

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #366
Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship
19th May, 2023

[00:00:04] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about newspapers.

[00:00:26] But not just any newspapers, we are going to be talking about a particular type of newspaper, the tabloid.

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:00:34] It's a form of small, [concise](#)¹ newspaper famous for [gossip](#)² and [sensational](#)³ stories, but this type of newspaper has gone on to become the [dominant](#)⁴ form of journalism in Britain.

[00:00:46] So, in this exploration of tabloids, and of tabloid culture, we'll look at how it all started, who some of the key players are, the types of stories they write, the [controversies](#)⁵ they've faced, and what the future holds for this very particular type of newspaper.

[00:01:03] This is actually going to be followed by another members-only episode where we'll look at some of the most [scandalous](#)⁶ tabloid stories in history, so keep a lookout for that one next week.

[00:01:13] Right, we've got a lot to get through, so let's get right into it.

¹ giving a lot of information clearly and in a few words

² casual reports about people's private lives

³ exciting, attractive

⁴ most common

⁵ disagreement, arguments

⁶ causing public feelings of shock and anger

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:01:20] The Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde once [quipped](#)⁷, he once said, “the public have an [insatiable](#)⁸ curiosity to know everything, except what is worth knowing”.

[00:01:34] In other words, people don’t want to know what matters, they want to know things that don’t matter - [gossip](#), [rumour](#)⁹, and [scandal](#)¹⁰.

[00:01:44] Oscar Wilde, as you may know already, or you might remember from episode number 215, was a man who knew all too well the danger of [gossip](#) and [scandal](#), and of how one’s reputation can be destroyed in an instant.

[00:02:01] And it was, in fact, when Oscar Wilde was in prison, from 1895 to 1897, that the first “tabloid” newspaper was created in Britain.

[00:02:15] This was something called “The Daily Mail”, and was created by a man named Alfred Harmsworth, the 1st [Viscount](#)¹¹ Northcliffe, in 1896.

[00:02:26] You might know that this newspaper, The Daily Mail, is still alive and well today.

⁷ said in a clever and humorous way

⁸ too great to be satisfied

⁹ information that is shared among people and might be true

¹⁰ events that cause public feelings of shock and anger

¹¹ a British man of high social rank

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:02:32] In fact, it's one of the most popular newspapers in the country by [circulation¹²](#), and it also has one of the most popular news websites in the world.

[00:02:42] It's popular with many, but hated by others; Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, described it as having [mastered¹³](#) “fake news”, and Prince Harry referred to it, and the British tabloid press in general as “the devil”.

[00:03:00] So, why should a newspaper, or form of journalism, [arouse¹⁴](#) such powerful feelings?

[00:03:08] Why are British tabloids so popular, but at the same time remain so hated?

[00:03:15] Well, we should probably start by defining what a tabloid actually is.

[00:03:20] A good way to understand this is to compare it to the other type of newspaper: a broadsheet.

[00:03:27] Broadsheets are, as you might have guessed from the name, physically bigger newspapers - broad means wide, and sheet refers to the sheet of paper. These types of newspapers generally focus on news through so-called ‘quality’ journalism based on research, facts and analysis.

¹² public availability, distribution

¹³ became extremely good at it

¹⁴ cause

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:03:48] Some traditional British broadsheets. you might have heard of include The Times, The Telegraph or The Guardian.

[00:03:56] Tabloid newspapers, on the other hand, are generally smaller and contain a lot more pictures and advertisements.

[00:04:04] Broadsheets tend to focus on 'hard news', with articles about politics and economics, where the simple facts are stated. And there is normally a separate section of a broadsheet, where there is the opinion of various journalists.

[00:04:20] Tabloids, on the other hand, often do cover the same stories, but there are a few points to note.

[00:04:27] Firstly, there is a more [sensationalist¹⁵](#) angle, the facts and analysis are less important, it's the 'story' - that is, how dramatic or entertaining it is - that is the most important thing for the tabloids.

[00:04:43] Secondly, tabloids are [unapologetic¹⁶](#) in mixing opinion with news, and there is no attempt to provide a balanced opinion, to report the story and allow the reader to make up their own mind.

¹⁵ presenting stories in an exciting and attractive way

¹⁶ not feeling sorry about it

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:04:57] Sure, arguably any reporting of a story has some political [bias](#)¹⁷, but the tabloids mix opinion and reporting, with journalists being free to [intertwine](#)¹⁸ their own views about current events with the reporting of the story.

[00:05:14] And thirdly, the tabloids also deal in a different type of story to the broadsheets.

[00:05:21] For many tabloids their [bread and butter](#)¹⁹, what fills most of the pages in a tabloid, is “[scandal](#) and [gossip](#)”, stories of celebrities or famous people doing things that they shouldn’t be doing, or simply going about their daily lives, having coffee, taking out their rubbish bins, or, [shock horror](#)²⁰, wearing the same dress for the second time that month.

[00:05:46] So, where did they come from, where did it all get started?

[00:05:50] Well, the [etymology](#)²¹ of the word ‘tabloid’, the origin of the word, isn’t actually entirely clear.

[00:05:57] Many people believe the term comes from another industry altogether, the pharmaceutical industry.

¹⁷ the action of supporting a particular side in an unfair way

¹⁸ mix, combine

¹⁹ what fills most of their pages

²⁰ an expression used when you are pretending to feel very shocked by a piece of news

²¹ origin

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:06:04] In the late-19th century a tabloid was a type of medicine, a mixture of ‘tablet’ and ‘alkaloid’ in a [condensed](#)²² tablet, meaning made up of two or more parts or ingredients.

[00:06:17] Historians seem to think that the name could have been used to describe journalism too, one that focused on shorter, [bite-sized](#)²³ articles more digestible to the reader, like taking a tablet.

[00:06:31] And the first tabloid arrived on the scenes, as you heard a few minutes ago, in 1896 when Alfred Harmsworth, the 1st [Viscount](#) Northcliffe, founded The Daily Mail.

[00:06:44] In one of its first editorials, one of its first opinion columns, the editor, Harmsworth wrote:

[00:06:51] “The World enters today upon the Twentieth or Time-Saving Century. I claim that by my system of [condensed](#) or tabloid journalism, hundreds of working hours can be saved each year.”

[00:07:07] Now, it’s not clear whether Harmsworth was talking about the fact that more dense journalism saved the reader time, or the journalist time in their research, perhaps both. In any case, Harmsworth wasn’t particularly [concerned](#)²⁴ about long, detailed journalism.

²² made thicker by removing water, compressed

²³ small enough

²⁴ worried

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:07:25] A few years later, in 1903, he created another famous British tabloid, one that is still in circulation today: The Daily Mirror.

[00:07:35] The aim of the Daily Mirror, Harmsworth wrote in its first editorial, was to be “entertaining without being [frivolous](#)²⁵, and serious without being dull”.

[00:07:47] Instead of focusing on hard news with articles about politics and economics and current events, The Mirror, as it’s widely known, featured [gossip](#), crime reports and mysteries, as well as celebrity [gossip](#), sports coverage and even [puzzles](#)²⁶ and [brain teasers](#)²⁷.

[00:08:05] The Mirror’s pages were also filled with photographs and cartoon-like illustrations, far more than any of its broadsheet competitors, which were filled with [wall upon wall](#)²⁸ of black and white text.

[00:08:18] And this more compact, easy-access format, it seemed, worked.

[00:08:24] By 1908 The Mirror was Britain’s second-largest morning newspaper, and together with The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, and later on The Sun, this tabloid format came to [dominate](#)²⁹ the British newspaper market.

²⁵ not having any serious purpose, shallow

²⁶ games designed to test knowledge or cleverness

²⁷ questions or problems that are difficult to answer or solve

²⁸ covering the whole space

²⁹ have the most important position

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:08:40] The format for all of these newspapers was pretty similar: lots of pictures, [bite-sized](#) articles written in relatively simple language and short sentences, [gossip](#) and [astrology](#)³⁰ columns, [agony aunts](#)³¹, where readers write in and ask for advice, and even [comic strips](#)³² and comedy columns.

[00:09:02] In the case of some of the tabloids, most [notably](#)³³ The Sun, it also included pictures of semi-naked women, with “Page 3”, the first page you see when you open the newspaper, containing a “Page 3 girl”, a topless model.

[00:09:20] The Sun finally stopped this in 2015, but it was, at this time, the most popular newspaper in the country by [circulation](#).

[00:09:29] And in terms of what are the most popular tabloids today, well, the exact titles have changed a little over the years, but the top three almost always include some combination of The Sun, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror and The Daily Express.

[00:09:47] Now, we’re going to go into some of the actual details of tabloid stories in the next episode, but let me give you one recent example to illustrate the differences in reporting style, particularly with the language used by the tabloids.

³⁰ the study of the stars and planets in the belief that they affect the lives of people

³¹ columns that give advice about personal problems

³² short series of funny drawings

³³ importantly, in a way that deserves attention

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:10:03] In this example, we'll look at how two different newspapers reported on the same story, the story of the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, being caught and fined by the police for not wearing a [seatbelt](#)³⁴ in a car.

[00:10:19] These stories were published on the same day, and both newspapers I'll be talking about are owned by the same person, Rupert Murdoch, who we'll hear more about in a few minutes.

[00:10:32] So, in The Times, a broadsheet, the report goes as follows:

[00:10:38] “Rishi Sunak has been [fined](#)³⁵ over his failure to wear a [seatbelt](#) in a moving car. Lancashire police confirmed this evening that they had issued a “conditional fixed penalty notice”. The force did not reveal how much the [fine](#)³⁶ was, but the usual amount is £100.”

[00:10:58] [Note](#)³⁷ the formal language, and the straight, [unbiased](#)³⁸ reporting.

[00:11:03] The Times [emphasises](#)³⁹ that though it wasn't clear how much the [fine](#) actually was, they made a conservative estimate based on what the usual amount is.

³⁴ a belt that protects the people in a car

³⁵ made to pay money as penalty

³⁶ an amount of money paid as penalty for not obeying a law

³⁷ notice

³⁸ fair, not influenced by personal opinions

³⁹ shows that it is important

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:11:13] Sounds sensible, right?

[00:11:15] Well, the same story was reported in The Sun, a tabloid, and it had a bit of a different feel.

[00:11:24] I'm quoting directly here:

[00:11:27] “He was caught riding [beltless](#)⁴⁰ in the back seat while filming a video,” The Sun wrote, “the [offence](#)⁴¹ carries a maximum £500 fine, but Mr Sunak had last night not been told by [cops](#)⁴² how much he must pay.”

[00:11:42] Can you see the difference?

[00:11:45] The informal language of ‘caught riding [beltless](#) in the backseat while filming a video’ in The Sun versus the “failure to wear a [seatbelt](#) in a moving car,” as it was worded in The Times.

[00:11:58] [Cops](#) versus the police.

⁴⁰ without having the belt fastened or tied

⁴¹ illegal act

⁴² police officers

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:12:01] And in terms of the [fine](#), The Sun chose to [frame](#)⁴³ it as a ‘maximum’ of £500, [sensationalising](#)⁴⁴ the story somewhat, whereas The Times went for the normal amount, though less [scandalous](#).

[00:12:17] The difference here seems clear: the broadsheet reports the facts in a calm, conservative way, while the tabloid [exaggerated](#)⁴⁵, [sensationalised](#)⁴⁶, and used informal language to make the story more dramatic.

[00:12:32] The Sun tells an exciting story while The Times tells the facts.

[00:12:38] But Prince Harry surely can't be [labelling](#)⁴⁷ the tabloid press “the devil” for simply using sensational language and a bit of [exaggeration](#)⁴⁸.

[00:12:48] One of the [mainstays](#)⁴⁹ of the British tabloid press, one of its key types of stories, of “news”, if we can call it news, is [gossip](#) and [rumour](#), of [prying](#)⁵⁰ into the private lives of celebrities and politicians and “revealing” it all to the public.

⁴³ present, formulate

⁴⁴ presenting it in a more exciting and attractive way

⁴⁵ represented it as being more important than it really is

⁴⁶ presented the facts in an exciting and attractive way

⁴⁷ describing them as

⁴⁸ presenting the facts as being more important than they really are

⁴⁹ most important parts

⁵⁰ trying to find private or secret facts

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:13:06] Compared to lots of other European countries at least, the UK press has a pretty [ferocious](#)⁵¹ culture where almost nothing is off-limits to the press.

[00:13:17] In other words, the British tabloids will go to extreme lengths to get a story about anything from a celebrity doing drugs or having an affair or behaving in an unusual way, and then be very happy to publish it on the front page.

[00:13:34] And in many cases these lengths are extreme indeed, and have led to a huge [backlash](#)⁵² when the methods of the British tabloid press are revealed, creating a [scandal](#) far bigger than the original story the journalist was reporting on.

[00:13:52] We are going to look at several of these [scandalous](#) stories in great detail in our next episode, but I want to highlight one particular example of this today, a [scandal](#) about journalistic methods that [illustrates](#)⁵³ just how far the tabloids would go to get a story.

[00:14:11] And that is something called the 'phone [hacking](#)⁵⁴ [scandal](#)', which involved a popular but now [defunct](#)⁵⁵, now out of print, tabloid called the News of the World, a

⁵¹ wild, intense

⁵² strong reaction

⁵³ shows

⁵⁴ gain illegal access to them

⁵⁵ out of print, no longer existing

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

tabloid owned by the media [mogul](#)⁵⁶ Rupert Murdoch, the man who owns The Times and The Sun.

[00:14:31] In 2005 [allegations](#)⁵⁷ emerged that journalists from the News of The World were [hacking](#) into people's voicemails, they were accessing them without permission, to get information for stories.

[00:14:45] They would [hack](#)⁵⁸ the voicemail, listen to the private, often [intimate](#)⁵⁹ conversations, record them, and then use that stolen information to write their stories before their [rivals](#)⁶⁰ something known as getting a '[scoop](#)⁶¹' - that is, an exclusive story that nobody else has.

[00:15:06] For these tabloid papers, which we must remember are businesses, after all, getting [scoops](#)⁶² and exclusives are a hugely important part of the job and help sell papers.

⁵⁶ very rich and important person

⁵⁷ statements that they had done it without giving proof

⁵⁸ gain illegal access to it

⁵⁹ very personal

⁶⁰ opponents, competitors

⁶¹ an exclusive story that nobody else has

⁶² exclusive stories that nobody else has

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:15:18] After all, if someone else has reported the “news” before you, your story isn’t really “news”.

[00:15:26] Now, sometimes these voicemails would be members of the Royal Family or celebrities, which would lead to stories like Prince William leaving funny voicemails for his younger brother.

[00:15:38] Not so bad, you might think, not the end of the world.

[00:15:42] But this was just [the tip of the iceberg](#)⁶³, and it would turn out that there was no depth the tabloids would not [stoop](#)⁶⁴ to, no limits they had, in order to get a [scoop](#), get a story before their [rivals](#).

[00:15:58] And this went far deeper than celebrity [gossip](#).

[00:16:03] In July of 2011, another story [emerged](#)⁶⁵ that shocked the British media landscape, when it turned out that News of the World journalists had [hacked](#) into the voicemail of a murdered teenager.

[00:16:20] Milly Dowler was a 13-year-old British girl who was [abducted](#) and murdered in 2002. It emerged years later that News of the World journalists had [hacked](#)⁶⁶ her

⁶³ a small part of a much larger situation

⁶⁴ lower their standards for, resort

⁶⁵ appeared, made known

⁶⁶ gained illegal access to

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

voicemails after she had been [abducted](#)⁶⁷, and published stories about the police investigation, stories that gave her parents false hope that she was alive. It was very nasty stuff indeed.

[00:16:49] Under [intense](#)⁶⁸ political and legal pressure, The News of the World eventually closed down in 2011, costing Rupert Murdoch and the paper's parent company a reported hundred million pounds in legal costs.

[00:17:04] And subsequent investigations revealed that this was no [isolated](#)⁶⁹ incident; phone [hacking](#) had been [commonplace](#)⁷⁰ at The News of The World for many, many years.

[00:17:17] Now, looking to the future briefly.

[00:17:20] As is the case all over the world, the internet and social media have completely changed the face of journalism and the newspaper industry.

[00:17:29] Gone are the days when you needed to go to a shop to buy a physical newspaper, and to many, gone are the days when you needed to go to a news website to get your news.

⁶⁷ taken away by force, kidnapped

⁶⁸ extreme, very strong

⁶⁹ single, only

⁷⁰ happening often

[00:17:42] Many people these days get their news from social media accounts and websites that aren't run by journalists, or connected to newspapers in any way. Perhaps unsurprisingly, fewer and fewer people are reading newspapers - both broadsheet AND tabloid.

[00:18:00] To give you an idea of quite how serious this is in the UK, back in the year 2000, Britain's daily and Sunday national newspapers had a total daily [circulation](#) of around 22 million.

[00:18:17] But by January of 2020, those newspapers were selling just 7 and a half million copies, a huge drop in [readership](#)⁷¹.

[00:18:28] But between the tabloids and the broadsheets, the former, the tabloids, seem to be adapting best to the digital world, both digitally and in print.

[00:18:41] The Sun, for example, still has over a million daily readers.

[00:18:46] And the Daily Mail has almost a million, whereas The Times, which is a broadsheet, had only 365,000 in 2020, and The Guardian just 105,000.

[00:19:00] And it is a similar story online, for the most part.

⁷¹ the group of people who regularly read them

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:19:05] The Daily Mail is the country's 11th most popular website, with 130 million monthly visitors being drawn to the website by its so-called "[sidebar](#)⁷² of shame", with never-ending stories of celebrity [gossip](#) and [rumour](#).

[00:19:21] The Sun, on the other hand, says it reaches over 30 million people a month between its print and digital editions.

[00:19:30] In true tabloid style, The Sun claims on its site, and I'm quoting directly, "the statistics leave rivals the Daily Mirror and the Daily Mail in the dust as our loyal readers [flock](#)⁷³ to us for their daily news."

[00:19:47] Perhaps, you might say, it makes sense that the tabloids would make the digital [transition](#)⁷⁴ more easily.

[00:19:54] Social media is all about [hooking](#)⁷⁵ people in with a [snappy](#)⁷⁶ headline, attracting them with a sensational story, even if that story might be incomplete, or [fabricated](#)⁷⁷ slightly.

⁷² a short article placed next to the main article

⁷³ come in large amounts

⁷⁴ change from the old form to the new one

⁷⁵ making them very interested

⁷⁶ clever and exciting

⁷⁷ invented, made up

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368

Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:20:08] It is, in many ways, a perfect fit for the form of journalism that tabloids have practised for over a century now.

[00:20:16] Short, [snappy](#), [elaborate](#)⁷⁸, easy to digest, and often full of [scandal](#) and [gossip](#).

[00:20:25] The British tabloid press has spent over a century perfecting this form of journalism, and while people might not be going to the [newspaper stand](#)⁷⁹ in the morning, they are going somewhere for their news.

[00:20:38] And so long as the public wants news, the tabloid press will do its [utmost](#)⁸⁰ to make sure that it's the place they get it from.

[00:20:50] Ok then, that's it for today's episode on British tabloid culture, the never ending stream of sensational stories and [scandal](#), and journalists that will [stoop](#) to any depth to get a [scoop](#).

[00:21:04] As a quick reminder, we are going to follow up this episode with one where we look at some of the most [scandalous](#) stories printed in the British tabloids.

[00:21:12] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

⁷⁸ containing a lot of detail

⁷⁹ the place where newspapers and magazines are sold

⁸⁰ best, maximum

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368
Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

[00:21:18] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Concise	giving a lot of information clearly and in a few words
Gossip	casual reports about people's private lives
Sensational	exciting, attractive
Dominant	most common
Controversies	disagreement, arguments
Scandalous	causing public feelings of shock and anger
Quipped	said in a clever and humorous way
Insatiable	too great to be satisfied
Rumour	information that is shared among people and might be true
Scandal	events that cause public feelings of shock and anger
Viscount	a British man of high social rank
Circulation	public availability, distribution

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368
Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

Mastered	became extremely good at it
Arouse	cause
Sensationalist	presenting stories in an exciting and attractive way
Unapologetic	not feeling sorry about it
Bias	the action of supporting a particular side in an unfair way
Intertwine	mix, combine
Bread and butter	what fills most of their pages
Shock horror	an expression used when you are pretending to feel very shocked by a piece of news
Etymology	origin
Condensed	made thicker by removing water, compressed
Bite-sized	small enough
Concerned	worried
Frivolous	not having any serious purpose, shallow
Puzzles	games designed to test knowledge or cleverness
Brain teasers	questions or problems that are difficult to answer or solve

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368
Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

Wall upon wall	covering the whole space
Dominate	have the most important position
Astrology	the study of the stars and planets in the belief that they affect the lives of people
Agony aunts	columns that give advice about personal problems
Comic strips	short series of funny drawings
Notably	importantly, in a way that deserves attention
Seatbelt	a belt that protects the people in a car
Fined	made to pay money as penalty
Fine	an amount of money paid as penalty for not obeying a law
Note	notice
Unbiased	fair, not influenced by personal opinions
Emphasises	shows that it is important
Beltless	without having the belt fastened or tied
Offence	illegal act
Cops	police officers

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368
Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

Frame	present, formulate
Sensationalising	presenting it in a more exciting and attractive way
Exaggerated	represented it as being more important than it really is
Sensationalised	presented the facts in an exciting and attractive way
Labelling	describing them as
Exaggeration	presenting the facts as being more important than they really are
Mainstays	most important parts
Prying	trying to find private or secret facts
Ferocious	wild, intense
Backlash	strong reaction
Illustrates	shows
Hacking	gain illegal access to them
Defunct	out of print, no longer existing
Mogul	very rich and important person
Allegations	statements that they had done it without giving proof

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368
Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

Hack	gain illegal access to it
Intimate	very personal
Rivals	opponents, competitors
Scoop	an exclusive story that nobody else has
Scoops	exclusive stories that nobody else has
The tip of the iceberg	a small part of a much larger situation
Stoop	lower their standards for, resort
Emerged	appeared, made known
Hacked	gained illegal access to
Abducted	taken away by force, kidnapped
Intense	extreme, very strong
Isolated	single, only
Commonplace	happening often
Readership	the group of people who regularly read them
Sidebar	a short article placed next to the main article

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #368
Britain's Tabloid Culture: A Love-Hate Relationship

Flock	come in large amounts
Transition	change from the old form to the new one
Hooking	making them very interested
Snappy	clever and exciting
Fabricated	invented, made up
Elaborate	containing a lot of detail
Newspaper stand	the place where newspapers and magazines are sold
Utmost	best, maximum

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com