

The REALL News*

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi

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A Look into the Sun -- and Other Tabloids

Part 3 -- The Lure of Money

by Bob Ladendorf

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Even before that, there was the penny press, and, in 1845, the weekly national *Police Gazette*, with its sensational crime articles. There followed the "yellow journalism" era around the turn of the century, and tabloid newspaper wars in the 1920s and '30s. In the '20s, bodybuilder and tabloid publisher Bernarr Macfadden developed the "composograph," a photograph that was altered or enhanced.

Which only goes to show that there really is nothing new under the sun. Perhaps humankind has always held a fascination with sex, crime and the supernatural. The "common folk" of England crowded in to see new Shakespeare plays, such as *Hamlet*, which features those three sensational themes prominently. Now days we have the royal couple's dalliances, the O.J. Simpson trial, and alien abductions.

Sensational stories sold newspapers then, and they sell them now. According to *Time* magazine, the ongoing Simpson story has raised the weekly *National Enquirer's* circulation by 500,000 a week, and during the past half year, 21 of the issues featured Simpson-related stories on its covers.

As the expression goes, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that all this sensationalism feeds a public's ravenous appetite for gossip and is thus motivated by money. No matter that the truth may be trampled in the process. But what about the people behind the sensationalism of the news - the writers and editors - who take the brunt of ridicule and criticism from more mainstream journalists? How do they with the sensationalism and fabricated stories? There again, money talks.

"Salaries for established reporters are \$75,000 and more" at the WWN, according to Sue Hubbell writing in the Smithsonian magazine. "A recent hire, with no tabloid experience, has started out at \$53,000, and editors make salaries well into the comfortable six figures."

In contrast, beginning journalists average \$20,000 a year, those with five years' experience average \$30,000, and senior editors at the largest newspapers earn \$60,000, according to the 1994-95 Occupational Outlook Handbook published by the U.S. Department of Labor.

"Most of Eddie's [Eddie Clontz, WWN editor] staffers are alumni of Harvard or Bryn Mawr or other good schools," writes Hubbell. "They include a veteran of the New York Times, a former Capitol Hill reporter ..., the retired editor of juvenile nonfiction for J.R. Lippincott." Hubbell also writes that Clontz once confessed, "We have to pay them a lot because we are, in effect, asking them to end their careers We're the French Foreign Legion of journalism."

Another reason that tabloids are decried is because of their "checkbook journalism." The National Enquirer has an editorial budget of \$16 million, a "good portion" going to pay for informants, according to Time. For instance, a female maid to the murdered Nicole Simpson received \$18,000 for her version of O.J. and Nicole's turbulent relationship. Gennifer Flowers received \$150,000 from the Star for her story claiming she had an affair with President Bill Clinton. The Chicago Tribune reported in its March 20, 1994, edition that British tabloids were just as eager to pay for sex stories, with the News of the World paying a whopping \$262,500 to Bienvenida Sokolow, a defense minister's wife who allegedly had an affair with a chief of the British defense staff who was also married.

Although only about 20 percent of respondents to a Roper Poll in 1984 said that supermarket tabloids were "accurate," establishment press journalists have little room to smile, as Hubbell points out in the Smithsonian article, for a "comparable Roper Poll conducted the same year about the credibility of the media in general found that 24 percent of the respondents trusted newspapers and only 7 percent of them trusted magazines."

Although that poll would seem in one way to indicate a skeptical attitude among respondents, the results may be skewed by the respondents' possible guilt about admitting belief in the tabloids. As other, more recent surveys show, Americans have much higher percentages of belief in the supernatural than about the accuracy of tabloids. Perhaps what is needed is a new survey of nationwide tabloid readership as well as in-depth individual studies to determine any correlation between belief systems and tabloid articles.

If the paranormal and pseudoscientific articles in the Sun and WWN and the gossip stories in the others have any long lasting effects on American minds, perhaps it is in the area of reinforcing myths. That connection is aptly pointed out by S. Elizabeth Bird, a University of Minnesota cultural anthropologist, in her book, *For Enquiring Minds*. Hubbell writes in the Smithsonian that:

She [Bird] studied tabloids as folklore and notes their preoccupation with eternal themes: the hero who didn't die (Elvis, JFK and Jimmy Hoffa are our current favorites); children raised by animals (remember Romulus and Remus?); ghosts (haunted toasters are big right now); monsters (Bigfoot has replaced dragons); flying saucers (the psychologist Carl Jung once traced back through medieval paintings the image of round, healing objects coming from the skies in times of social disruption); fairy stories about princes and princesses (today's definition of royalty has been expanded to include Oprah Winfrey and Elizabeth Taylor).

The supermarket tabloids may be ridiculed and castigated, but they are read. One of them, the National Enquirer, has been acknowledged as being "accurate" in some of its Simpson stories by none other than the New York Times, causing a firestorm of controversy.

However, in the pursuit of truth, a darker exposure of the tabloid news producers and its readers can be aptly summarized in H.L. Mencken's wry statement, "No one in the world, as far as I know - and I have researched for records for years, and employed agents to help me - has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people."