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## Tabloid porn in Quebec

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### ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Canadian region of Quebec saw a proliferation of tabloid newspapers, of uniform dimensions, covering a wide range of sensational genres (such as crime and celebrity gossip). Increasingly explicit content of a sexual character cut across these genres, marking each of these genres with elements of the pornographic. At the same time, a number of tabloid papers emerged exclusively to sexual content, typically offering softcore photographic imagery of nude bodies and sexual activity which accompanied journalistic narratives (of variable veracity) chronicling sexual behaviour. The generalization of the tabloid form, this article suggests, has had particular effects on the ways in which these papers have survived. While, on the one hand, the tabloid form and use of cheap newsprint materials have contributed to a sense of the valuelessness of these papers, the manner in which the pornographic is very often 'hidden' within other sensational genres has allowed many of these papers to survive in contexts of preservation from which they might otherwise be expelled.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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tabloid; Quebec; erotic; print; sensation

This article is about a tabloid form of print culture that flourished in the Canadian province of Quebec in the late 1960s and early 1970s. My central argument is that the tabloid newspaper form served as the principal carrier of printed pornographic content during this period. This content included photographic imagery of nude or semi-nude women (and, very occasionally, men), feature articles on sexual behaviour presented using the formal features (such as sensational headlines and illustrative photographs) of mainstream tabloid journalism, and a variety of ephemeral features with a sexual focus (such as advertisements from people seeking sexual encounters, or sexually focused advice columns). While, in other national cultures, print pornography might circulate through glossy magazines or in underground, book-like compendia of words and images, the largest corpus of erotic print culture in Quebec drew on the forms and materials of cheaply produced newspapers and on an infrastructure of distribution systems which delivered these periodicals to newsstands across the province.

The research presented here is part of a larger project, tentatively called 'Tabloid Metropolis', which deals with the remarkable expansion of the tabloid press in Montreal (Quebec's industrial and cultural capital) from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. This expansion involved the growth of daily tabloid newspapers aimed at a general readership,

but its most striking feature was the proliferation of weekly tabloid papers devoted to celebrity culture, crime, sports, underground culture, and, most notably, sex. The papers I am discussing, both here and as part of that larger project, are French-language, but it should be noted that, during the same period, Montreal became a major place of publication for English-language tabloid newspapers, like *Midnight* (later *Midnight Globe*, then *Globe*) and *National Spotlight* which, unusually for Canadian periodicals, found great success in the USA.

### The tabloid pornographic

In a period extending roughly from 1968 to 1973, at least 25 periodicals published in Quebec engaged in some version of the pornographic. Some of these papers interwove the sexual with other forms of sensation, such as celebrity scandal or unusual crimes, but most of them engaged in ever greater degrees of sexualization as the 1960s ended and the 1970s began. Titles in this category include *Rendez-Vous*, *Nouvelles Bizarres*, *Encore*, *Flirt* (later *Flirt et Potins*), *Hebdo Monde*, *Minuit*, *Pilou*, and *le Tourbillon*. Many of these, particularly in their early years, had offered articles on such phenomenon as astrologers' predictions of doomsday, UFO sightings, or babies abandoned in usual places; this variety of topics resembled that of the US-based weekly tabloid papers, like the *National Enquirer*, whose proliferation in the 1960s was considerable. By the end of the 1960s, all of these papers offered content whose themes were almost exclusively sexual. Another cluster of tabloids consisted of papers which, from the moment of their launch, were concentrated more exclusively on sexual imagery and textual content. This focus was often signalled in their titles: *Amour et vérité*, *Bi-Sexus*, *Echangeur de Partenaires*, *Interdit*, *Jeux d'Hommes*, *Le Monde Lesbien*, *Le Nu-Vo Journal*, *Lesbo*, *L'Escapade '69*, *Le Topless*, *Maniaque*, *Omni-Mag*, *Nympho*, *Sapho*, *Scandale*, *Sextra*, and *Vice Roi*.

In the late 1960s, then, the broad expansion of the tabloid newspaper as a form in Quebec served to expand the terrain of the erotic. The years 1968–1971 were the 'thickest' for tabloid pornography in Quebec, in that we see older titles, during this period, adapting to a competitive environment which seemed to encourage heightened sexualization and newer titles emerging to exploit what seemed to be an expanding market. We may imagine the tabloid field in Quebec during this period as a distributive machinery which scattered erotic content across a range of pre-existent tabloid genres (those focused on celebrity culture, crime, and the human interest news story) while simultaneously concentrating that material in new titles or formats devoted to materials of an exclusively sexual character.

The immediately striking thing about the corpus of tabloid papers described here is the uniformity which runs through them. All of the papers listed here share the same physical dimensions (29 cm × 39 cm), and all are printed on newsprint of roughly equal quality. While, when examining these papers, we may note differences between the explicitly pornographic and the more conventionally sensational, the corpus is held together by markers of period style (like fonts and colour schemes) which over-ride differences of genre and explicitness. This standardization is particularly true of these papers' covers, and, I will argue, has effected the ways in which these papers have survived and continue to circulate. Uniformity has contributed, as well, to a perception that, during this period, the pornographic was everywhere, spilling across genres and generating forms of

presentation (like cover lay-outs) which marked the broader field of tabloid print culture with an air of sexualized sleaze.

Figure 1 shows the covers of five Quebec tabloids published in 1969. *Allo Police*, the oldest of these papers (founded in 1953), was also at greatest distance from the pornographic, but in its use of a full shot of a woman's body on its cover (signalling an inside story about an evening encounter that resulted in violence) it resonated with others of the moment. *Encore*, *l'Escapade '69*, and *Pilou*, which had all been launched in the previous three years, were in various stages of transition at this point, from offering content covering a range of sensational social phenomenon to a more exclusively sexual focus. This ascendant focus is evident in the ways in which the sorts of 'reports' common to the tabloid newspaper were more and more mobilized as justifications for the inclusion of images of naked women. Overviews of the new eroticism of contemporary European cinema or stories on new trends in beach bathing were little more than pretexts for an abundance of such imagery. *Vice-Roi*, whose cover in this year sometimes claimed it was the 'Numéro un des tabloids sexes', offered more explicit sexual imagery and a more exclusive concentration on sex, but still included the sorts of miscellany typical of the mainstream news tabloid, such as cartoons, a gossip column, and a horoscope feature.



Figure 1. Five tabloid papers from 1969.

All five examples discussed here feature sexualized images of a single woman on their cover, and, while this is hardly novel in magazine history, this has affected the ways in which these Quebec tabloids continue to circulate. That the full-body figure of a woman is featured on the covers of both *À l'lo Police* and *Vice Roi* has meant that, for those encountering such papers today, it is read as a sign of shared period style rather than of specific generic belonging. Arrayed alongside each other on newsstands of the period, or bundled together in present-day flea markets, these covers, seen at a distance, offer few clues as to the degree of sexual explicitness inside each tabloid paper relative to the others. Following the useful framework offered by Carla Rodrigues Cardoso, we may see such covers as constituted of 'lines of visibility (images); of enunciation (the title), of strength (the main headline and image); and of fracture (separation mechanisms for multiple subjects)' (2010, 578). Cardoso is writing of the mainstream news magazine, but in the evolution of the covers of Quebec's sensational tabloids in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we find, typically, a reduced fracturing of covers into the multiple elements which might suggest a journalistic abundance. Rather, we may observe an intensification of the use of single images of women in sexualized poses alongside one (or, at most, two) headlines. The lines of visibility and enunciation which, on the cover of a conventional newsmagazine, might offer the promise of variety, here seem devoted solely to gathering up a sensationalizing 'strength' which is that of an weakly specified but ubiquitous sexualization.

### Bundles and stashes

The uneven mixes of the pornographic and non-pornographic in the tabloids just discussed have had particular effects on the manner in which these papers are likely to be found today. The sites in which they turn up for sale are – in declining order of the likelihood they offer of successful discovery – flea markets, charity book sales (organized to support libraries or other public institutions), church basement rummage sales, and junk shops or low-end antique stores. In the vintage clothing stores which have proliferated in Quebec over the last two decades, one or two examples of these tabloids are sometimes on display as decoration. eBay remains a minor source for these, and their presence on Facebook marketplace is rare relative to that of other forms of Quebecois cultural ephemera.

If these tabloids are becoming difficult to find, this has little to do with their status as secret, illicit artefacts or with any notable increase in their value to collectors. Their elusiveness is largely an effect of their inconsequentiality and disposability. Because most examples of printed pornography produced in Quebec during this period were printed in tabloid form and on newsprint paper, their fate has been the fate of all tabloid papers – to be preserved mostly by accident or neglect. One effect of the ageing of these papers has been to diminish the distinctiveness of any one, such that the status of all converges on that of cheap newspapers in general, which typically have little value (outside those cases in which they document important events, like the Kennedy association or – in Montreal – the 1967 World's Fair).

Nevertheless, it would seem, there comes a point in their material history as objects when even old tabloid newspapers are kept and allowed to survive. This is because, even when there is no evidence of their value in the present, the mere fact of their

having lasted thus far weakens any impulse to throw them in the garbage. In this, they are like certain categories of vinyl records or paperback books which, unwanted, nevertheless continue to be stored, in places (like basements) where they are rarely disturbed (or, more likely, are moved along from one site of possible resale to another). In this respect, the tabloid papers described here represent an inverse of the expensive, coffee-table books of pornographic materials analyzed by Cardoso and Paasonen (2021, 96) whose unusual size and cost render them resistant to being discarded. Insofar as the ongoing survival of a tabloid newspaper usually involves its joining to others, in bundles produced for the convenience of storage rather than to express any archival strategy, the pornographic tabloid finds a place of rest and survival alongside and between the non-pornographic. It is also worth noting that, even in places of casual retention, Quebec's tabloid newspapers are usually stored flat and not folded, and thus resist the cracking and tearing which is the common fate of larger newspaper formats.

I have found tabloid sex papers like *Echangeur des partenaires* (published circa 1970, full of illustrated 'reports' on orgies and featuring nudity but concealed genitalia) in bundles that included crime tabloids (like *Photo Police*), showbusiness papers (like *Photo Vedettes*), and random issues of sensational, but non-pornographic, daily tabloids (like the *Journal de Montréal*). If such bundles survive, this is rarely because of a recognition of the historical value of individual titles within them. More likely, it is because all of these papers resemble each other sufficiently for them to be gathered together. In this gathering, in piles or bundles, they acquire a weightiness which endows them with the hazy air of possible interest or value, such that any decision to dispose of them is put off to some later day.

These tabloid bundles bear some relationship to the pornographic 'stash' as conceptualized by Kyrölä and Paasonen (2016), in that they often represent personal collections amassed over time and kept out of sight or forgotten. The canonical version of the pornographic stash is the collection of sex magazines found hidden in a man's garage upon his death. One assortment of sex papers I purchased at a Montreal 'vintage bazaar' was described to me as such by the vendor. It contained sequential runs of such papers as *Flirt* and single issues of several of the short-lived sex papers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, like *Maniaque*.

My largest acquisition, however, is better described as a bundle, produced in the slow disposal and convergence of miscellaneous printed objects over time. In 2021, a student who knew of my collections alerted me to a sale being held to raise money for a public library. He messaged me from the sale (I was travelling) to say there were boxes of tabloid newspapers piled on the floor. I asked him to buy everything. I received 150 Québécois tabloids of all genres, their dates of publication concentrated in the period I am discussing here. The range of genres and themes (crime, celebrity gossip, sex, mundane news) made it unlikely that these had been 'stashed' for any decipherable purpose. The present-day market status of many of those papers – rare, but largely indistinguishable and not notably sought by collectors – worked against any sense of a corpus purposely built with an eye to re-sale. Despite the fact that most of these papers were over a half-century old, it was difficult to imagine their life cycle as material objects as involving anything more than a very long history of neglect and endlessly delayed disposal.

That many of the papers gathered in this bundle were sex papers, markers of a significant transition in collective morality and legal regulation in Quebec, did not seem to

render them more collectible or hurry their movement towards any kind of official archives. The common features of 1960s/1970s Quebec tabloids work to reduce the special features or desirability of any one. The bundling of tabloids of possible historical interest – such as those which stand as signposts for moments in the history of sexual representation in Quebec – with tabloids of other genres which mostly resist that interest (like sports or the news of a small city tabloid) collapses all these artefacts into the brute status of paper.

In such bundles, I have often thought, the mundane newspaper and dated celebrity tabloid have served as a protective camouflage for sex papers. Lost among them, the sex paper conceals its exceptionality, both from scholar-collectors (like myself) and from others (like the organizers of church rummage sales) who might want to throw them in the garbage in an act of delayed censorship. Concealment and camouflage, in such cases, are helped by the ways in which, in their collective ageing, differences between these papers (and the genres to which they belong) dissolve within a loosely coherent period style. That they may all offer the cover image of a semi-naked woman conforms to a widely shared popular expectation of tabloid covers – that they be both tantalizing and deceptive. This expectation dissuades any reading which would take such covers as evidence of the exclusive presence of pornographic content inside.

### Histories of Quebec pornography

If the tabloid press of the late 1960s and early 1970s is scarcely acknowledged in histories of Quebec pornography this is in part because, as in so many national cultures, the key milestones in the mid-century history of Quebec pornography have been understood as those involving cinema. Here, the dominant narrative surrounding pornography in the 1960s and early 1970s is one which begins with struggles over the projection of sexually explicit European art films at the Montreal International Film Festival (which ran from 1960 to 1968). These struggles would lead to government recognition of the need to adapt Quebec's censorship to shifts in international cinematic culture, but also to the acceptance of rating systems which would enshrine the notion of multiple publics for films. The culmination of these changes was a wave of softcore sex films made in Quebec between 1969 and 1971 (Véronneau 2013; Garneau 2012). These films were of feature length, featured Quebec media celebrities, and were produced, in many cases, with government subsidies. They were organized as comic or romantic narratives interrupted by scenes of sexual activity in which breasts and asses were visible while genitalia remained hidden. Labelled by *Variety* as 'Maple Syrup Porno' and remembered popularly in Quebec as 'les films de fesse', these films – with titles such as *Valérie* (Heroux, dir. 1969) and *L'Après-Ski* (Cardinal, dir. 1971) – are taken to exemplify Quebec's version of a 'golden age' of pornography. As such, they find their place within broader, transnational periodizations of the pornographic, such as that which prompted the publication of this Forum.

The corpus of tabloid sex papers I am discussing here has also been overlooked in histories of print pornography in Quebec, which have tended to focus on two periods before and after this wave. The first of these periods is that of the so-called 'journaux jaunes' [yellow papers], small-size periodicals (with typical dimensions of 22 cm × 29 cm) published on a weekly or bi-weekly basis between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. These were usually printed on newsprint and contained few illustrations beyond their

front covers. Their content ranged from bits of gossip about local personalities through salacious narratives, of limited journalistic reliability, dealing with sex workers, homosexuality, sexual victimization, and other phenomena typically treated in sensationalizing fashion. As Vivian Namaste (2017) has shown, these periodicals were the target of ongoing judicial action, principally in small towns, which removed them from newsstands and other points of sale. The most significant research on the *journaux jaunes* has been by queer historians (for example, Higgins 1999) who have used them as indices of shifting attitudes towards non-normative sexualities and evidence in reconstructing the places and practices of queer sociability.

The other significant body of research on pornographic print culture in Quebec focuses on a period which came after the tabloid explosion of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Historians of queer life in Montreal have produced rich accounts of the emergence of a gay and lesbian press in the 1970s. While they have concentrated on papers and magazines of an explicitly political character (for example, Giguère 2016), these histories will occasionally acknowledge the thicket of pornographic periodicals published earlier in the decade, in the later years of the tabloid wave which is my focus. Papers like *Bi-Sexus*, *Le Monde Lesbien*, *Lesbo*, and *Sapho* resembled other sex papers of the tabloid wave (like *Vice-Roi*) in their physical dimensions and in their balancing of text and image. What distinguished them was a focus on gay and lesbian sexualities, typically signalled in their titles and on their front covers. While, for many of these papers (like *Lesbo Monde*), the purported emphasis on lesbianism and bisexuality was often a pretext for publishing eroticized images of women directed in part at male, heterosexual readers, many of these titles also published personal advertisements for those seeking same-sex encounters or other non-normative practices. These listings, as well as advertisements for sexual accessories and regular 'reports' (however fictive and sensationalizing) on queer activity, may be seen as setting in place some of the resource infrastructures for LGBTQ+ communities in Quebec as the 1970s unfolded. It is in part for this reason that, as Patrick Keilty (2019) has shown, the depth of present-day university-based collections of sex-centred print culture owes much to the willingness of gay and lesbian archivists of the 1980s and 1990s to reach back to publications of a decade or more earlier which, while they bore no obvious connection to emerging, politicized sexual communities, were part of a history of publicly circulating images and words documenting sexual dissidence. While Quebec has required legal deposit of periodicals to its Bibliothèque Nationale since 1968, compliance on the part of small publishers of sensational papers has been uneven and, when library holdings of such papers exist, they are very often available only as black-and-white microfilms of uneven legibility (Costantini 2021; see also Beal 1989).

From the *journaux jaunes* of the 1950s through the explicit sex papers of the early 1970s, the use of newsprint and variations of the tabloid format characterized a majority of the erotic print materials available on the open market for books and periodicals in Quebec. Quebec publishers had experimented in 1966 and 1968 with glossy men's magazines aspiring to the model of *Playboy*, in which softcore, black-and-white nude photographs of women were interwoven with articles on local celebrities or lifestyle accoutrements such as automobiles. However, neither *007* (first issue 1966) nor *Défi* (first issue undated, but probably 1968) survived long, presumably because their production costs (and resulting retail prices) were too high for the competitive Quebec market. Advertisements for glossy volumes of colour nude photographs were often



published in Quebec's erotic tabloids, but these were almost always imported from elsewhere, a fact usually signalled in their English-language titles like *Jaybird International* or *Metropolitan International* (advertised in *Pilou* in 1970). From the 1950s onwards, journalist Mario Fontaine (1978) observed, the prevalence of tabloid newspapers of all kinds was perhaps the most distinctive feature of Quebec's media culture. The widespread sexualization of the tabloid field in the late 1960s stands as a key development in the history of the pornographic in Quebec.

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