

## **Goodbye politics, hello lifestyle Changing news topics in tabloid, quality and local newspaper websites in the U.K. and Sweden from 2002 to 2012**

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### Abstract

Although considerable efforts have studied online news, studies so far have not investigated how the actual news topics are affected by digitalization in general, if at all, or compared them to different media constructs. Instead, changes in content are assumed or illustrated anecdotally rather than systematically assessed. This empirical study, covering Swedish and UK news sites within tabloid, quality morning, and local/regional varieties between 2002 and 2012, shows that there is a tabloidization effect in general but that it is stronger in tabloids and in Sweden compared to the UK. Further, this tabloidization can be more precisely described as a shift from political to more lifestyle journalism, as it is in the areas where the prime growth and decline are found. In addition, the study reveals that it is the slower news that increases most suggesting that the immediate character of online news is mediated by production conditions

Keywords: tabloidization, digitalization, online news, content analysis

### Introduction

The debate about whether the news should be about social issues and presented in a neutral way or whether it should encompass human-interest topics and be presented in a sensational and emotional way dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Schudson, 2003; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). At the heart of this debate, often-labelled 'tabloidization', is a concern about the quality of information, public life, civic engagement and, in the long run, democracy. In recent years the digitalization of the news industry has added extra dimensions to the discourse (Deuze, 2011; Peters & Broersma, 2013; Singer et al., 2011; Sparks, 2000).

Given the centrality of news content and that media studies have had a strong focus on digitalization for quite some time it is remarkable that few studies (although see Barnhurst, 2012) have systematically studied how the actual *news content* of online news is shaped *over time*. The theoretical expectations imply that a greater share of the news will deal with celebrities, accidents and entertainment at the expense of politics, economics and social issues, and that the publishing tradition will affect how this is appropriated (Bird 2009; Currah 2009; Thurman & Myllylahti 2009). Thus, although there might be an

overall increase in 'tabloid' news, broadsheet and local/regional papers will be more reluctant to embrace this trend compared to tabloids that already thrive in this area. Still, this connection is by and large theoretically assumed or illustrated anecdotally, while few studies so far have systematically investigated *if, how, to what extent, or why* the actual news topics in different publishing traditions have changed. Consequently, the purpose of the present study is to address and fill some of that research gap by comparing how the content of online newspapers from different publishing traditions and different countries develop over time. The study contains content from UK and Swedish news sites, namely *The Guardian*, *Dagens Nyheter* (quality morning papers), *Daily Mirror*, *Aftonbladet* (tabloids), *Helsingborgs Dagblad* and *Yorkshire Post* (local/regional papers) from 2002, 2007, and 2012.

## Literature review

### Journalism, content and an informed citizenry

Although the quality of news content is interesting in itself, the discussion cannot be properly understood without making the connection to society and democracy. A key issue in a large amount of previous research is a concern that the news media, for a host of reasons, will increasingly publish news that is poor for citizens and democracy. There are different labels and ways to describe and measure this phenomenon but they all try to capture the same thing – a journalism that emphasizes entertaining, dramatic and crowd-pleasing news at the expense of complex information about society (Esser, 1999; Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2011; Schudson, 2003; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Another less repeated distinction of the quality of information is made by Sparks (2000) who, in addition to sensationalism and crime, draws a line between news focusing on private or personal life and those focusing on public life.

The debate about the content of journalism along with what it might entail is far from new and there is no consistent view if tabloidization inherently ruins the chance of an informed citizenry. On one hand it is accused of sensationalism and emotionality, but on the other hand it is able to raise concern and change for important social conditions, for exploring new approaches to those with power in society that 'serious' media was unable or unwilling to do (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Schudson, 2003; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000).

While many ponder the connection between the quality of content and citizens' knowledge with the will to participate theoretically, there is also some systematic empirical evidence supporting the claim. Ultimately, societies saturated by news about sports, accidents, and celebrities have significantly less informed citizenry compared with societies that have more news about politics and economics (Aalberg & Curran 2011). Similarly, Scheufele, et al. (2002) point out that the consumption of 'hard news' is positively related to political involvement. In other words, the content filling the media have ramifications for citizens' ability to come to informed decisions about common issues not only in theory but also in practise. This scenario presupposes that relevant news is still being produced by media organisations and several scholars are sceptical of the development suggesting there is an overall commercialization of the news media catering to values other than an informed citizenry even among serious media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; McManus, 1994; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Looking at previous studies on news content in analogue

media channels the results are far from conclusive but most results and overviews suggest that it is a slight trend towards tabloidization (Bennett 2004; Connell 1998; Cushion 2012; Sparks & Tulloch 2000; Uribe & Gunter 2004; Wadbring 2012). Overall, change in analogue media seems rather slow (Barnhurst & Nerone, 1991) but the scenario for online media might, for better or for worse, be different for reasons developed below.

### **Digitalization and changing news**

While traditional media are dropping in circulation and credibility, they still play a big part of how people orient themselves in the world, especially online (De Waal & Schoenbach 2010). Analogue media are embedded in a specific time/space mode of production marked by, amongst other things, limited space, a predictable publishing cycle, one-way communication, and limited modalities. In digital media, time/space does not fall under the same constraints and thus have repercussions for how journalism is produced and consumed by an ongoing and interactive publishing process (Boczkowski 2004; Nerone & Barnhurst, 2001).

Looking at scholarship in online news, there are two different strands of thought that have relevance for the issues discussed here: On one hand, digitalization has been put forth as an opportunity to improve journalism and thus, in this context, supply more and better information about society (Matheson, 2004; Robinson, 2009). On the other hand, other researchers argue that the situation might become even worse - in particular, that digitalization change how journalists perform their news judgment and 'the cheap, easy and popular story often wins out over expensive, difficult, and less popular ones' (Bird 2009: 44). An important dimension to accommodate change in news content is the ability to track, in real-time, how the news consumers chose to click through the news site, allowing editors to cater to audience preferences, and thus accelerating the commercialization process (Currah 2009; MacGregor 2007; Nerone & Barnhurst, 2001; McKenzie et al. 2011). Although some research has been done on the production aspects suggesting some adjusting to reader preferences (Gynnild 2008; Author; Thurman & Myllylahti 2009), remarkably few studies focus on how the actual news content changes over a longer period of time. Some studies touch upon the issues but do not examine the content per se. Tremayne et al. (2007) studied how often hard, neutral, and soft news items were updated over a three-year period and found an increase in all three categories. Other studies focus on specific dimensions in content development. In a cross-sectional study, Hoffman (2006) compared to what extent print and online news facilitated mobilizing information in a political context and found no major differences. Barnhurst (2012) made a longitudinal study on how online content changes over time in four specific areas: politics, jobs, crime, and accidents, and found that political topics become more complex over time, while the contrary is true concerning accidents, implying there is no uniform 'digitalization' effect. Boczkowski and de Santos (2007) studied content homogenization and how public affairs developed over time in an Argentinean context and found that homogenization increased and public affairs coverage decreased.

All in all, there are very few empirical studies that inform the issues at hand, and no studies have investigated how the coverage of different topics has evolved over time. While there are indeed some

factors those foster changes in news content, especially online, there are other factors that hinder or alleviate change.

### **Factors mediating change in digital news**

Despite the fact that the digital environment allows for other modes of publishing, regardless of a normative framework, there are dynamics that work in favour of the status quo or incremental changes. The theoretical framework of neo-institutionalism implies that news organizations will both differ in their coverage and be guided by their past behaviour and history when facing a new situation (Dunaway 2011; Lowrey 2011). Thus, changes will be slow and differences in publishing tradition – tabloid, morning, local – will affect how new settings are appropriated. In the context of publishing tradition, it is important to point out that local media have received very little attention, especially by online journalism researchers, although it is the local and regional media that produces the bulk of the news (Reader & Hatcher 2012).

Another theoretical framework pointing out a potentially important dynamic is *niche theory* that posits that it is imperative for media corporations not to overcrowd the same market with identical products (Chan-Olmsted & Chang 2003; Mierzejewska 2011). Accordingly, news sites need to find an identity and a position on a market with limited possibilities for advertising and audience revenues (Hermida & Thurman 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring 2011). In the setting of online publishing, where there are no spatial or temporal limitations in the production and distribution of news, all media organizations compete in the same market. However, while some dimensions might change others are firmly rooted in time and space. Concerning news consumption, there is little reason to assume that people will be equally interested in what happens in other towns, as in their own, even though it only requires one additional mouse click. On the contrary, research suggests that personal motivation and individual preferences become more important in a fragmented media environment (Prior 2007).

Although user preferences are at the centre of the tabloidization debate, production conditions must be considered as well. Hamilton (2004) aptly points out that taste alone cannot explain content but that economic factors, such as production cost, advertiser interest and, ultimately, profitability also drive content. Thus, in an online environment where direct revenue from users is small, other economic factors may rise in importance.

Further, countries are structured differently in terms of what role different media fulfil and the context in which content is produced and consumed. This makes comparisons both difficult and vital (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Both Sweden and the UK, the setting of this study, differ in terms of how large and what audiences' newspapers reach. Newspaper reading, especially of local papers, is more widespread in Sweden as compared to the UK and income does not predict newspaper reading in Sweden although it does in the UK (Elvestad & Blekesaune 2008). Additionally, in the UK, the audience is stratified according to class (McNair 2000) while the same clear division does not exist in Sweden. Thus, a newspaper like *The Guardian* might possibly have to continue to cater to their 'elite publics' reading preferences while the Swedish *Dagens Nyheter* may have a larger and more diverse following (relatively speaking) online compared to their English counterparts. To put it differently, many factors that affect

conditions in online publishing beyond technological affordances suggest that news site evolution will vary.

The expected differences, although theoretically rather than empirically grounded, propose that tabloids would change quicker and more profoundly than broadsheets and local/regional papers, due to the ability to cater even more to audience preferences online that would fit tabloids better than the other papers, while all news media would move towards publishing more 'tabloid' news and less news about events concerning society at large issues. Furthermore, this would have a bigger and quicker impact in competitive media systems such as the UK, compared to corporatists media systems in Sweden, for example. In particular, we could expect, drawing on previous research, that entertainment, sports, crime, and accidents would increase at the expense of news covering politics, economics, and social issues.

To summarize, not many studies of online news focus on content per se and those that do rarely assess how news content evolves longitudinally. Currently no studies compare publishing traditions by countries and subsequently the purpose of this paper is to compare how the content of online newspapers from different publishing traditions (broadsheet, tabloid, and local/regional) and different countries (Sweden and the UK) develops over time. As the literature review indicates, there are some dynamics that suggest there will be major uniform changes while other dynamics suggest small, dispersed patterns in change.

Although there are different ways to measure tabloidization, in this study, as proposed by several researchers (Gripsrud, 2000; Klein, 2000; Sparks, 2000), the proportions given to different topics will be used. Further, while news topics are sometimes contested (Reinemann et al. 2011), they are a frequently used and a widely accepted method to measure proportions of content (Quandt 2008; Sjøvaag et al. 2012).

More specifically, the research questions asked are:

*RQ1:* To what extent does the content composition (i.e. share of different news topics) change within the same news site (RQ1a), between different news traditions (RQ1b) and in different countries (RQ1c) over time?

In addition to describing a general trend of how news content evolves (if at all), the result from this part of the study will allow for further inquiry whereas (RQ2) the publishing tradition will prevail (as implied by neo-institutional theory), there will be a niche effect (differentiation between news sites) or a homogeneity effect (increased similarity between news sites)?

## Method

Conducting content analysis on online news is challenging. Although the Internet can indeed be used as an archive (Krippendorff, 2013), this does not necessarily imply that news sites have archived any or all of their news items during a specific time period, or that the archive is representing what was once published or meant to be archived (Brugger, 2009). Consequently, one literally needs to travel back in time to see what was actually published at a specific point in time. This is obviously impossible, so for the purpose of this study, the Wayback Machine (WM) was used. The WM is hosted by archive.org and has been running since 1996. As of January, 2015 it has captured an impressive 452 billion webpages. Research seeking to validate WM suggests that it is a feasible alternative (Murphy, Hashim & O'Connor 2007) and it has been used in previous research in online news (Weber 2012). While WM does capture news sites, the archive

does not facilitate a full sample of all the worlds' news sites over time. Rather, it has some gaps; especially in the earlier years when the news sites were downloaded a few times a year compared to several daily downloads today. Furthermore, many of the earlier downloads are, fully or partially, broken making analysis impossible and therefore engender several limitations of what can be researched.

Working within these limitations, this study collected a week-sized sample of six news sites during 2002, 2007 and 2012. Ideally, a constructed week should have been used but the incompleteness of the archive in the earlier years made this impossible so for that reason the seven days were randomly selected. Accordingly, the results have to be read with this limitation in mind. The rationale used to select these particular years were: 1) In 2002 shovel logic (Barnhurst 2012; Bardoel, 2002; Scott, 2005) still dominated online publishing suggesting that the tradition of the parent medium would indeed be reflected online; 2) Prior research (Domingo et al. 2008; Author) suggests that the acclimatization to online publishing had begun around the mid-2000s implying that 2007 would be a suitable measuring point to find potential changes since 2002; and 3) 2012 comes after the decline of traditional publishing has picked up speed with more people moving their news consumption online.

Although there are many news sites that have been publishing during the ten year period of this study, only a few have been successfully archived in the WM at all three measuring points. After extensive screening, the news sites selected, for this study were *The Guardian*, *Dagens Nyheter* (quality morning papers), *Daily Mirror*, *Aftonbladet* (tabloids), *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, and *Yorkshire Post* (local/regional). Sweden and the UK were chosen since they represent different media systems (the democratic corporatist and the liberal system, respectively) that may impact how the news sites appropriate the online space (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

The sample was randomly collected using days as sampling units and analysed the latest (in case of several archived versions per day) working version of the stored archive. All front page news item for each day, totalling 7 447 news items, were collected and subjected to analysis. A news item was considered a graphically and thematically distinguishable entity (e.g. a news story separated from other news stories with bars and lines) with editorial content; advertisement and navigational hyperlinks were excluded. The front page was chosen as it is the most important space on a website, a showcase for the news that the news organization values at the moment (Bucy, 2004; Quandt, 2008; author), and also the page on which WM organizes its archives. 102 news items (equivalent to 1.4 per cent of the sample) were impossible to assess due to broken links, reducing the total number of valid news items to 7345.

	<b>2002</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b><i>Aftonbladet</i> (Sweden)</b>	608	686	1250	2544
<b><i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (Sweden)</b>	189	400	829	1418
<b><i>Helsingborgs Dagblad</i> (Sweden)</b>	126	601	614	1341
<b><i>The Guardian</i> (UK)</b>	156	359	290	805
<b><i>Daily Mirror</i> (UK)</b>	88	182	403	673
<b><i>Yorkshire Post</i> (UK)</b>	64	247	253	564
<b>Total</b>	1231	2475	3639	7345

Table 1: Number of valid news items organized by year and news site

Table 1 shows the number of valid cases (news items) in the study organized by year and news site. No two studies on news topics use the same categories and occasionally separate categories are grouped together (see Quandt 2008; Sjoovaag et al. 2012). Consequently, this study draws from the past most frequently used categories such as politics, business/economics, crime and others, as well as some categories that are not measured consistently such as lifestyle, environment, and science (see Table 2 for complete list). All categories have been differentiated in the coding procedure.

Two trained coders analysed the sample for news topics and identification variables. A Cohen's kappa coefficient on 4.8 % ( $N=349$ ) of the sample yielded a satisfactory 0.73 result on news topics after one revision.

Percentage is used to report the results in the tables below. In addition, Pearson's correlation tests have been used to see whereas the differences in percentages between topics, years, outlets and countries are statistically significant.

## Results

Table 2 presents the results of the first research question asked: RQ1 To what extent does the content composition (i.e. share of different news topics) change within the same news site (RQ1a), between different news traditions (RQ1b) and countries (RQ1c) over time?

First of all, it is clear that the number of news items published increased over time on all news sites (see Table 1) save *The Guardian* from 2007 to 2012. Thus, the news audience is offered more news items from which to choose. It is also evident that the Swedish news site, for reasons hard to decipher in a content analysis, publish many more news items on their frontpages compared to the English sites in every year. Apparent in Table 2, most news items fall under six or seven topics, depending on year and news site. The following presentation will focus on these topics, namely: politics, economics, social issues, sport, entertainment, crime, and lifestyle.

Table 2: Changes within content composition in the same news site, between different news traditions, and different countries over time

News site	Year	Topic														
		Pol.	Eco.	Soc.	Sport	Acc.	Cult.	Ent.	Weat.	tech.	Media	Env.	Crime	Life.	Other	Total
Aftonbladet	2002(n=608)	14	6	9	4	5	3	13	3	5	2	0	13	14	8	100
	2007 (n=686)	7***	4	5**	10***	5	2	15	1*	5	1*	1*	13	21***	9	100
	2012(n=1250)	9	2***	6	18***	4	2	19*	0*	3*	1	0***	5***	22	8	100
Dagens Nyheter	2002 (n=189)	21	13	15	16	4	5	6	3	3	1	1	7	4	2	100
	2007 (n=400)	11***	9	9*	8**	4	7	15**	3	2	2	2	10	14***	6*	100
	2012(n=829)	11	7	11	10	3	8	13	0***	3	2	1	9	13	8	100
Helsingborgs D.	2002 (n=126)	8	7	22	15	10	3	3	2	1	1	1	17	1	10	100
	2007 (n=601)	9	9	9***	16	6	7	9*	0*	2	0	1	11	9**	10	100
	2012 (n=614)	9	2***	10	17	5	3**	14*	1	2	2**	1	10	12*	10	100
Guardian	2002 (n=156)	34	2	12	9	1	12	14	1	1	6	0	3	2	4	100
	2007 (n=359)	22**	5	9	13	2	7	11	1	4	4	1	3	12***	6	100
	2012(n=290)	29*	1*	8	13	2	4	16	0	3	5	1	6	5**	6	100
Daily Mirror	2002 (n=88)	23	0	24	10	1	0	33	0	1	0	0	8	0	0	100
	2007 (n=182)	7***	0	7***	33***	0	0	36	1	0	0	0	10	5*	1	100
	2012(n=403)	3	5**	1**	24*	1	0	27*	0	1	1	0	5*	21***	9***	100
Yorkshire Post	2002 (n=64)	19	14	5	22	0	0	23	11	2	0	0	3	0	2	100
	2007 (n=247)	13	2***	15*	19	1	4	8***	3**	2	4	1	5	15***	7	100
	2012(n=253)	8*	13***	8**	25	2	4	9	4	2	0***	1	5	14	6	100

The coverage on politics, business/economics, and social issues decrease significantly on most news sites over time, although the UK sites also show an increase in some areas in 2012 vis-à-vis 2007 as *The Guardian* increased their coverage on politics from 22 to 29 per cent and *Daily Mirror* and *Yorkshire Post* increased coverage on economics from 0 to 5 and 2 to 13 per cent, respectively. However, *The Guardian* had a lower score on politics in 2012, 29 per cent, compared to 2002, 34 per cent. The increase of coverage on economics for *Daily Mirror* in 2012 should be viewed as a result from the lack of any coverage in past years.

The UK sites covered more on politics than their Swedish counterparts in 2002, but that had reversed in 2012 (except for *The Guardian*, as opposed to *Dagens Nyheter*). At the *Daily Mirror*, coverage of politics and broader social issues is almost absent in 2012, 6 per cent, while they comprised close to half the news stories, 47 per cent, ten years earlier. Politics was among the top three topics on all news sites in 2002, save *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, while in 2012, only the two national broadsheet sites, *The Guardian* and *Dagens Nyheter*, had politics among their three most common topics. Of all the news sites, only *The Guardian* listed politics as the most popular topic in 2012 with 29 per cent. On *Dagens Nyheter* politics was the most popular topic in 2002, 21 per cent, while it was the shared third most popular topic, with 11 per cent, in 2012. It is fairly obvious from Table 2 that political coverage is in decline regardless of publishing context.

The coverage of sports increases regardless of country whereas only *Dagens Nyheter* has less coverage of sports in 2012, 10 per cent, compared to 16 per cent in 2002; it is only the tabloids in both countries that have a significant ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) increase (and at least doubling the share of sports in 2012 as compared to 2002).

Interestingly, there are also some notable statistically significant *decreases* in the coverage of crime in the *Aftonbladet* and *Daily Mirror* tabloids leaving these sites with the *least* coverage of crime of all sites in 2012, both with 5 per cent, as compared to the *Daily Mirror* having the *highest* crime coverage in England in 2002 with 8 per cent and *Aftonbladet* having the second highest share of crime with 13 per cent (after *Helsingborgs Dagblad*) in 2002.

In two of the UK papers, *Daily Mirror* and *Yorkshire Post*, there is a decrease in entertainment from 33 and 23 per cent in 2002 to 27 and 9 per cent ( $p$  at least  $\leq 0.05$ ), respectively. In Sweden all three sites have a statistically significant increase ( $p$  at least  $\leq 0.05$ ) in entertainment topics where *Aftonbladet* goes from 13 per cent in 2002 to 19 per cent in 2012, *Dagens Nyheter* from 6 to 13 per cent and *Helsingborgs Dagblad* from 3 to 14 per cent during the period.

The real winner - lifestyle (home decoration, food, clothing, leisure, travelling, etcetera), is the only topic that has a statistically significant increase in all six news sites in the ten years covered in the study. In 2002, lifestyle was almost absent in the sites, save *Aftonbladet* with 14 per cent. In 2012, all sites except *The Guardian*, with lifestyle being the sixth most common subject at 5 per cent, have it listed at least as the third most common topic with shares ranging from 12 to 22 per cent. Lifestyle has a larger share of the news than politics, economics and social issues on all sites except *The Guardian* in 2012 while the scenario was almost the opposite in 2002.

Taken together, it is evident that the content composition (RQ1a) has changed over time in all of the news sites, whereas the biggest change is a greater focus on lifestyle topics and less focus on politics (though *The Guardian* seems to have changed less than the other sites).

Comparing the overall news coverage (i.e. not topic by topic) on all three news sites in each country (e.g. different publishing traditions as posed in RQ1b) year-by-year, there is a significant difference in Sweden in 2002, 2007 ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) and 2012 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Going further into the data and comparing the different publishing traditions as asked in RQ1b, there are significant differences between all news sites in Sweden in 2002 on at least the  $p \leq 0.01$  level. In 2007, there was a significant difference ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) between *Aftonbladet* and the two other sites, while there is no significant difference between *Helsingborgs Dagblad* and *Dagens Nyheter (DN)*. In 2012, there is still a significant difference between *Aftonbladet* and *DN* ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) but not in any other configuration, which indicates that the news sites are becoming more similar over time but that differences still persist.

Comparing the 2012 datasets from *Dagens Nyheter* and *Helsingborgs Dagblad* with *Aftonbladets* 2002 dataset, reveal that there are no significant differences, which imply that news composition, in general, is similar which can also be seen by visually comparing the numbers in Table 2. Accordingly, *Aftonbladet* has become even more of a tabloid over time (as seen in Table 2) than the others, but they too, have moved towards the tabloids' topic composition as it looked in 2002. Overall, it seems that there is a trend towards homogenization, as asked in RQ2, in the Swedish media system, as the differences between the outlets decrease over time, suggesting that the local and the quality papers are abandoning their publishing tradition by publishing online.

Making the same comparisons for the UK sites, there are *no* significant differences in 2002 and 2007 between any of the sites considering *overall* news coverage. However, in 2012, a significant difference ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) is found. Comparing the papers one by one, the Daily Mirror differs significantly ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) from both *The Guardian* and *Yorkshire Post* in 2012 while there are no significant difference between the latter two. Consequently, in the UK there is a trend towards divergence between the tabloid and the other publishing traditions over time and, subsequently, causing a niche rather than a homogenization result (as asked in RQ2).

Comparing the same publishing tradition (i.e. tabloid versus tabloid in each country, as posed by RQ1c) year-by-year shows that there were significant differences in 2002 and 2007 ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) between *Aftonbladet* and *Daily Mirror* while that difference had disappeared in 2012. Regarding the quality papers, there were no significant differences in 2002 between *Dagens Nyheter* and *The Guardian* but that had changed in 2007 ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) and 2012 ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). *Helsingborgs Dagblad* and *Yorkshire Post* were significantly different in 2002 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), not significantly different in 2007 and different again in 2012 ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). Given the fluctuating results between the countries, it does not seem that the geographical location or the media systems are all-out important factors. However, save the tabloids, the UK papers seem to have a larger share focusing more on serious news than their Swedish counterparts, as evident in Table 2.

Overall, based on the results presented in Table 2, as well as the correlations in the comparisons above, it seems there are changes in news composition in all news sites, where there is a trend for less news about complex issues and an increased focus on lifestyle, sports, and entertainment topics to some degree. However, there are differences between sites and countries. For example, *The Guardian* seems to be

much more focused on the complex issues throughout the period than both their UK siblings, as well as their Swedish counterpart *Dagens Nyheter*. In relation to the other news outlets, *The Guardian* has, in fact, focused even more on societal news over time since the gap between them have increase. Hence, *The Guardian* is less elitist than before as it has decreased its coverage on complex issues, but even more elitist than the rest.

It is primarily the Swedish sites and the UK tabloid site that have changed the most towards tabloidization, though the other sites are also affected. Merging news about politics, business/economics and social issues (arguably the topics benefitting knowledge about society the most) *Aftonbladet* retain 59% of their 2002 coverage in 2012, *Dagens Nyheter* 59%, *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 57%, *The Guardian* 79%, *Daily Mirror* 19% and *Yorkshire Post* 76%. Conversely, merging news on sports, entertainment and lifestyle (arguably topics that do not inform readers about political processes and policy issues in society to the same degree) there is an increase on all sites. *Aftonbladet* has increased its coverage in those areas with 90% in 2012, *Dagens Nyheter* with 38%, *Helsingborgs Dagblad* with 263%, *The Guardian* with 36%, *Daily Mirror* with 67% and *Yorkshire Post* with 7% compared to 2002.

Summarizing the results, there is an overall tabloidization effect in terms of news content composition regardless of country or publishing tradition; although it could be more aptly described as a change in lifestyle and political journalism, as it is in these topics, that the most widespread and most significant growth and decline are found. Additionally, tabloids put more focus on sports over time. A noteworthy *absence* in increased coverage, in contrast to what much previous research predicts, is noted primarily in the news categories accidents and crime but also to some extent in entertainment.

## Discussion

Compared to the research on analogue media showing that changes are slow, the tabloidization process online seems to be much faster, although caution needs to be applied since no equivalent data exists for the analogue outlets of these media corporations and we need to keep in mind that analogue content is being repurposed as online content. Many of the changes in content composition had already happened in 2007 while continuing, stabilizing or, in some cases, even reversing in 2012. The comparative approach of the study, and arguably the most important results, also reveals that *all* media types, regardless of publishing history or context, move in the same *tabloidization* direction indicating that, whatever forces are at work, the development happens on a large scale, surpassing media traditions and systems. Further research will show if, as would be expected from these results, this scenario is similarly matched in other countries and outlets and with other measurements of tabloidization than the composition of news topics. Also, it would be crucial to see if these changes occur in the analogue versions of these news sites as well. Nonetheless, there are also somewhat bewildering results from a tabloidization theory perspective. The decrease in politics and social issues runs well with a tabloidization process as does the increase in sports. However, the decrease in entertainment on the UK sites and crime on the tabloid sites contradicts that development, as does the increase of business/economy news on two UK sites.

The literature on online news stresses the immediacy of online news and how news can be included and adjusted according to the click-streams, as they happen, and the websites can be filled with crime and other concrete and crowd-pleasing stories rather than public affairs (Bird 2009; Author; Nerone & Barnhurst, 2001; Thurman & Myllylahti 2009). It seems that all stars align for this kind of 'tabloid' news and yet the share of topics on crime and accidents *decrease* or remain unchanged in coverage, while something so 'slow' as lifestyle really takes off. In order to assess this development it is necessary to include production costs and benefits into the analysis and possibly, while not included in this paper, wider cultural developments in society and in the media (e.g. commercialization), but data from analogue media is needed for comparison to be warranted. According to Hamilton (2004), commercial news must ultimately be profitable to be produced. Considering that original reporting inevitably cost money and that some news are more interesting for advertisers than others it might not be so surprising that, for instance, accidents go down and lifestyle goes up. An accident or crime will take some journalistic resources to report and the shelf life of that news item is short, as new events will inevitably occur and demand additional resources. A story about home decoration or travelling abroad does not have the same actuality and can stay on the front page for days, weeks or months and might be partly or fully subsidized by corporations within the field, thus cutting production costs. Conversely, while accidents, celebrities and entertainment might be interesting and attract readership, it might be harder to convert this traffic into people booking vacations, overhauling their kitchens or buying the latest car (and thus creating advertising revenue), while the connection is imminent in lifestyle journalism. This finding is intriguing, especially since tabloids previously have been criticized for sensationalism and emotionalism (Esser 1999; Örnebring & Jönsson 2004; Reinemann et al. 2011; Sparks & Tulloch 2000). However, this is still a form of tabloidization viewed from the perspective that lifestyle news is about the private rather than the public sphere (Sparks, 2000). The surge in the lifestyle section can be seen as an increase in guidance and instructions on how to consume and do identity work rather than addressing the readers as citizens in need of qualified information.

Also, connected to the production context, the tabloids have increased their sport coverage, which is marked by more predictable and longer news-cycles than some other news. There can be a talk-up before the match, live-coverage during it, and a post-match analysis afterwards allowing the news site to feed off other media coverage, making the audience do a large chunk of the conversation and marketing while planning and conserving their own resources accordingly.

Immediacy and clicks are often claimed to be important traits and determinants of online news (Currah 2009; MacGregor 2007; McKenzie et al. 2011). Judging from these results, and as pointed out by Hinderson (2013), a much slower publishing rhythm that runs along with, and are as or more important as immediacy, is also demonstrated. Seemingly contradictory, these different publishing rhythms fit within a wider concept of upheaval, or rather disturbance, of the time-space continuum due to the virtual and reprogrammable nature of digital media. The result is a myriad of diverse publishing rhythms, guided by editorial planning and needs rather than user attention predominantly, that co-exists and, tentatively, provides an opportunity to offer an, increasingly similar, assemblage of breaking news, longer reports as well as more traditional magazine journalism simultaneously, regardless of publishing history.

The overall changes in news coverage are somewhat inconsistent as there are some differences between the Swedish sites and some of the UK sites. First of all, these irregularities suggest that there is no

unconditional digitalization effect on media content although everyone is moving in the same general direction. Looking at the specifics of the two countries studied existing market size might help explain the observed patterns. In the UK, with over 64 million citizens in the UK alone (not to mention English-speaking people all over the world), there is a better possibility to create an online niche market while the possibilities in Sweden are more limited with nine million citizens and a much smaller language pool. Thus, the variance in the results with homogenization in Sweden and divergence between *Daily Mirror* and the other sites in the UK can be partly explained at least. In the UK, market size and market differentiation appears to allow the non-tabloids to remain closer to their publishing tradition compared with their Swedish counterparts. Conversely, the high coverage of politics/economics/social issues at *Daily Mirror* in 2002 may be related to perceptions of what audience was online in 2002 and their particular preferences. These observations points to the need for more research into media strategies in general and multichannel publishing in particular, as well as research on market size and homogenization effects, especially since the changes happen fast online compared to their analogue counterparts. Further, the significant increase in lifestyle journalism revealed in this study calls for additional research in this area, which is usually neglected by scholars of journalism studies.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the results presented here are in percentages. In absolute numbers there were, for instance, more news items about politics in 2012 than in 2002 on *Aftonbladet*. So anyone interested in politics has more to read in that area (regardless of *how* politics, or any other topic for that matter, is being framed – an issue worthy of further exploration) and those not interested have, similarly, easier to opt out of it emphasizing the importance of individual preferences and consumption patterns (Prior 2007). A limitation to the study is the restricted sample, to some extent limited by the WM, only covering two countries and one type of news site from each country, and that news coverage may possibly be affected by local and social factors that are not visible in a content analysis.

The discussion about tabloidization is often related to the need of an informed citizenry and their ability to perform their democratic duties (although there are admittedly different views of how this is best accomplished). As news consumption is increasingly moving online (De Waal & Schoenbach 2010) the results from this study indicate that those who chose only to expose themselves to online news are being offered proportionally less news informing them about society and being offered more news addressing them as consumers.

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