Dora explains how her addiction to this “journalistic junk food” has become a compulsion she simply cannot quit. Like any other addiction, it consumes her time that could be spent doing more productive activities. To be a tabloid-aholic, Dora suggests, is to be obsessed with celebrity gossip, and therefore, uneducated or unconcerned with actual news events like elections or war updates. To associate tabloids with addiction brings new light to the word’s usage and meaning. While to one person reading today’s version of a tabloid might be considered a harmless hobby, Dora characterizes the liking for tabloid news to be a full-fledged addiction (2). Making a connotation between tabloid and addiction is a very interesting connection.

Tabloids as pills create a physical addiction whereas tabloids as gossip-filled magazines create a thematic addiction. Depending on the severity of the addiction, both forms can be just as consuming and life-altering. The current culture of tabloids, in relation to the masses, carries a strong thematic addition. In my experience, being addicted to tabloids can be a very realistic thematic addiction. I check PerezHilton.com more than five times a day, and hearing that Chris Brown beat the living daylights out of Rihanna was far more upsetting to me than a bad test grade. I’ll be the first to admit that this sad confession may appear a little bit pathetic, but tabloids offer me the unique chance for distraction from my own startling meritocracy.

Tabloid medication and magazines helps individuals numb their lives. Tabloids make life interesting, as they distract us from our own lives. Tabloid magazines provide an escape from our own lives by giving us the ability to have a preoccupation with other people’s alleged lives that are filled with scandal, sex, sin, and shocking fashion choices. Tabloid artwork is aimed to alarm people and make them take notice of appalling topics that might not otherwise grasp their attention willingly. Tabloid pills are meant to desensitize the pain or ailment of an individual. In a broader sense, tabloids, in their various forms, are an opiate to the masses. They can expose the greater evils and creepiness of the world in order to opiate individuals from realities they are not yet ready or willing to face.

Every time I read a tabloid, I could be reading something of more substance; yet I willingly and knowingly choose to dwell on fictional stories about people who don’t have any relevance in my life. I’ve never truly explored why it is that I do this—after all, I consider myself to be a smart

young woman—but there is something unique about tabloid magazines that keeps me loyal. This summer I worked as a tennis clerk, where I had lots of down time after checking people in to use the tennis courts. At first, I spent this time catching up on reading novels I couldn't read during the year. First, there was *The Red Tent*, followed by *Midwives*, followed by a half-dozen Jodi Picoult books, followed by books borrowed from my 14-year-old sister, until finally, by the end of the summer, I was only reading tabloids. The evolution of my reading choices had started with renowned books, slipped into teenage best sellers, and finally they reached the bottom of the literary barrel to my treasured issues of *People* and *In Touch*. As I read them behind my clerk desk, I often got tennis players who were checking in attempting to make conversation with me. John, a 77 year-old retiree from Wall Street, stunned me on a quiet Saturday afternoon when he came up to check in as I was reading a tabloid. His first words were something along the lines of "Oh, that Spears family is really messed up, the younger one is even worse than Britney!" A man nearly 60 years older than me was attempting to relate to me using the Spears family drama. When I asked him how he even knew the difference between the Spears sisters, he rolled his eyes and said, "You'll learn soon enough that gossip and scandal are the best way to take your mind off of life." Then, I just thought he was a crazy old man for saying that, but now I've come to a conclusion: tabloids aren't about focusing on the negative aspects of people's personal lives or about numbing the pain through medication; tabloids are about becoming uninhibited and taking a breather from mundane, everyday life. Tabloids aren't just characterized and remembered for their absurd claims, but rather they're about forgetting worldly problems for an instant because, after all, there is no way Dick Cheney could be a mermaid. He's obviously a robot.

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