debate about what tabloidisation might involve and why it is relevant here, we shall look at how British tabloids approach stories about celebrities.

**Reading 2.3 Activity**

Now read the following extract from Ian Connell, ‘Personalities in the popular media’, (Reading 2.3). Once you have read it through, make some notes on the following questions:

- What distinction do critics of tabloids set up between human and public interest?
- How does this tie in to the differences between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers?
- Why in Connell’s view do the tabloids’ stories consistently mount attacks on privilege?

**Reading 2.3**

*Ian Connell, ‘Personalities in the popular media’*

Tabloid stories about personalities do typically provide revelations, exposés of the ‘facts’ concerning things they have done which they should not have, or which they themselves would prefer not to be widely known. It may be, as I have suggested elsewhere, that their appeal partly arises from this. But this is not all, and not the most important thing, they do. The journalism to be found in the tabloid press is only distantly related to that found in the broadsheets and operates by quite different codes of practice. If broadsheet journalists are primarily concerned with politely reporting and investigating public issues of the moment on ground essentially chosen by the protagonists, the writers of these tabloid stories choose to confront often the same protagonists with themes that they thought safely buried and obscured by their positions in the public domain.

It has often been said of tabloid journalists that their raw material is of ‘human’ rather than ‘public’ interest. It is mined from that which ordinary people, remote from the culture’s centres of power, have to contend with in their everyday lives. This leads them to deal with themes that are perhaps more persistently problematic features of our cultural formations. I think it is a little more complicated than this suggests. They do deal with matters of ‘human interest’, why then do so with characters which are drawn from a world so remote from that ordinary world which we might expect to be invoked? Certainly when taken as a whole, there are lots of stories in tabloid papers
about ‘ordinary people in trouble’, but they rarely receive such prominent coverage.

The stories the tabloids tell break the boundaries that have been drawn between that which can and cannot legitimately be discussed in public, by drawing to their readers’ attention that which the bearers of public office have deemed private. It is in this sense only that it can be regarded as of ‘human’ interest. They are rude and raucous intrusions into the sphere of rational public discussion and debate. Their contribution is like someone shouting from somewhere near to, but not at, the centre of the action; ‘Stuff the sophisticated arguments, the effete excuses and labyrinthian qualifications – these ba...rds have been caught with their pants down.’ (Please feel free to supply adjectives more in keeping with the tabloid styles.) As is often the case with territorial boundaries, these cultural ones are conventional, sometimes imposed, at other times legitimated, but always essentially unstable and, therefore, open to dispute. While there may be no treaties, no lengthy and carefully worded pacts between the parties involved, there have been understandings and ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ governing what can and cannot be written. The tabloid press have found themselves collectively driven to ignore these understandings, perhaps because they have for some time now been engaged in a sharply competitive and costly struggle among themselves. This would not explain, however, why the ground of this struggle has been the deviant doings of the ‘great’ and good.

Much can be at stake in treating personalities as they do. What we read in the tabloid stories is the yield of a cultural interaction between interests which have become increasingly differentiated and explosive. Depending upon the personalities involved and the nature of the allegations contained in the revelations, the breaches can trigger intense controversy and sometimes costly litigation. Even if the consequent reaction does not go this far, over time the uncontrolled stories have given rise to a generally cautious and disdainful attitude to ‘the media’ among professional entertainers, other public figures and serious journalists worried, no doubt, about their own standing and credibility. They can be very risky and costly acts for all involved, so we must be curious as to why the tabloid press persist in running them.

Above all what these stories do is mount a populist challenge on privilege. I appreciate this may seem far-fetched. The way I have expressed it makes what goes on in these stories seem far too coherent and calculated. While the stories articulate neither a coherent political philosophy nor strategy, their splenetic outbursts do have, however, important political impact. What these stories do is bash the ‘power-bloc’ – or those representatives of it whose attributes and
actions can be most meaningfully represented for their readers. They give voice to and vent pent-up frustration and indignation at the excesses of those who have come from recognisably ordinary backgrounds, and have ‘made it’ in understandable ways. [...] 

[...] This [...] raises an interesting proposition about these sorts of stories. The proposition is that not only are they revealing tales, but also tales which set out to teach moral lessons by exposing unworthy and unbecoming actions. Moreover, though perhaps less surprisingly, the moral lessons they teach are relatively simple and conservative ones – of the sort that extra-marital sex is to be avoided. Not for them the complexities of the professional philosopher. Much of what was written about ‘Randy Rod’, for example, suggests that a major point of narrative interest is whether or not he is capable of living up to the conventional idea of marriage – fidelity. This moralising is not entirely consistent with the other, more common proposition, namely that these papers peddle a prurient interest in sexual matters.

I have said that these stories belong to a hybrid genre that combines elements of fabulous and journalistic writing – fabulous reportage. They are sufficiently driven by journalistic imperatives to take an interest in the disruptive, unexpected or unanticipated. Guaranteed pride of place are stories which deal with just such events in the lives of the rich and famous. Will ‘Randy Rod’ with his long history of casual affairs really settle down with yet another ‘leggy blonde’ who is, moreover, his junior by several years? The types of events which are of particular interest to the tabloids can be further specified. They involve actions which are not only unexpected or disruptive, but also unworthy, and unbecoming to a member of the caste of stars or any of the other elevated castes.

[...] Some final remarks are required on this matter. It does seem to me that fundamentally these stories turn on what are perceived to be abuses of privilege. Their moralising tone adds force, but is dependent on or occasioned by the abuses. The moral condemnation is not the main point of telling the stories. These are political stories, even though their ‘structure in dominance’ (to indulge in a little old-fashioned structuralist phraseology) is not evidently political. They are political stories inasmuch as (a) they articulate as antagonistic the relations between:

1. powerful elites (from which are drawn the tragic heroes and heroines of the tales);
2. narrators who are by a variety of means in touch with the goings on of the elites, but who are not at one with them;
the rest of us, the powerless ordinary people on whose behalf the stories are told.

and (b) they focus on the abuses of the rights and privileges that have been granted the heroes and heroines. I would add two comments to this. First, these stories do not operate with a particularly sophisticated political ideology. I have suggested above that it is a somewhat archaic ideology with respect to its perceptions of the differences between social strata. Archaic it may be, but we should not allow this to blind us to the possibility of its continuing efficacy. It is a political ideology which sees the world divided rather simply between those who ‘have’ and those who ‘have not’. This distinction is boldly drawn. The ‘haves’ have it all – opulent homes, good-time lifestyles, leggy blondes, big cars and ‘inflated’ salaries. They have all the things that the ‘have nots’ are presumed to desire. There are even, on occasions, suggestions that they have it all at our expense.

[...]

In a particular light the stories can be read as the expression of outrage on behalf of the ‘have nots’. This can be powerfully and pleasurably engaging. Why should they have it all? What have they done to deserve such rewards? What do they know of real work? What do they care about what happens to the likes of you and me? Like much populist ranting, however, these stories are quite conservative. They are not against privileges being granted, merely angry that they have been granted to the wrong people – to ‘them’ and not to ‘us’, not to ‘me’. Their mission is not so much to put a stop to gross inequalities as to redistribute them. Worse still perhaps is the possibility that the populism is a sham. The most vitriolic of the attacks seems to be reserved for those who by good fortune have found themselves one of the stars. They have not been born to stardom. It is, therefore, as if the tabloids are waiting for the inevitable, the moment when these parvenu personalities give themselves away and reveal the ordinariness of their origins. I do not wish to sell these stories short, however. While what I have just suggested can be demonstrated to be true of them, it is also true that they can and do undermine the authority of those who would place themselves apart. They encourage and nourish scepticism about the legitimacy of the class of personalities to act as they do.

Reading source
Connell, 1992, pp.64–83