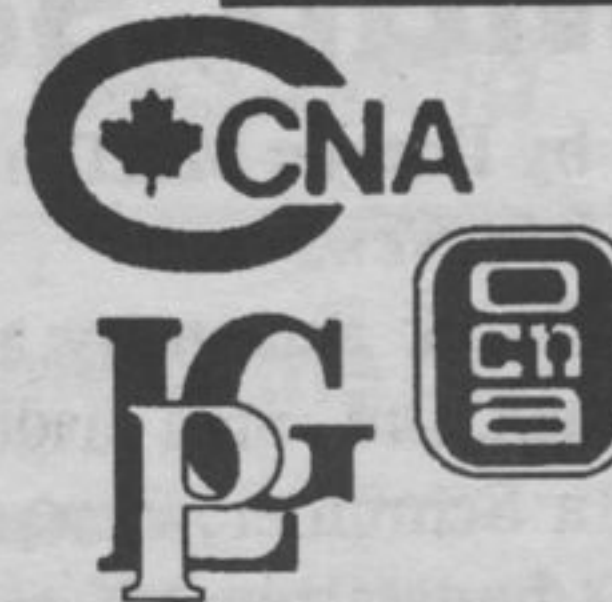


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Tabloid television is an embarrassment, but we watch anyway

We've all watched them at one time or another, although some of us may be reluctant to admit it. I'm talking about those cheap tabloid television shows that focus entire programs on things like fat women who flaunt their sexuality, or the sex lives of your favourite movie stars, or just about anything at all with sex in it.

Every occupation has its embarrassments: some lawyers do literally chase ambulances; some politicians really are crooks; and some doctors are quacks. But unlike other professional scourges, quack journalists are watched by millions every day, coast to coast. And their only constraints are libel and slander laws.

Although the tabloid shows are largely an American phenomenon, they have leaked into Canada, albeit in a slightly tamer version than Oprah or Sally Jesse whatsherface. Why is it that Canadians insist on adopting the bad aspects of American culture, like race riots and tabloid television, and never any of the good?

Anyway, "journalists" weren't always interested in the darker aspects of celebrity. The robust sex life of John F. Kennedy was well known to the press of the day, but it somehow never made it into the newspapers. Estimates of the number of extramarital affairs JFK had run from the ridiculous to the merely outrageous, yet it wasn't until 20 years after his death that they became common knowledge. Compare that with former US presidential candidate Gary Hart's little tryst with model Donna Rice, or even our own prime minister's extra-curricular activities documented in John Sawatsky's *The Politics of Ambition*.

What changed the attitude of the press? How did this entourage of smut-hounds and dirt seekers ever get started? Well, most people trace it back to the downfall of former US president Richard Nixon. Rather than bury the story of White House dirty tricks, Washington journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein kept on digging until they destroyed Nixon's presidency. Through tenacity, exhaustive research and a few lucky breaks, Woodward and Bernstein brought down a crooked president and the ensuing Watergate scandal changed the way people view politicians forever.

Unfortunately, what the two journalists also succeeded in doing was opening up a market for dirty news. Somewhere in America, a lightbulb went on in someone's head, and they realized that people eat this kind of stuff up. By appealing to the lowest common denominator, a journalist with a lot of gaul and not a lot of scruples could make a lot of money.

Not only was the conspiracy of silence between the media and the celebrity broken, but the press began *looking* for such stories, and often didn't care whether their sources were reliable or not. Getting the story before anyone else was—and often still is—the primary consideration.

The first form of this kind of "journalism" was the tabloid newspaper—The National Enquirer, The Star, etc. Instead of reporting about a UFO that ate someone's mother, like other tabloids, they began reporting that this star had a child out of wedlock, or this politician was drunk at a party.

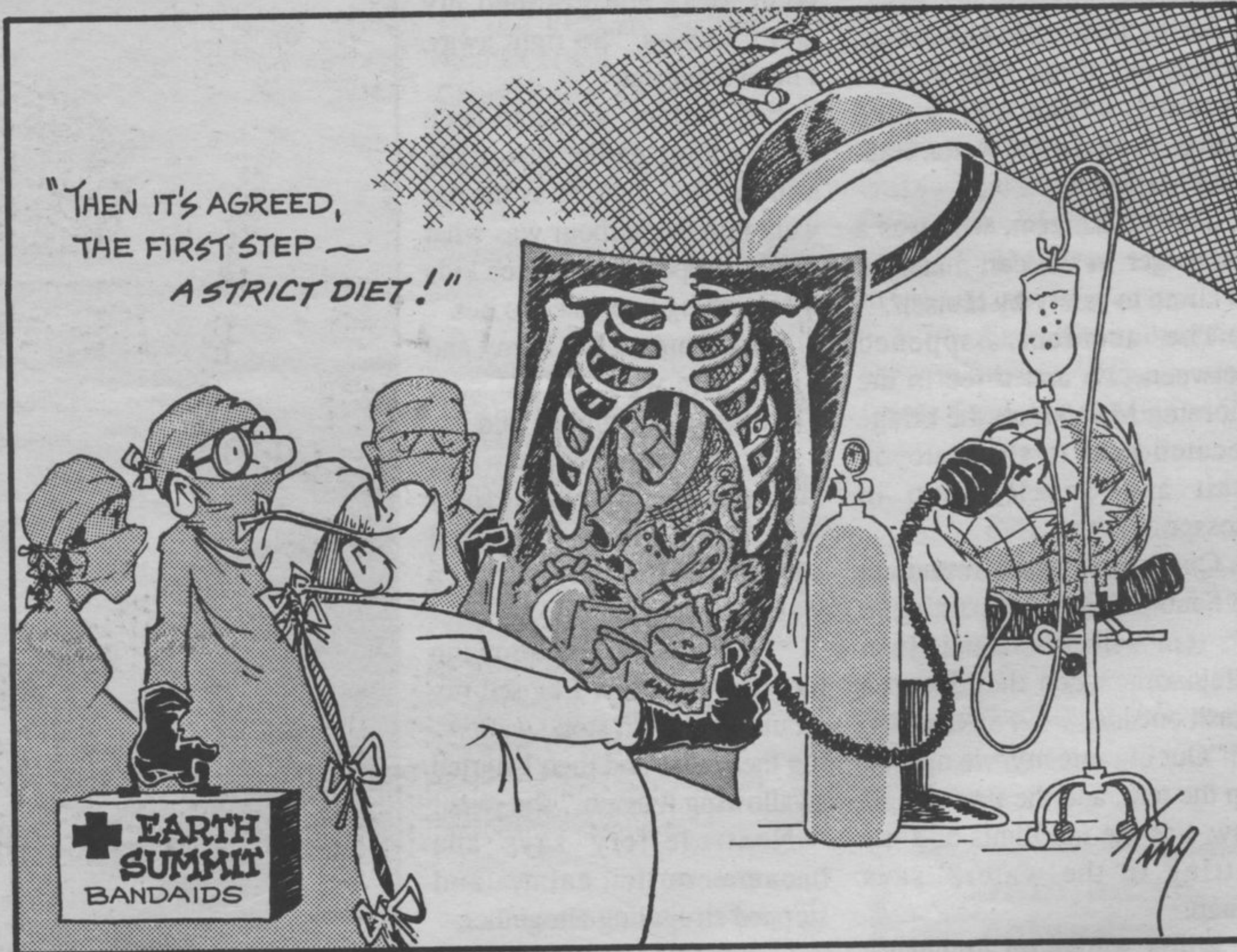
And the sources for the stories? The infamous, all-knowing, all-seeing "insider," as in "insiders say," or "according to one insider".

The lawsuits these publications inevitably attracted were, considering the profits involved, the cost of doing business. And the resulting publicity was worth the court costs anyway.

It was just a matter of time before another lightbulb went on in another head, and the tabloids made it to television. Today, the tube's full of these bloody shows.

Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein calls the tabloid shows "the idiot culture". He's right.

But there's an idiot somewhere laughing uncontrollably as he drives his Rolls Royce to the bank



Pirates had great health care

Don't talk to me. Don't look at me. I'm in a bad mood. I've just had one of my all-time favorite myths pulverized like a sea-biscuit under Long John Silver's peg leg.

That's the very myth I mean—pirates. It probably indicates a mutant chromosome in my genetic balance sheet, but I've always had a perverse fascination with pirates. I like pirates because in a world of shifting values, of weasel words and fake imagery—pirates were at least real. Real . . . bad

The badest, in fact. Nastier than Nazis and more ruthless than lawyers, even. Pirates had no redeeming features. We're talking about thugs who stalked fat, unarmed merchant ships. Who boozed and raped and pillaged and plundered and sent anyone who stood in their way for a long stroll off a short plank, right?

Nah. Not even close.

Fact is we can thank Robert Louis Stevenson and J.M. Barrie for most of the "truths" we know about pirates. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island*. J.M. Barrie gave us *Peter Pan*.

But based on real historical records, it looks like Messrs. Stevenson and Barrie probably couldn't tell a pirate cutlass from a veal cutlet

First, the famous skull and cross bone flag. Everybody knows that pirates invariably hoisted the old S&C when they were bearing down on some hapless treasure-laden galleon, right? Wrong. Pirates flew red flags, black flags, flags with full skeletons—in short, any damn flags they pleased. For most part, they ran up the flag of Utmost Convenience. In other words, if a British frigate was their prey, they flew the Union Jack. If it was a French sloop they had in their sights, they made sure the Fleur de Lis was fluttering in the breeze. The better to bamboozle the quarry, my pretties.

What about the plank, then? Surely the stories about pirates prinking captives off a plank into the briny are true? Not according to Hugh Rankin, author of the *Golden Age of Piracy*. Ye

olde plankwalk, writes Rankin, "appears to have been a fabrication of later generations." Rankin says that when the pirates wished to rid themselves of enemies, they simply tossed them over the rail—without the benefit of a diving board.

Turns out that even among themselves, pirates weren't the lawless band of savages we've come to know and loathe. Buccaneer politics weren't anything like the anarchic seadog-eat-seadog frenzy one might have assumed. It was more like . . . well, the United Nations.

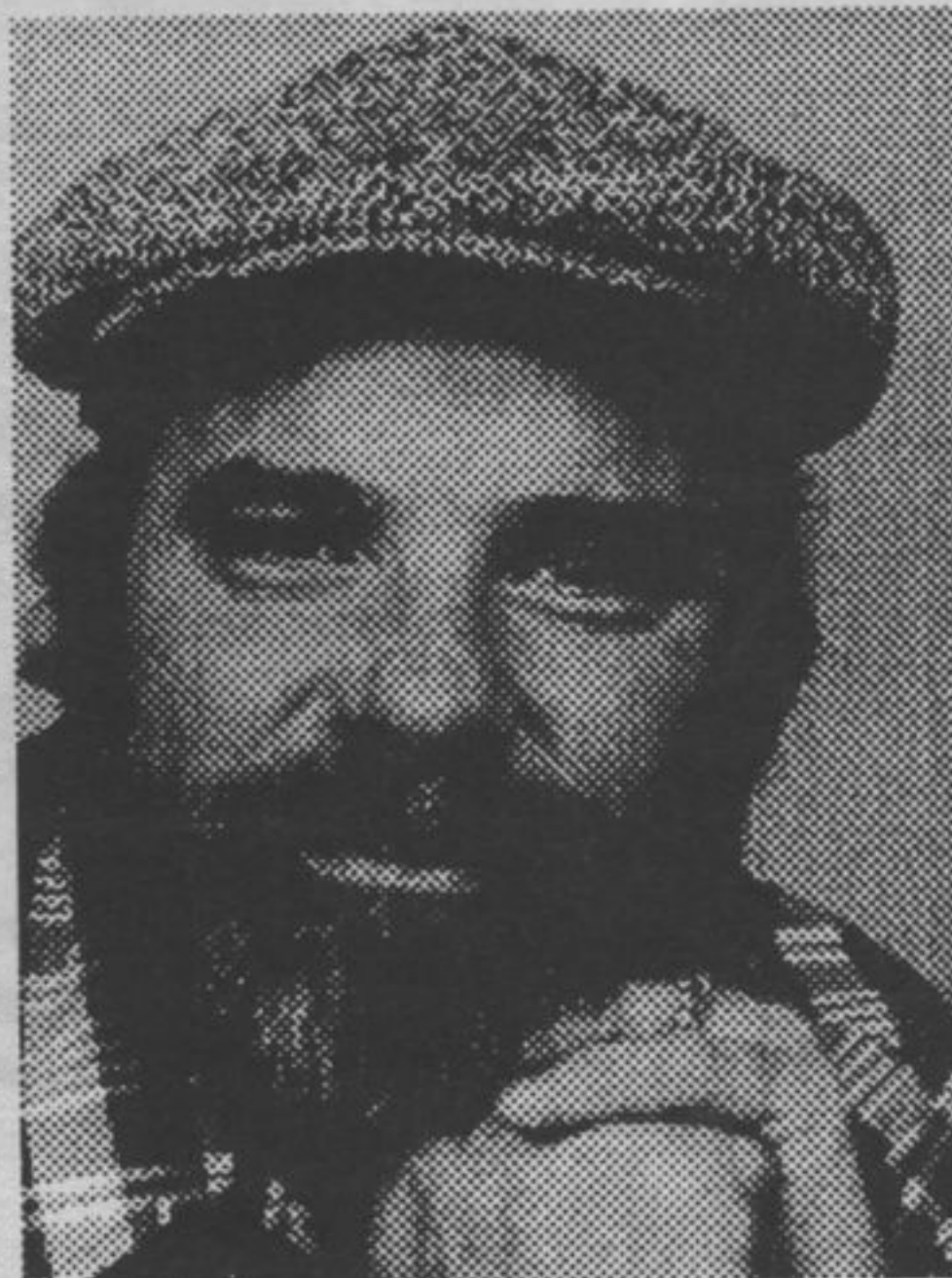
David Cordingly is the organizer of an exhibition on pirate history currently on display at the National Maritime Museum in London, England. According to him, inter-pirate behaviour was surprisingly charitable. "Pirates were extraordinarily democratic," he says. "Plunder had to be shared out equally. The captain could take a bit more, but not a lot more, unlike the navy. A pirate crew could even vote their captain out of office."

And here's the kicker for me. Care to meet two of the bloodthirstiest pirates of all time? One was a fearless cutthroat named Read; the other, a sadistic swashbuckler named Bonny. Read and Bonny roamed the seas in the early 1700s, separately at first, then together on an English pirate ship under Calico Jack Rackham. Finally, in 1721 a Jamaican warship tracked them down and after a vicious battle in which Read and Bonny were the last to yield, they captured the pirate sloop and threw the whole crew into chains.

The entire crew was tried, found guilty and hanged. With the exception of Read and Bonny. They were excused.

Because they were pregnant. Bonny's first name was Anne; Read's first name was Mary.

Sure throws cold water on the pirate legend. On the other hand, it opens a whole new career option for Maggie Thatcher.



Arthur Black