Journalists in The Netherlands

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Journalism and Infotainment

Commercialism, corporate business interests, internationalization of media markets are but some of the developments about which most contemporary media critics and scholars agree, that these are and have been profoundly shaping the culture industry in (Western) society (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992; McManus, 1994; McChesney, 1999). As argued in the first chapter, two developments in journalism that follow directly from changing and evolving media market developments are equally valid in Australia, Germany, Great Britain, The United States as well as in The Netherlands: (increased) media concentration and infotainment. As argued in the first two chapters, one can study the articulation of infotainment to Dutch journalists and journalism in two distinct ways. In this chapter those ways are addressed firstly by looking at the basic, occupational and professional characteristics of journalists working for specific infotainment genres, secondly by analyzing the professional knowledge and views of experts in the field regarding their work.

As a first step, both of these questions were partly answered by the analysis of the data regarding professional characteristics from the main survey sample (see chapter III). Dutch journalists in general seem to be quite supportive of a more or less entertaining role for the newsmedia, as 49% said this is an important or even very important part of their job (compared to 47% in Germany and 40% in the United States). This 49% is distributed more or less evenly across the entire media spectrum. As infotainment and media concentration are generally attributed to increasing commercialization of the media (see Esser, 1999), it is important to note here that I found commercial goals of newsmedia – identified as advertising-revenue goals – particularly shared among journalists working for magazines and television.

In this chapter the full analyses on the data of the subsample of infotainment journalists are offered in detail (for details on the sampling procedure see the second chapter of this book). As a second step – and similar to the thematic chapters on journalism and multiculturalism and the Internet – we conducted a range of expert interviews with leading tabloid editors in The Netherlands, in order to further study and understand the relationships between working for a 'typical' infotainment genre in the Dutch media and the process of giving meaning to one's own professional identity in contemporary journalism. First an overview is offered of earlier research and theory regarding
journalism and infotainment, after which the survey data analysis follows. The sections thereafter cover the ground of the design and analysis of the (14) expert interviews with tabloid editors.

**Journalism and Infotainment**

A specific difference between the theme of infotainment, and the discussion of multiculturalism and online journalism in The Netherlands, is that commercialism and entertainment have always been part and parcel of the newsmedia – at least since the early 19th century when news became a commodity, a way for a company to make profit, a way for people (writers) to earn a living (see for example: Schudson, 1978; Baldasty, 2000; Blokker, 1989 for a Dutch similar perspective). Scholars like Van Zoonen (1998a: 125) and Gripsrud (2000: 287) argue that it is part of the mythology of journalism to suggest that commercial and entertainment interests have only recently come to the fore. The earlier cited work of Tunstall (1970) has shown that advertising-revenue goals have been an accepted part of the professional identity of (certain specialist) journalists. Schudson (1978; 1995) correspondingly argued that commercialism and entertainment have always been part of the (history of professionalization in the) newsmedia. Dahlgren (1992) and Winch (1997) claim that the perceived differences between entertainment and news are a social construction of mainstream, ‘hard’ news journalists to differentiate, define and legitimize themselves.

Nevertheless, what gives the theme a sense of urgency and immediacy when it comes to the daily practices, norms and values of journalists at the time of writing, is the perceived blurring of the historical distinction between information and entertainment in the news which happens in particular in terms of new genres (cf. docusoaps, talk shows), styles (‘intimate’ journalism, public journalism), and topics (cf. the entertainment industry becomes ‘hard’ news) in contemporary journalism (Schudson, 1995: 179-181; Brookes, 1998; Esser, 1999). Van Zoonen (1998b) has argued that even though infotainment can be seen as a historical feature of journalism, the growing concern about these developments for journalists may be explained by the fact that it used to be clear which realms of journalism could be considered to be entertaining – i.e. lifestyle, gossip and human interest genres – and which were seen as in the ‘public interest’. The findings in the main survey among Dutch reporters suggest that commercial interests are somewhat typical for magazine and television journalism, but on the other hand also reveal that ‘mixed’ sets of goals are shared by (a slight) majority of Dutch journalists.⁴

Content analyses in several countries suggest that televised and printed news has become more entertainment focused in for example the United
States, Great Britain, Germany and The Netherlands, particularly so since the 1980s (see Hallin, 1992; Barnhurst and Muntz, 1997; Esser, 1999; for The Netherlands see: Brants and Neijens, 1998; Van Praag and Brants, 2000). Sparks (2000: 3) suggest that one could speak of a spill-over of tabloid news values and topics – such as entertainment, gossip, scandal – into the mainstream prestige media. Esser (1999: 293) argues that one should in fact study the ‘quality’ press in order to analyze the impact tabloidization has on the news media. In The Netherlands, Costera Meijer (2001a) suggests a framework for analyzing the ‘public quality’ of popular journalism, where she aims to enrich mainstream news genres with what popular genres (like tabloids, talk shows) do better: incorporating and maintaining audiences, focusing on life stories and human interest.

Studies by Van Zoonen (1998a) and Sparks (2000) suggest there exists a more or less explicit consensus within and about journalism on which sections or genres can be considered more ‘infotaining’ than others. Sparks (2000: 14-15) in particular defines this infotainment field in the print media as the ‘newsstand tabloid press’, typified by a concentration on private life of individuals specifically in terms of scandal, sports and entertainment. It is this contemporary demarcation that has led to the research questions as formulated above. The signaled blurring of the public-private distinction in journalism therefore particularly impacts upon the journalists’ sense of autonomy and professional self-perception. As in the two previous chapters, I will explore and analyze this impact in the qualitative phase of the project by looking specifically at those journalists directly involved: for multiculturalism the specialists and experts in the Dutch newsrooms, for new media developments the online reporters and for infotainment processes the editors of those media in The Netherlands corresponding closest to Sparks’ definition of newsstand tabloids. In the quantitative phase I have – as in the other two thematic parts of this book – added a specific subsample of journalists in order to better grasp the articulation of infotainment to Dutch journalism and the characteristics of the reporters and editors involved.

**Infotainment journalists in The Netherlands**

The history of media professionalization and developments in journalism regarding the rise and establishment of entertainment (genres) in journalism – as reported in chapter 1 – shows that infotainment in newsmedia can be seen as a significant area of change and challenges to the norms and values of journalists. Like in the cases of ethnic minority journalists and online reporters, I included a subsample of so-called ‘infotainment journalists’ in the survey (N=80; for details on this particular sampling procedure, see chapter 11). The
report on the basic, occupational and professional characteristics of this sample follows here.

**Basic Characteristics.** The infotainment sector in Dutch journalism is a bit more balanced in terms of gender (39% versus 32% in the main sample), and much more balanced regarding age, as 48% (versus 28%) is younger than 36 years. The level of education is similar, with almost one-third of reporters entering the genre with a BA-degree in journalism. This is somewhat surprising, as the four schools for journalism in The Netherlands do not support their students in finding internships, contacts or employment in the infotainment sector – nor do these schools offer specific courses in 'popular journalism'.

Like in the overall sample, 2% of the infotainment journalists reported having a non-Dutch ethnic background.

**Occupational Characteristics.** One has to note specific sample effects regarding the occupational context of these respondents. In the sampling procedure we found more established infotainment programs and formats in the magazine and broadcasting sector, than for example in national newspaper sections (see Lamkamp, 2000). Infotainment journalists work under the same conditions as 'other' journalists, although almost half of them work for broadcast organizations (45% versus 29% in the main sample), which finding supports the claim that infotainment is a genre in journalism which has particularly flourished in the concept of the (television) talkshow. The types of specializations respondents reported show that this segment of journalists is not likely to process news regarding financial or economic issues, foreign or domestic politics (including multicultural issues), and new media technologies (versus other categories like crime, lifestyle, youth culture, art) – this suggests a clear boundary between 'regular' journalism and 'popular' journalism, which distinction Tuchman typified as 'hard' versus 'soft' news (1978: 47-49). The respondents think their audience is a bit more interested in education and health issues (58% versus 52%), art (44% versus 38%), show business news (48% versus 40%), and topics regarding the multicultural society (40% versus 28% in the main sample). They also feel that their public is a bit less keen to learn about economic issues (21% versus 37%). In terms of getting and rating audience feedback, the infotainment journalists gave similar answers to those offered by their colleagues. Perhaps these 'infotainers' are a bit more acutely aware of their public's wants and needs, tough: more than half said to use e-mail for more or less regular interaction with the audience (53% versus 32% in the main sample).
PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS. Two-thirds of infotainment journalists feel that one of their most important functions is to provide entertainment and relaxation – versus half of the main sample (65% versus 49%, adding answer categories “important” and “very important”). On the other hand it seems that it is the group of ‘infotainers’ who are most fervently opposed to consciously providing a good environment for advertisers: 68% said this is not important at all for their job as a journalist, versus 50% of the main sample. This suggests that being an infotainment journalist is for these respondents not synonymous with having a commercial attitude or seeking advertising-revenue (using Tunstall’s terminology).

Like with the other subsamples, a factor analysis of items pertaining to journalists’ role perceptions was conducted (see Table 1 for full results). This analysis shows that the three roles observed in the main sample (of journalists endorsing non-revenue, audience-revenue and advertising-revenue goals) are also supported by the infotainment reporters. A closer look suggests however, that the dominant role for this group of journalists seems to mean something quite different. The first factor shows a combination of both a public and a private orientation: being both critical and focused on public institutions (businesses, government) as well as aiming to develop the intellectual and cultural interests of the public and giving (disadvantaged) people a voice. This perhaps

| Table 6.1 |
| Items and factor loadings (varimax rotated) for infotainment journalists’ role perceptions (N=80) |
| Media roles | Factor | 1 | 2 | 3 | Communality |
| Be an adversary of public officials and businesses | .77 | -.23 | .66 |
| Investigate claims government | .76 | -.12 | .62 |
| Stand up for disadvantaged people | .73 | .26 | .61 |
| Develop interests of the public | .50 | -.42 | -.19 | .47 |
| Reach widest possible audience | .73 | | |
| Have an influence on the public/political agenda | .35 | -.58 | .41 | .69 |
| Give people a chance to express their views | .12 | .57 | .36 |
| Get news to the public quickly | .55 | .24 | .55 |
| Provide a good environment for advertisers | -.18 | .84 | .74 |
| Provide entertainment | .14 | .71 | .64 |
| Signaling new trends | .12 | .60 |
| Provide analysis and interpretation | .31 | -.13 | .48 |

Notes: only loadings above .10 (or -.10) are reported in this table. Boldface indicates highest factor loadings. Factor 1 explains 23%, factor 2 explains 15% and factor 3 explains 12% of the variance.
gives evidence to the claim, that infotainment not only means the blurring of
the lines between that what is considered as 'information' and what is 'entertainment', but also between the seemingly clear lines between a 'public' and
'private' focus of journalists (see Hallin, 1996; Brants, 1998; Sparks, 2000 for a
discussion on this claim).

Van Zoonen (1998b) has argued, that popular journalism needs its own ethical
codes and guidelines, since the kind of newsgathering and reporting one does
in such genres brings about more (and sharper) conflicts with established
moral codes in the profession (which codes are generally based on mainstream
'hard' news journalism, see for example Evers, 1994). A comparison between
the main sample and the infotainment sample on issues regarding ethics of
newsgathering shows differences on two of the eight 'ethical' items (at signifi-
cance level p=0,00): 44% of infotainment journalists say it can be justified to
pay for information (versus 27% of the main sample) and 12% would not un-
equivocally protect a source's confidentiality (versus 6%). When interpreting
these results, one should first consider the fact that almost half of the 80 re-
spondents work in broadcasting, which means that for them it is quite com-
mon to pay sources to come to the studio for interviews – which is something
other than the kind of 'chequebook journalism' this particular item refers to
(the acceptance score for this item is indeed significantly higher among radio
and television journalists than among newspaper and magazine reporters).
Regarding the second finding, one has to note that a vast majority of journal-
ists still feels that one should honor the confidential relationship with a source
at all costs. What these two findings definitely warrant is further investigation
into the kind of ethics pertaining to infotainment genres in contemporary
journalism. Ethical perceptions were therefore explicitly included in the semi-
structured design of the in-depth expert interviews.

Expert Interviews

The qualitative method of analyzing the issues related to infotainment jour-
nalism in The Netherlands is the same as in the chapters on multiculturalism
and the Internet: the transcripts of a series of in-depth interviews with a spe-
cific group of experts have been analyzed looking at the full range of topics
mentioned, and constructing different interpretative repertoires applied by
these journalists to give meaning to their everyday work. For determining
whom to interview, I used the definitions of tabloid and popular journalism by
Sparks (2000: 14-15) and Van Zoonen (1998a: 127). Both authors identify the
tabloid as the archetype of popular journalism. The 'ultimate' form thereof is
the supermarket tabloid – a genre non-existent in The Netherlands (besides a
brief and unsuccessful experiment with a magazine called *De Nieuwe* in the early 1990s), but well established in the Anglo-American media sphere. Prime examples of this type of tabloid are the *Weekly World News* and the *National Enquirer* in the US, *Bild* in Germany, and the *News of the World* or *The Sun* in Great Britain.⁶ Van Zoonen identifies several in-between genres, of which gossip magazines (in terms of Sparks: the newsstand tabloid and serious-popular press) can be singled out as a type of popular journalism present in all media-savvy societies, including The Netherlands. She argues that there are considerable varieties in the gossip press in different countries (1998b: 114). One of the few scholars who have researched and published about journalists working for popular genres, Elizabeth Bird (who studied people working for weekly supermarket tabloid *National Enquirer* in the US), offers a more general view on the phenomenon: “Although their emphases are different, newspapers and tabloids are located along the same storytelling continuum. Tabloids report on real people and events, and their staff members are journalists” (1990:386). Whereas the Dutch media market has no tabloids, it does have its fair share of weekly celebrity and gossip magazines, breakfast and daytime TV lifestyle talk shows and lifestyle sections in newspapers, which segmentation has informed the theoretical sample of infotainment journalists used in the phone survey (see the previous section on results of the survey). For the in-depth interviews all the (chief) editors of the main newsstand tabloids (*Privé, Story, Weekend, Party, Talkies, Glossy, Beau Monde*) and serious-popular press (*Aktueel, Nieuwe Revue, Panorama*) were selected. These magazines have a long history in The Netherlands (*Story* for example was the first gossip magazine, started in 1974; *Panorama* put out its first issue in 1913), and have significant readerships (*Story, Weekend, Privé* and *Party* together had a total circulation of almost one million copies at the time of writing, the six other magazines together have a market share of approximately 600,000 copies; source: *Het Oplage Instituut*, 2001). These magazines have also undergone some changes in recent years because of increased competition from other media – notably commercial television and the 'quality' press – and from other tabloid titles – most recently *Talkies, Glossy* and *Party* entered the market in the 1990s (Hemels and Vegt, 1997; Meijer, 1999: 42). Broadcast media were deliberately left out at this stage of the project for several reasons, the main one being the consideration found in the literature of the archetypical quality of the gossip press in the history of popular journalism. As with the multicultural expert group (also including only print media practitioners), the added complexity of working in a broadcasting environment also provided ground for exclusion. One more pragmatic reason is the aforementioned long tradition of the printed popular media in The Netherlands, whereas most of the radio and particularly television talkshows
have relatively short running times. Gossip journalism in The Netherlands has recently been the subject of relatively few studies, for example about politicians in the popular press and the ethics of gossip journalists (Van Zoonen, 1995; 1998b and 1998c), and one about the history and character of gossip journalism (Meijer, 1999). Meijer in her paper that, as the 'quality' press has adopted the news topics and newsgathering methods of the popular press, Dutch journalism has to look hard at its own ethical standards to see if "publication of uncontrollable facts about persons is justifiable" (1999:49). The data analysis on the infotainment sample indeed suggests that one might expect a different set of ethical principles or at least a different way of thinking about ethics among journalists working for popular genres. The main theme (semi-) structuring our interviews has therefore been working ethics. Where the interviews with multicultural experts were structured by the concepts of knowledge – representation – responsibility, and the online journalists were questioned using the concept of media logic, the interviews with the tabloid editors have been informed by the combination of ethical perceptions with what Coster Meijers' notion of public quality of popular journalism (2001a). Costera Meijer contends, as other scholars have done recently, that the strict separation of quality journalism and popular or tabloid journalism is an often unarticulated, if not unworkable one in the contemporary media sphere (2001a:190; see also Winch, 1997; Brants, 1998; Allan, 1999:185-192). The in-depth interviews therefore contained a significant emphasis on questions regarding the perceived differences or distinctions between popular (gossip) and quality journalism. Other items addressed in the interviews followed the results of the literature review, and included (as mentioned) questions of ethics, organization of labor, definitions of for example 'gossip', and opinions about competitor-colleagues and the audience. As with the interviews with experts in the previous chapters of this book, the informants were given as much room as possible to structure their own accounts of their work, their (news) values, norms and ethics.

The editorial departments of the ten selected magazines were first sent a formal letter (dated late May 2001) describing the research project, and were then contacted by phone to make an interview appointment. Only the editor of Talkies refused cooperation, claiming he did not have time for 'academic pursuits'. All other editors (some of these magazines have more than one editor; Aktueel, Glossy and Weekend in fact share the same editor-in-chief) agreed, resulting in fourteen expert interviews. The results section will follow the same pattern as before (chapters iv and v), starting with an overview and description of the full range of topical categories the participants talked about, concluding with an analyses of the interpretative repertoires these journalists used when talking about their work. A striking characteristic of all interviews
with the tabloid editors was, that the atmosphere of the talks was quite informal and pleasant. Almost all of the editors expressed, that they enjoyed the fact that academia would spent time on research into popular journalism. One could argue, that the editors considered our interviews as some kind of intellectual acknowledgement of their role in society.

Analysis

As a first remark one has to note that on several occasions the interviewed editors of serious-popular magazines *Nieuwe Revue* and *Panorama* expressed different concerns than their colleagues. These are not gossip magazines, and several notions mentioned in the analysis pertain specifically to their views. On the other hand I found that these editors do talk about more or less the same issues, questions and topics as their counterparts in the gossip press; they use the same yardsticks to evaluate themselves, address similar trends and developments in the market for infotainment media, apply the same repertoires to give meaning to their work. Although their experiences and ways to go about their work are sometimes quite differing, the interviews with these 'serious-popular' press professionals can be seen to contribute to an analysis of the knowledge and views of infotainment journalists.

All of the interviewed experts addressed a total of seven recurring topical categories when talking about their work: a gossip or popular journalism attitude; corresponding skills attributed to the 'craft' of doing infotainment journalism; views regarding their particular audience; truth; ethics or codes of conduct; benchmarking their work using competitor-colleague magazine *Party*; their (low) status in the hierarchy of journalism. In this analysis the full bandwidth of these categories is first explored, after which the ways tabloid editors give meaning to the various topics is discussed.

**Category I: 'The' Gossip or Popular Journalistic Attitude.**

The editors would often describe the way they go about their work as a distinct process of gossip or popular journalism. These accounts of 'that what we as journalists do' were set against experiences most of the interviewees had while working for other (non-gossip) media. In other words: the way to go about work seems to be instrumental in distinguishing oneself from the 'other' journalists and journalism in The Netherlands. The various ways in which interviewees describe their work indicates, that they actively negotiate between the norms and values of 'traditional' journalism and the intricacies of the gossip environment. Two colleagues at one magazine felt that these supposed differences are what define gossip journalism – a sort of raison d'être even:
"Gossip magazines are in a way just magazines like any other. But a gossip magazine should have a kind of 'mean' or 'sneaky' aura, like something you cannot really put your finger on, so if you take that away, you do not have a magazine anymore, right? Yes, it is kind of a forbidden fruit..."

Several editors would go out of their way to position themselves as 'regular' journalists, even though they would readily admit that what they do and the way they do it is not generally considered to be anything like 'regular' journalism (see Bird, 1990 and 1992).

"People should not think we are just making things up here. We don't do that, we just get our news not in an 'everyday-like' fashion. People do not have a clue that we work in a normal office building with regular adult people who are happily married...hahaha... Sorry I have to laugh...haha [Interviewer: what are you laughing about?] No, now you can't come and work here, otherwise you would have asked about that a long time ago, haha."

Sometimes editors would explicitly address this process as their motivation for doing this type of journalism:

"We try to visit a lot of educational institutes to explain how fascinating this type of journalism is, how journalistic the work is that gets done, because there are still many people that question that, which really annoys me."

This link to the role of (journalism) education and thus professionalism shows that part of defining popular or gossip journalism for the informants is a discussion on what one specifically does in the daily practice of working for a tabloid-like magazine.

**Category II: Skills and Standards.** Indeed, what does a gossip reporter need to know in order to be a real tabloid journalist? An interesting question – and one which features topically in the discussions we have had with the interviewees. Several participants lamented the omission of popular journalism from the curriculum of the various journalism schools and training institutes in The Netherlands – as noted before in the analysis of educational background of infotainment reporters. A question could be, what specific skills a journalist should or could learn in the popular press. A selection of statements to this effect sheds some light on this topic regarding what specific skills are expected of a gossip reporter:

"You have to be the kind of reporter Dutch celebrities talk about at parties, saying: 'look, there is that asshole again', you should not be too friendly and
positive [...] I have to write really hard-hitting stories about people, but that does not mean I have something against those people personally – that is just how the story should be.”

An important aspect of such remarks is the way these are framed versus what other newsmedia supposedly do, emphasizing what these editors feel makes them and their genre extraordinary:

“A normal reporter tends to be very careful, but we have to write an exciting headline and a teasing lead, that makes a story different.”

A discussion of skills and standards not only serves to define what tabloid-style journalism is, but it also functions for the interviewees as a way to specify a concept of ‘quality’ in the genre.

“What we do is combining information. We protect our sources, but ask them everything to make sure we are accurate, and that is good journalism. Combine everything, use all information at your disposal: call that person, he might have heard this, and you have read that, seen this somewhere, and as you work along this way, you might even decide to put a photographer somewhere for a night on stakeout to see whether that person indeed comes home alone or with someone else, and yes... then you did a good job.”

The framework of delineating popular journalism’s skills extends to specific standards acknowledged throughout the profession, like reporting on both sides of a story, or defining oneself in a position of critical acclaim throughout the profession as ‘investigative reporter’.

“Both sides of every story, sure that is what we say as well, but we accept that you cannot get that all the time, so you have to make an ‘educated’ guess, haha... [...] if you check your sources too much, you lose the good story. A gossip story does not have to be entirely true.”

“What we do is a kind of investigative journalism [...] we are searching for the truth. Look, if you are a parliamentary reporter it’s easy, just wait for the press conference, do some short corridor interviews, and nobody thinks that is odd. But as a gossip reporter you have to know everything about a person’s private life and there are no press conferences for that, there is nothing to help you – except just researching, investigating like a detective.”

The various comments on skills and standards of media practitioners in this
field reads like a particular description of investigative reporting, with emphasis on (potential) conflicts with the traditional rules of the profession. Such a challenge to conventional notions of reliable or 'true' information and the checking of facts leads – as the last couple of quotes show – to an additional discussion dominant in these interviews: a discussion about truth.

**Category III: Truth versus 'Untruth'.** Other 'binary oppositions' could be: fantasy versus reality, lies versus truths, deceit versus honesty, rumors versus facts. The participants would refer to these dualisms throughout the interviews to such an extent, that one could analyze it as a topical category. Reality and truth seem to be phenomenological concepts the popular press are quite familiar with, concepts with which they actively negotiate in the daily routines of newsgathering and -reporting. This goes as far as for example refusing to print a story on a certain celebrity for reasons of 'reality':

"Ehm... It sometimes happens. If it's really for our magazine, like if one of our reporters offers an interview with someone, this has happened, then we do not print it because it is not exciting enough. But it is a real interview."

One of the editors has an explanation for this approach, specifically locating 'truth' in the aesthetic of the story, the way it can be written and is presented:

"Yes, well, if...I assume that the gossip magazines also strive for some kind of truth, they have limits as to what they can write, those limits are a bit more stretched with phrases like 'it could be that' or 'we have heard that', but...ehh...they aim for the kind of truth they feel the public needs to know and it is of course nice to read."

This reflection comes from an editor of one of the serious-popular magazines, and is to some extent mirrored by a colleague in that category, also using a distinction between the gossip press and his own publication, seeing a perceived conflict between true and (potentially) false information as a deliberate strategy:

"It's the journalistic approach we choose, we do not exaggerate beyond all proportions. It must be something concrete, but if that is so we move in full-steam! That is what we do. The moment such a story turns into a lawsuit all kind of extra publicity follows, our sales increase, so that is good."

Several of the gossip editors declared that what they do, is in their view part of the journalistic task of looking for 'the truth'. One may argue that a complex concept of truth is common to all participants, and it is strategically used to discern one's own product from the competition. In this last quote explicit ref-
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erence is made to publicity and sales as aspects of evaluation and perceptions of the audience as customers.

CATEGORY IV: THE PUBLIC / READERS / PEOPLE. Several editors consider the weekly sales figures 'holy'. In making decisions about content or laying down cover policy, considerations of 'the' audience are put central. Throughout the interviews the participants would also refer to certain characteristics of the people who buy their magazine. Such references varied from general comments ('Our readers are mostly men, their wives buy our magazine at the grocery store') to very specific ones ('Our reader eats microwave food'). Doing audience research - several journalists mentioned qualitative research like focus group discussions in particular - also seems to be part of the whole 'popular journalism experience' for these editors.9

Looking more specifically at the comments made about (members of) the audience, it seems that such statements are used specifically when making editorial decisions on the visualization of content (cf. writing style, choice of illustration or pictures, cover policy), not on the processes underlying news-gathering (like whether or not harass people to get information, or which news to print). Examples of such statements on visualization (as it relates to status):

"We are making a much more respectable magazines than a couple of years ago. Now we also have covers that you can put on the table, covers you don't have to feel ashamed about. Sometimes covers are a bit more explicit, but that does not matter."

And on style (as it relates to know-how and attitude):

"We write for the big masses, so we cannot go too far... you have to be carried away by the story, you should be teased to read on, like 'hey I did not know that, wow'. That is the tone of voice of your magazine, we take a certain position, a bit tongue-in-cheek, sometimes with humor, now and then really sharp."

When it comes to the role of the audience in decision-making on the contents, it seems that editors perceive people in The Netherlands as a public with certain specific 'Dutch' characteristics.

"Yes, sure I like the big scoops, but the larger audience will not like that. And then you should not do it, which is obvious. That is the weird thing about The Netherlands, compared to for example England. We have the same target group as the British tabloids, but Dutch people do not want to read about
hard-hitting scandals involving the big celebrities. If it goes too far, nobody wants to read about it. Dutch people don't want to know about the fallacies and wrong-doings of their favorite stars."

Dutch tabloids are described by Van Zoonen (1998b) and Meijer (1999) as relatively 'decent' types of popular journalism – especially when compared to their British, German or American counterparts. The statements on the audience suggest this has more to do with perceptions of readers than on journalistic attitude or style of newsgathering. This is also reflected in the various audience-related goals the editors talk about:

“We want to offer people a bit of distraction, entertainment. People do not have to learn from what we write, no... a bit of gossip, which is also enough. What is nice is that you notice how people talk about what you've published at parties.”

Images of audience are also evoked when commenting on perceptions of the added value of popular journalism as compared to the mainstream newsmedia.

“Just negative news does not work, people want to have a bit of fun reading as well. The popular magazine has a function of entertaining. Like when someone has worked hard all day and just wants to lie down at night and relax, he or she can read the magazine.”

CATEGORY V: ETHICS. The ethical perceptions of infotainment journalists have been used as sensitizing concepts in the interviews, both by the interviewers as the interviewees (Silverman, 2000: 65; see also Lamkamp, 2000). Often the participants would address ethical issues and dilemmas themselves, for example when discussing the daily practices of working as a gossip journalist (see category II on skills and standards):

“We always say: we want to know everything, but that does not mean we publish everything. This has to do with ethical rules. We know much more about celebrities than the people know, but if we would publish that it would ruin careers [...] but it is becoming more acceptable now. If you would know who is calling us, tipping us off... sometimes I think people are not born good but evil.”

Other editors would position themselves more modestly regarding ethical rules or norms, and refer to themselves as the yardstick for measuring ethical decisions without making generalizing normative claims, linking ethics with (perceptions of) the audience:
"No, of course not, I am not here to change the world. The ultimate goal is to sell a lot of magazines, whereby you have to be able to look in the mirror each night and say: 'I have not hurt anybody today'."

The emphasis put on selling magazines has to do with the week-to-week battle for the reader, as editors explain. As most readers buy the magazines under study on impulse, and readership changes and diversifies across the different titles (one week buying Aktueel, next week Story or Privé, and so on). Interviewees furthermore added third-person comments on the ethics and trustworthiness of ‘serious’ journalists, now that those media are considered to be moving into ‘their’ terrain of news:

"Daily newspapers are writing about human interest and personal stuff more and more, but that is not bad for us. The more they talk about it, the better, because people think of the gossip press as the place to really find this news. The gossip magazines are increasingly used as an ‘alibi’ for the good papers to write about celebrities for example. If such a celebrity makes it onto the front page of De Volkskrant which causes trials and the destruction of that person’s career, than the editor of De Volkskrant says: ‘Yes, but what he said is written in my notebook.’ Well, I can show you notebook full of quotes by people, but we can never use them, no judge will allow us to use that argument. This shows you how rocky the credibility of mainstream newspaper journalism is."

This kind of distinction made between ‘our’ and ‘their’ ethics, norms and values further contributes to the earlier mentioned strategy of the participating editors of distinguishing one’s own particular field of journalism from the ‘other’ journalism in The Netherlands: discerning the popular from the serious.

The most interesting thing of what we do is the combination of creativity and management. The development of new initiatives [...] and the ability to do things, that normal journalists – put ‘normal’ in brackets here – consider impossible, that you can make those things happen [...] You constantly look for those borders, yes. And sometimes you can only say with hindsight whether what you did was crossing the line too much... but oh well.”

What this topical category also shows is heightened awareness of continuously working on the edges of what is considered ‘appropriate’ in (popular) journalism. This awareness does not seem to reflect a need for a code, nor an attitude attuned to prescriptions on how to do popular journalism, and can therefore be seen as a plea for a contextualized and situational ethics, offering ways of interpreting specific ethical dilemmas. This does not mean that these jour-
nalists are not ethical, or do not share a sense of ethics; on the contrary, the interviews suggest that ethical perceptions are actively negotiated as a means of distinguishing oneself from competitor-colleagues and 'other' journalism. Ethical sensibility seems to function as an instrument for drawing a boundary between mainstream and popular journalism. But it is also used (together with notions of true versus false information) to discern 'good' from 'bad' tabloid-style media:

"You know what we do, that is really different than for example what 'Party' does. Party is the youngest. That is real 'thumb suck journalism'. The weirdest thing is that it's rebellious and it's popular with a younger audience. But listen: 'thumb suck journalism' is the lowest when it comes to quality, it is not even journalism anymore."

**Category VI: Magazine 'Party'.** As noted in the analysis of interviews with multicultural experts (see chapter iv), journalists seem to share very specific views on certain benchmarks in their profession. Whether this may have to do with the absence of a consensual, theoretical or academic concept of quality in journalism or not, is beyond this particular analysis (see Costera Meijer, 2001b). But it is striking to notice that – where newspaper De Telegraaf is an example of 'bad practice' for most multicultural reporters – the relatively 'young' gossip magazine Party serves as a similar example of 'how not to do popular journalism' for practically all participants in our series of interviews. The notions of age, of being younger, as well as a concept of telling the truth seem to be tied in with the criticism towards Party:

"There is also a... a group of young people or students, but those people read magazines like 'Party'... magazines which are completely... well not completely, but it is a magazine which goes too far in our line of work, they do not hesitate to, ehh... to write complete nonsense."

Other comments also explicitly address this issue: "Where they really lie about everything, that is at 'Party', hahaha... the real dirt among the gossip press", or for example: "I do not consider 'Party' gossip journalism... no, it belongs to an outside category, it is really nothing, I cannot understand that it already exists for 5 or 6 years." When we put these comments to the editors of Party, they responded with an acknowledgement of the arguments about telling the truth: "There does not have to be a core of truth in a story." About the critical comments about the magazine: "We make 'Party' for our readers, for no one else [...] After all these years you develop an elephant skin, whatever, it is just all about selling magazines, the salary and having a good time."
But whether working for Party or any other magazine in this genre, all editors expressed to some extent a feeling of unease among journalists and editors working in different genres of the Dutch media – addressing a particular awareness of (informal) hierarchy in the profession.

**CATEGORY VII: (LOW) STATUS IN JOURNALISM.** The status (or lack thereof) of gossip and popular journalism is a topic of concern for most interviewees (see also Bird, 1990 and Sarler, 1999 on similar notions of unequal status of the gossip press in US and British journalism). Although this has been noted in the literature as well (see in particular the volume on tabloid journalism edited by Sparks, 2000), some of the editors indicated recent changes to the status issue.

“*I am getting more and more interview requests, so yes I am also in Netwerk and Nova [two ‘quality’ newscasts on Dutch public television – MB]. They consider us experts, as extraordinarily well-informed people when it for example comes to royalty. Which we are [...] I think that they will still look down upon us, even though they also know that it is not a kind of ‘thumb suck journalism’, but that it is really investigative journalism. Then it is just a question on whether or not you are interested in topics like celebrity divorces.*”

Yet on the other hand several interviewees still feel that they have to fight their lower status in journalism – which defense affirms that there does seem to exist a shared perception of professional hierarchy in journalism.

“*What we really have to get rid of is the misconception that it is not journalism what we do around here, or that it is not ethical. It should not be so that we are not being taken seriously by our colleagues – colleagues of newspapers and so on – that is a kind of ‘illusory supremacy’, thinking that you are better. It irritates me.*”

This hierarchical notion of the media system echoes in a somewhat frustrated discussion of the internship policies of the Dutch schools for journalism (a discussion particular to the gossip press editors):

“*Coincidentally yesterday two girls called for an internship, they were students of the journalism school in Zwolle. Normally these students are not allowed to do an internship at a gossip magazine, I hate that attitude. That is ridiculous, it should not be that way. Also at the Utrecht school for journalism and the universities: gossip magazines are not taken seriously in journalism.*”
Such a thirst for acknowledgement is generally ratified by pointing to similar reporting practices, sales figures ("we make money for all the other magazines of our publisher"), and a suggested 'complacency' of colleagues at other media. The way tabloid editors are being held accountable each week for the number of copies sold is something that keeps them more alert than their colleagues at for example the newspapers, editors would argue:

"A lot of those colleagues do not have that, I think if you work at a newspaper you stop worrying about whether or not people like to read what you write, you think 'well now I am intelligent and intellectual', you think you have made it. But you have never made it; every day is a new day to prove yourself. Yes, satisfaction kills creativity."

This last comment links status with intellectualism and may be seen as an element of a 'high-brow' versus 'low-brow' culture debate. Apparently the popular press uses the same discourse to defend itself, as the 'quality' media who use this discourse to discern themselves (Winch, 1997). In this overview of topical categories, that must be the overarching conclusion indeed, which point leads this analysis to a discussion of interpretative repertoires.

**Repertoires**

From the various propositions applied by the participants when discussing the topics mentioned above, four more or less distinct repertoires have been distilled. These can be summarized as irony, morality, commercial, and popular journalism interpretative repertoires. The first one can be coined as 'irony', containing propositions of having a good time when doing popular journalism and explaining oneself as a professional in this genre.

**Irony Repertoire.** Arguments about having fun are paramount. This not only reflects the relaxed and open atmosphere in most of the interviews, it also serves as a strategy for these journalists to give meaning to a wide range of issues facing their profession. Questions about competences, about ethics, about the competition of other media, or about taste are sooner or later all answered by referring to 'having fun':

"Well, hahaha, personally.... I think that is the fun part, to put a bit of humor in stories, like 'look at that!'... In a way you work schizophrenic because most of the time you do these really serious in-depth interviews with celebrities, but you write these funny stories so it is a kind or role you're playing, which is good fun. That is what is really fun every day, yes."
Fun is also used to determine quality in this genre of journalism, or even to distinguish gossip from journalism altogether:

"I think what we do is sometimes more like 'fun journalism', it is something you should really want to do as a journalist, but is a real difference with... I sometimes write a column on gossip, then it is okay to skip the news like, ehh... just your own ideas."

The references made to having fun, the good laughs from time to time when responding to (critical) questions seem to serve as a somewhat ironic step away from the issues at hand for these editors. Instead of directly confronting issues like 'objectivity' or ethics of certain newsgathering and storytelling practices, participants would sometimes fall back on an ironic repertoire with which they avoid clear answers or specific statements regarding their work.

"A story should be exciting, it should have some kind of emotion to it...hahaha [Interviewer: You really seem to enjoy talking about this?]...haha, yes... it should have emotion, there must be something to it, it should not be some boring story which just goes on and on about nothing, about 'oh he is so happy with his children blah blah blah', that is not what I am waiting for."

Irony further contributes to judgments about mainstream news journalism as being too restrictive – a comment also made frequently by the National Enquirer reporters interviewed by Bird (1990 and 1992).

"It is just a really fun business to be in, and it is different every week. It is wild, things happen all of the time and the journalists working here are not so boring [...] there are crazy photographers, crazy reporters [...] everyone is much more loose, it is like working for a newspaper but also making a magazine [...] we are really a newspaper in magazine format, which is funny, it is good fun to work this way."

Bird indeed showed that many weekly tabloid-reporters expressed frustration about the 'seriousness' of the mainstream newsmedia, with the restrictions they felt there regarding their creativity. According to these journalists, working in popular genres of their profession allows them more freedom to tell stories – whether 'true' or 'untrue' – and to have fun in doing so. This reflects a step away from the classical distinction between 'hard' versus 'soft' news (see for example Tuchman, 1978) to contemporary terms as in between 'serious' and 'non-serious' news. Irony functions in this respect as a way to put some distance between 'them' and 'us' in popular journalism. The interviewees indicated that the topics they work with – lifestyles, celebrities, royalty, sex – are not exclusive
to popular journalism anymore, which suggests that what discerns them from other journalism in their perception has to do with reporting style, with certain ways of storytelling, and not with being too strict (or: serious) about certain values in traditional journalism. This consideration also seems to relate to the tabloid editor's perceived autonomy: not being too restricted by conventions. It almost seems a bit like a pubertal preoccupation with 'breaking the rules': seeing how far you can stretch rules laid down by parents, without actually inventing new rules.¹

MORALITY REPERTOIRE. Douglas Coupland wrote in his famous account of the contemporary thirty-something generation (the so-called 'Generation X') about the concept of 'celebrity Schadenfreude' as: "lurid thrills derived from talking about celebrity deaths" (1991: 78). This term can perhaps be applied – in a less morbid fashion, that is – to the connection between this and the irony repertoire: making fun of calamities involving celebrities. As celebrities have increasingly made it to the headlines of the mainstream newsmedia in recent years, the interviewees consciously add an additional element of distinction to covering celebrities: especially cover them when things go awry, when love lives crash, when tears are running down their cheeks – in other words: when some kind of 'Schadenfreude' is involved (see also Schudson, 1995). Celebrity is a diversified category, though – comparable to the concept of elite sources in 'hard' news (Schlesinger, 1990). For the tabloid editors a celebrity is someone successful, rich, living their private life in the public eye, while the serious-popular journalists also consider the 'normal' individual as a celebrity the moment he or she becomes an actor on the pages of their magazine. The question is, why these celebrities – rich or poor, luxurious or normal-looking, jobless or movie star – enter the popular news story at all? The answer: when they breach the (admittedly fine) lines of civil morality, particularly regarding how we ought to behave in society regarding sexuality, religious practices, and life politics.³ Examples interviewees offer, anecdotal references they make, stories they remember fondly are all set against a 'morality conflict' involved.

"You know, the story I am still most proud of is... I was working at the 'Privé' at the time when we got a lead on an extramarital affair a well-known politician supposedly had. And then I went out and staked out his house one Sunday morning. When he came out in his car I followed him, and a bit down the road a woman and two children got in – turns out this was his mistress, and she was married too! And his own wife was back home, she was sick, yes, I mean, really..."

The ranges of topics that are mentioned with moral indignation generally fall in
the category of 'love life', ranging from marital affairs (divorce, cheating, death in the family, a baby when it is unclear who the father is), and relationships (emphasizing breaking up and getting together again, breaches of monogamy) to sexuality (extraordinary sex, extreme sexual preferences, physical beauty, promiscuity). I have to note that within this range of potential breaches of morality little or no mention is made of specific topics or issues outside of the dominant, heterosexual and family-oriented view on civil life. The way the journalists give meaning to what people in the news do (and select people as news actors accordingly), seems to reflect or connect to a shift in the politics of citizens: from old-fashioned collective 'emancipatory politics' to engagement in individual 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991). Yet on the other hand, the editors indicated they deliberately keep certain details or information out of their magazines - to protect certain celebrities - and thereby making them more willing to cooperate as sources - or to even protect their readers (as mentioned earlier in the topical category regarding the audience). The readers are fitted into their moral iconic framework of 'good' versus 'bad' as a mass, regardless of how reader characteristics are addressed specifically (as a topic). This seemingly (moral and professional) superior attitude or 'higher ground' presupposes a particular kind of ethics, as Van Zoonen (1998b) suggests as well. The comments made by the interviewees suggest that there is no clear consensus on what would constitute such a code of ethics, but ethical perceptions are used to underscore several points and statements made throughout the interview. Moral indignity and a presumed higher ground additionally serve as a further delineation for the experts - another way to draw a line in the sand between popular and 'other' journalism: between one's own morality (and ethics), or somebody else's.

COMMERCIAL REPERTOIRE. As shown in the discussion of topical categories, notions of selling magazines, making decisions based on weekly sales figures, addressing perceived wants and needs of a (faceless or specific) audience were frequently apparent in the interviews. The morality repertoire indeed reflects a specific view on the audience as a rather homogenous, heterosexual civil 'mass' of people wanting to be entertained and informed about (mishaps of) celebrities. And nowadays - specifically when seen in the context of (the popularity of) reality television - individual 'representatives' from this mass have become celebrities as well. This development contributes to a shared perception of the interviewees regarding their market position in today's mediasphere. Now that the topics concerning life politics - notably the forming and dissolving of social relationships - have entered the mainstream newsmedia or 'quality' press, archetypical popular journalism genres like the tabloids are redefining their approach, especially their style:
"Newspapers cover the topics that originally come from the gossip magazines, I guess they like that as well, they are doing that now as well [...] so we are becoming much harder. You move up a bit in gossip journalism from being nice to a bit harder, another bit harder, harder still... then there is a chance that a newspaper cannot do that anymore."

Editors did not suggest new or different topics, but did emphasize a genre-wide 'hardening' of tone of voice, coupled with previously signaled moral indignation. I found a striking consensus among participants that the lines so easily drawn between gossip or popular journalism and other journalism, are blurring. This poses a clear challenge to the tabloid editors, as another participant remarked (see below).

"It is kind of a problem, yes I think it is a problem. If you now hear about a royal wedding or whatever you have to fight regular newspapers which appear daily, and everywhere, who also cover this with 8 to 10 pages full-color. Until 4 years ago you had, as a weekly gossip magazine, the sole rights to these kinds of things. The mainstream media are taking over the topics that used to be restricted to the gossip press [...] so we are getting harder, you have to move up a bit in gossip journalism, become tougher, because a newspaper cannot allow itself to print rumors – at least, not until now..."

Commercial considerations indeed seem to prevail any discussions regarding ethics (or moral reflections for that matter):

"How far can you go [...] you cannot cause any real damage, that is something you learn over the years [...] and there is also the role of commercialism, that is also important. So all those elements together determine whether it is right or wrong. It is never just one aspect; there are always more aspects involved [...] such a decision also depends on the way they ['they': celebrities trying to prevent a potentially damaging publication, MD] approach you, about what is explained. If someone asks very nicely, please, yes, and explains why. Then you can sometimes... But it is still a matter of debate. Yes, if the other magazines are running the story and selling well, then it is just commercial."

A commercial attitude is clearly explicitized by some as the be-all-end-all of their work, indeed adding to the perception of the audience as a 'mass':

"We respond to the sentiments of the day, each day begins with checking ratings for television programs to see what is a hot topic in The Netherlands as a whole."

Commercial considerations in the context of the Dutch (popular) magazine
market relate specifically to selling copies through newsstands, bookstores, and so on, while a more or less commercial interest for newspapers – with subscription rates around 80% – means advertising-revenue. A commercial repertoire for these editors also means making day-to-day decisions about news selection, gathering of information, telling stories, choosing a format, and sticking to a certain all-encompassing formula.

“You have to be able to write stories, do editing if necessary, make good judgment calls on what kind of cover to use, what pictures should be taken and so on. You need to have a lot of experience, you have to know how to work with the specific angle and format our kind of magazine formula demands.”

(POPULAR) JOURNALISM REPÉRTOIRE. The last quote used in the discussion above connects with yet another repertoire used by the interviewees: the somewhat ‘holistic’ experience of making a popular magazine, of working in infotainment journalism. Especially when describing the attitude of tabloid journalists, the participants would refer to being an all-rounder as a defining quality of their trade:

“We all have our own specialties, but people need to be multifunctional here, they have to be able to do everything: reporting, writing, editing, layout, cover policy... it is more fun for those people as well, otherwise it just is the same all the time.”

Although this holism in functions is used to give meaning to the kind of work these editors do, the data analysis (in chapter III) of our phone survey among all Dutch journalists suggests that a widespread functional differentiation is somewhat typical for Dutch, or even continental European journalism, compared to the organization of labor in Anglo-Saxon newsrooms (Esser, 1999). The explicit use of this argument by the interviewed tabloid editors may have to do with their function as (chief) editor, or can be attributed to the line of questioning followed in the interviews, following up in particular on issues of perceived difference between popular journalism and other journalism. Although skills and standards are a topic journalists would talk about, a more general notion of what this genre of journalism is and how it should be understood in the context of journalism in The Netherlands as a whole becomes a system of meaning for the participating editors.

“You should learn to look differently at journalism, gossip journalism... you know, what we do is a lot more creative and hard to do than the rest of journalism in The Netherlands.”
Popular journalism, 'the gossip world', the popular press are some of the terms used by the editors to describe their corner of the Dutch mediasphere. This varies from detailed descriptions of how the making of a magazine works via elaborate definitions of what gossip 'really' means to profiles of what a 'typical' reporter in this genre is made of. Working for a tabloid-style magazine not only requires a certain mindset, according to some it is also a choice one makes for a lifetime, which connects this career to the perceived status it has in the profession as a whole:

"After you worked for a well-known gossip magazine, it makes you a tainted person, it becomes much harder to work elsewhere if they see that on your resume. So generally people are sticking to these magazines for 20 years or more."

Indeed we found that all of the interviewees at some point worked for either Privé or Story, and several of them had connections with one or more other magazines in the field (see Tuip, 2001). For the participants this clearly has to do with the 'uniqueness' of their field, the specifics defining what popular journalism is – as opposed to the rest of Dutch journalism. The sense of being a necessary all-rounder, of "doing everything yourself" as one editor explains, may also reflect a need for gaining control over the products and production processes within the media organization as a defining and legitimizing element of professionalism in journalism (Beam, 1990). Seen in this light this repertoire serves the same purpose as for example the irony repertoire, as it acts as a way for the participants to discern their work and genre from other journalism. One has to note that the perceived multiplicity of tasks is further moderated by the fact that the interviewed experts are magazine editors – people who can be considered to have more than one responsibility on their hands.

**Conclusion**

The seven topical categories and four interpretative repertoires found shed light on the ways in which the tabloid editors construct their professional identity – both as Dutch journalists as well as distinct 'popular' journalists. In doing so, these journalists use similar instruments (or rather: discourse) of journalism's professional ideology as their colleagues in the 'hard news' sector (Dahlgren, 1992; Winch, 1997). Journalists in the more entertaining sector of the media use the same notions of ethic sensibility, servicing the public, editorial autonomy and credibility as those in the strictly 'informing' sector (however constructed this categorization may be) in order to position themselves as
a distinctive genre – their ‘unique selling point’ even. One could even argue the interviewees are overcompensating in the various ways they keep stressing their uniqueness, in their emphasis on freedom and having a (more or less superior) moral-ethical attitude. The differences between the applications of journalism’s ideological values are embedded in the respective meanings these concepts have in popular or infotainment journalism. The ideal of servicing the public is strongly connected to commercial interests in the sense of evaluating each week’s sales figures against the editorial content and cover policy of the magazine. This suggests a strict and ‘immediate’ awareness of shifting wants and needs – however unexpected these may be – of the readership (rather than the advertiser). It also reveals the domination of the many over the few, as public awareness in this respect exclusively relates to a common or ‘mass’ denominator.

The pre-occupation with reader statistics does not seem to infringe upon the popular journalists’ perception of professional autonomy. In fact, editorial autonomy – as in the freedom to write creatively without the constraints of newspaper formulas, rather than for example the freedom of working independent from potential marketing intrusions – is cited self-reflectively as one of the ‘best parts’ of being in the tabloid business. On the other hand, the editors clearly indicate a strict adherence to ‘the formula’. Anything not fitting the magazine format and formula is unacceptable. One participant even indicated he could not even explain what exactly this formula is – “you just know after a while.” This sounds like a particular definition of journalists’ freedom. Whereas autonomy in mainstream news media is often articulated to commercialism and perceived inroads on editorial policy made by marketers and advertisers, this is considered not to be of any relevance to the daily work at a popular magazine by our interviewees, as the data on the survey of the infotainment subsample indeed shows. Weaver and Wilhoit (1996: 61-62) consider autonomy to be articulated to the freedom journalists have in selecting and writing particular subjects and stories, and according to the participants it is exactly a lack of freedom in the mainstream news media in this respect which prompted them to opt for popular journalism – but at the same time forces them to stick to an enforced formula. Autonomy to the editors relates to the ability to write a story based on ‘educated guesses’ rather than ‘the truth’, whatever that truth may be. The tabloid story may be based on similar newsgathering methods and investigative reporting practices; a paradoxical notion of freedom to write creatively around the retrieved information is central to the interviewees’ understanding of autonomy.

Ethics, credibility and trustworthiness indeed feature prominently in the way tabloid editors talk about their work and the various ways in which they
give meaning to what they do. Yet, perhaps a bit unlike their colleagues elsewhere in journalism, ethical perceptions are both continuously under discussion as well as these are not considered to be guidelines or rules for conduct. Ethical perceptions are closely articulated to competitor-colleague relations (‘if they do it, we do it too’), to autonomy (‘we can do things the other cannot do’) and especially to morality – a higher moral ground even (‘we decide when to publish or not’). This may also explain that the answers the infotainment journalists gave on ethical issues in the phone survey did not differ much from their colleagues elsewhere in the media: reporters agree on certain newsgathering practices, but differ in their assessment of the overall criteria applied to such practices. This particular conception of ethics is contextual; ethical decision-making is dependent on morality (considering the publication of details on an ‘extreme’ sex-life for example), on competition and on personal norms and values (‘have I hurt somebody today or not?’). The ethics generally measured in journalism surveys assume that journalists share an understanding of certain guidelines or ‘controversial reporting practices’, but publications in this field also conclude that the meanings such practices may have are dependent on the mental pictures these conjure up in reporters’ minds (McMane, 1998: 206). The bottom line in any kind of editorial (and thus moral-ethical) decision-making is outright audience-revenue commercialism: if (we expect) the competitor-colleague is running the story, we are running it as well.

Two more conclusions can be added to our analysis. One relates to the way the literature has suggested that any perceived boundaries between information and entertainment in journalism are blurring; a second conclusion pertains to a conceptual understanding of the four repertoires used by the editors to give meaning to their work. The interpretative repertoires and the topical categories all reveal an active construction of distinction: of finding new ground in a profession that is fast becoming a hybrid between different genres and formats in the perception of its professional practitioners (and academics alike). What is both interesting as well as perhaps troubling is the emphasis put on ‘toughening up’ in this process of distinguishing oneself in popular journalism: editors seem to think they have to push the limits of what is possible or ‘moral-ethical’ in journalism in order to survive the competition of other, notably mainstream news media. As they consider Weekend the best gossip magazine because it is ‘the hardest’ and Party the worst because it does not tell ‘the truth’, this makes for an interesting future perspective, featuring a journalistic attitude that reads like hard-hitting investigative (and creative) popular journalism.

A second and final conclusion to this chapter considers the various inter-
pretative repertoires in particular. What I would like to suggest is an over-arching concept of utilitarianism to the function of irony, being all-round, a strict focus on weekly sales and the assumption of a moral-ethical higher ground. This utilitarian attitude seems to function as a strategic ritual to explain why and how one does his or her work in popular journalism. The evaluation of this kind of utilitarianism, of tabloid editors being right or wrong solely based on the consequences of their own actions (in the opinion of the participants reflected predominantly in number of copies sold), the distinct emphasis on pleasure (be it ironical), including a moral notion of (preventing) pain or unhappiness (both to celebrities and publics) can be seen as encompassing the core defining characteristics of Bentham’s moral theory of utilitarianism. An important note to be made here regards the highly personal and contextual application of the theory to the lifeworld of the tabloid editors: they talk about their own happiness, not necessarily the happiness of their (mass) audience. And one can argue that popular journalism’s happiness is interdependent with the ‘unhappiness’ of celebrities. The ideology of journalism can be therefore seen as being actively deconstructed by professionals working in popular journalism genres, using a similar discourse from a different theoretical perspective: instead of professional ideology a kind of personalized utilitarian ideological framework is applied to give meaning to being a journalist – and in particular to being a (popular) journalist other than the ones working elsewhere in the Dutch media.