

THE MARKET VS. THE RIGHT TO COMMUNICATE:

THE ANTI-POLITICAL LOCAL PRESS IN
BRITAIN AND THE JOURNALISM OF
CONSENSUS

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Abstract

The MacBride Report identified communication as a basic individual and collective right, and offered a range of recommendations to protect it. Among other things, the report highlighted the need to strengthen cultural identity, provide diversity of choice in media, reduce the commercialisation of communication, and remove obstacles to individuals' participation. This article, based on interviews with journalists, argues that in the case of British local journalism, a market logic works against the right to communicate. The increasing dominance of resource-poor, chain-owned weekly newspapers has encouraged the rise of an anti-political journalism. I look at the anti-political tendencies of UK local journalism by focusing on campaigns, editorials and letters to the editor – the opinionated journalism through which local newspapers may advance social change. I argue that journalism-on-the-cheap, as practiced in local papers, becomes a journalism of consensus; one which has the power to enhance community solidarity but cannot question the status quo.

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Introduction

The MacBride Report identified communication as a basic individual and collective right. The report highlighted the need to strengthen cultural identity, provide diversity of choice in media, reduce the commercialisation of communication, and remove obstacles to individuals' participation (MacBride Commission 1980/2004). It also suggested that more emphasis should be placed on local media as unique sites for democratic participation (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 56).

This article suggests that the concerns of the MacBride Commission have a continued relevance. It examines the state of the right to communicate in British local journalism in terms of these concerns, drawing on interviews with journalists and existing scholarship.¹ It is a deliberate attempt at widening the debate about the relationship between journalism and democracy, which, in the British context and elsewhere, is dominated by work on national journalism.

The article is animated by the belief that local newspapers need to be taken seriously because for most people, they are the only source of information about the small and large events that shape local communities – council policies, births, marriages and deaths, new building projects, farmers' markets, and the state of traffic lights and post offices. It is often at the level of the local newspaper that "news stories involving issues of individual political rights and the malfunctioning of the basic components of the democratic system have their genesis" (Murphy 1976, 11). Local newspapers are central to participation in communities, and as such they are also crucial to the very existence of these communities.

I argue that in the case of British local journalism, a market logic works against the right to communicate – understood in terms of citizens' ability to access information, express opinion, and participate in public communication (cf. Splichal 2002, 168). Changes in the local newspaper landscape have had a direct impact on the content, quality and diversity of papers, and therefore on the ability of citizens to communicate and participate in local settings. In particular, the increasing dominance of resource-poor, chain-owned weekly newspapers – free and paid-for – has encouraged the rise of an anti-political journalism. I look at the anti-political tendencies of local journalism by focusing on campaigns, editorials and letters to the editor – the opinionated journalism through which local newspapers can advance social change.

The threat to free communication I outline here is not a straightforward one. While the changing nature of the British local press by no means undermines local journalism as a category, it does limit its ability to scrutinise institutions and companies. Journalism-on-the-cheap, as practiced in local papers, becomes a journalism of consensus; one which has the power to enhance community solidarity but cannot question the status quo. As such, the state of the local press in Britain is a key example of how the commercialisation of media reduces the ability of citizens to acquire information about, participate in, and change their societies. Even in a country like Britain, which prides itself on a long history of vigorous journalism appealing to broad national and local audiences (e.g. Allan 2004, 8-16) a free press can never be completely secure, but is always a struggle and an achievement (see also Curran and Seaton 2003, 1-3; Williams 1997).

The State of Local Newspapers in Britain

The regional and local press in Britain was born as a capitalist enterprise. Regional periodicals were among the first published newspapers – while the first regular daily paper, *The Daily Courant* (1702) came out of London, it was soon followed by regional titles such as the *Leeds Mercury* (1718, later merged into the *Yorkshire Post*), the *Belfast News Letter* (1737) and the *Aberdeen Journal* (1748) – all of which survive to this day (www.newspapersociety.org.uk). The growth of a substantial local press was made possible by the abolition of the “taxes on knowledge” in the 1850s and 1860s, including the Stamp Duty, the Paper Tax, the Advertising Duty and a compulsory security deposit. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the foundation of a diverse local press committed to providing “a reliable source of information for the local community” (Franklin and Murphy 1991, 55-56). Local newspapers thrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, occupying a niche in the media market. Today, there are 1,286 regional and local newspapers in the UK today, including 27 mornings (19 paid-for and 8 free), 75 evenings, 21 Sundays, 526 paid-for weeklies, and 637 free weekly newspapers according to Newspaper Society data.

Local papers remain a unique source of news about their communities, and it is therefore not surprising that they have such wide readership – 85.4% of the British population regularly reads local and regional papers (www.newspapersociety.org.uk). However, the role of the local paper is continually contested and changing. Facing competition from television and radio and, more recently, the Internet, local newspaper circulation has been in steep decline since the late 1980s. This decline has been particularly marked for evening newspapers and paid-for weeklies (Franklin and Murphy 1998, 8). Despite the fall in circulation, local newspapers remain profitable as advertising revenues continue to soar. In 2002, for example, advertising revenues in the regional press outperformed those of national newspapers, at £2,870 million (Franklin 2005, 140).

Though local newspapers are often seen as parochial “parish pumps” chronicles (Pilling 1998) which align themselves closely with the power holders in their communities (Neveu 2002), most are owned by large national or multinational corporations whose interest lies not in local influence, but in profit-making. Ownership is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few large companies: the largest 20 newspaper groups in Britain own 85 per cent of regional titles and control 96 per cent of the weekly circulation, while the five largest groups own 76 per cent of newspapers by circulation (Franklin 2005, 141). These newspaper groups have secured the efficiency of their operations through the creation of local monopolies, both in dailies and weeklies (Murphy 1998, 82). As David Murphy points out, the corporations that dominate the local newspaper landscape – companies such as Trinity Mirror, Newsquest, Johnston Newspapers, and Northcliffe Newspapers – have exchanged titles and production facilities to obtain local control. These exchanges “have been underpinned by agreements to refrain from competition within agreed circulation boundaries” (Murphy 1998, 82).

The ownership and circulation dynamics of local newspapers have had profound consequences for their content. In the following section, I will consider some of the specific ways in which the British local newspaper industry has responded

to change. I will begin to show that the shrinking of resources militates against a critical and political journalism.

Journalism-On-the-Cheap: The Rise of the Free Weekly, and the Fall of the Regional Daily

While paid-for newspapers have struggled for decades, the period between 1970 and 1990 saw the meteoric rise of the free local weekly. Between 1977 and 1986, the number of titles went from 201 to 886 (Franklin 1998, 128). Bob Franklin suggests that 'free sheets' – which don't need to sell papers to generate income, and therefore don't have to "report news to attract readers" (Franklin 1998, 124) – are dragging down the local journalism industry as a whole. He argues that their "limited and consumer-focused editorial has tended to influence and diminish both the range and quality of the editorial content of the local weekly press more generally" (Franklin 1998, 124; see also Franklin & Murphy 1997).

Adding to this trend is the particularly marked decline in the fortunes of regional evening papers, the traditionally "serious" publications (Franklin 2005, 137). In response to the loss of readers, the majority of evening newspapers converted from broadsheet to tabloid format in 1995 (Griffith 1997, 12) – a change which also meant a turn to tabloid subject matter. This entails a journalism that pays less attention to politics, economics and society, and more to sports, scandal, human interest and popular entertainment (Sparks 2000, 10). More than that, the large corporations that own the local press now view weeklies as the most successful model for newspaper operation. As a result, they are closing down dailies while supporting weekly titles (Slattery 2005). And while dailies are relatively resource-rich journalistic workplaces, weeklies are typically run by an editor and one or two journalists. Also, despite the profitability of the local press, the companies that own them are publicly traded and rely on ever-increasing revenues for their continued stock market success. This means that job cuts and savings are the order of the day in a profession which is already resource-starved (Slattery 2005). Moreover, as corporations strive to make newsrooms more efficient, journalists in the age of convergence are required to perform an ever-greater variety of tasks ever more swiftly (Aviles, Leon, Sanders and Harrison 2004).

The scarcity of staff on weeklies means that journalists often become little more than transcribers of news releases from local institutions and businesses. As Shirley Harrison describes it:

Local newspapers' editorial consists of less news and more in the way of features, such as leisure items on hobbies and holidays (ideal vehicles for attracting associated advertising), and so-called 'infotainment', such as 'What's On' supplements and syndicated interviews with the stars... Their journalists, in many cases hard pressed, de-unionised, demoralised, are increasingly reliant on press releases and promotional material provided for them by vested interests (Harrison 1998, 167; see also Pilling 1998, 185).

The drive for efficiency characteristic of journalism-on-the-cheap combines with ownership patterns to reduce the amount of radically local news. For the large corporate groups that dominate the British press, one of the advantages of chain ownership is that resources can be more efficiently used. This applies not only to technical aspects of news production, such as sub-editing and printing, but also to

the content of the papers (Franklin 2005). Papers that have a local monopoly own several papers sharing the same council, police force, and fire services, as well as local events such as fairs, markets, and festivals. This means that a large proportion of stories can be published across the papers. For instance, among the newspapers in the Mid-Somerset newspaper chain, stories about council decisions affecting all the communities in the region are recycled across the chain's newspapers. Also, each of the papers has three letters-to-the-editor pages – two of them shared across all the papers, and one page unique to the community (Phillip Welch, personal communication, September 1, 2005). This sharing of content among newspapers, which is a common consequence of local monopolies, effectively limits the amount of information readers are offered about their local communities and therefore their right to communicate (cf. Wahl-Jorgensen forthcoming).

Not all of the developments challenging the local press' ability to provide useful and critical information are internal to the newspaper industry. Social change also has a direct bearing on journalistic practices. As the MacBride Report pointed out, the "inherent nature of communication means that its fullest possible exercise and potential depend on the surrounding political, social and economic conditions" (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 253). In the British case, the de-localisation of public services poses a significant threat to local newspapers and their communities. Meryl Aldridge pointed out that newspapers are affected by the "accelerating shift of political power away from the locality through a combination of state centralisation (turning the probation service into a national agency), privatisation (for instance of water and sewerage services), the imposition of national policies and practices (the national curriculum in schools and prescribed methods of practice in social services) and rigid spending controls on local authorities" (Aldridge 2003, 493-494). These changes, while serving the needs of an efficient nation state, are viewed with alarm by local newspapers and their communities. The fewer such services there are, the less grounds for the existence of a community. Also, it results in the "restriction of a potential supply of locality-based news" (Aldridge 2003, 493) – as police and fire stations move away from smaller local communities, it becomes more difficult to gain information about their activities.

The Anti-Political Nature of Local Journalism

In this section, I focus on how the market pressures detailed above construct an anti-political local press; one which orients its resources and coverage away from political issues, and towards non-political and non-controversial topics. I use the term "anti-political" not simply to refer to politics as understood conventionally, in terms of the activities of political parties and institutions (cf. Mulgan 1994). To me, an anti-political journalism is one which fails to enable citizens to understand the larger forces that impact on their lives.

Other scholars have examined the news agenda of local journalism, demonstrating that "serious" content is viewed as anathema to commercial success. Franklin has suggested that local news is becoming "McDonaldized" in its "drive for efficiency, calculability, predictability and control via technology" (Franklin 2005, 148). One consequence of "McJournalism" is the dominance of human interest stories. One editor explained the shift as follows:

We would obviously love to have human interest stories day after day because we worry about becoming too boring for the public. They're very much keener about what they will buy. Reporting about schools, councils, that sort of thing, you might have got away with that in the past, but now you have to look for good stories and the good stories which sell newspapers are tabloid stories (Franklin 2005, 145).

Human interest stories, though often vilified as trivial or insignificant (cf. Allan 2004, 120), can play an important role in creating empathy between individuals and groups, and ultimately support the coherence of local communities (cf. also Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). However, when this is the *dominant* and sometimes the *only* form of news available, it takes away from the critical role of journalism, and with it, from the ability of citizens to engage politically.

Other scholars have suggested that because of shrinking editorial resources, local papers are “ceasing to fulfil their former role as guardians of the truth, and keepers of the public record” (Harrison 1998, 167). As Shirley Harrison concludes, the majority of the local press in Britain consists of “smaller weekly papers, heavily reliant on press releases, [which] enjoy little prospect for independent, investigative or critical journalism.” Similarly, Andrew Leather, in a study of local papers’ business reporting, finds that “it is written by very few full-time staff journalists and is largely constructed by the reproduction of either local financial services’ press releases (business sections) or else national financial services’ press releases (personal finance sections). As a result its tone is completely uncritical and non-investigative” (Leather 1998, 250-251). These patterns of coverage add up to a journalism which pays little critical attention to community events.

I would like to suggest that underpinning and strengthening this orientation away from critical journalism is an anti-political culture within local journalism newsrooms; a culture that shies away from political debates and controversy. When resources are scarce and competition fierce, this culture strongly shapes editorial decision-making. As Phillip Welch, the editor of the *Mid-Somerset Newspapers*, a small chain of local weeklies, put it, “people don’t like to read about politics, they’re not interested in reading about people criticising other people” (Welch, personal communication, September 1, 2005). Similarly, the editor of the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* argued that “court and council are a turn-off ... we’re not interested in political hot air” (Aldridge 2003, 494). The editors I interviewed generally believe that controversial and political content is bad for business. For example, Viv Hargreaves, editor of *The Forester*, a paper in rural Gloucestershire, said that the function of a local paper is to “reflect the local community, and to stimulate, inform and entertain.” However, within that framework she avoids printing too many negative stories: “I don’t like being in conflict. Sometimes it’s important to allow people to fight it out, and we’ll support it when an issue really needs airing.” (personal communication, August 11, 2005).

As such, though the papers cover local politics, as well as stories that are political in a broader sense – about crime, local facilities and working conditions in local businesses – their preferences are inherently anti-political. They favour what one editor described as “emotive and human” stories (Mean, personal communication, August 16, 2005). As Aldridge wryly observes, local newspapers may be reluctant “to confront the possibility that their readers may be not so much bored as scepti-

cal about the effectiveness of local political processes and, by extension, about the standing of the local paper within the local polity" (Aldridge 2003, 494). Instead, the vast majority of local news stories, beyond reprints of press releases, are about the struggles and achievements of individual community members and groups. The stock and trade of the papers I studied was stories about struggles with cancer, remembrances of World War II, the performance of local sports teams, and successful fund-raising efforts.

Campaigns, Editorials and Letters: Constructing a Journalism of Consensus

I would like to show how the anti-political orientation of local journalism spills over into what are ostensibly the key sites for political debate in the papers – the "opinionated journalism" (McNair 2000, 30) of campaigns, editorials and letters-to-the-editor; the main features through which local newspapers can advance social change. That is to say, I try to look at the conundrum of how local newspapers manage to express opinion without causing offence.

If local papers are key to holding local and national government accountable for their actions, such accountability is enforced through these features. However, the anti-political culture works against watchdog journalism, and instead perpetuates a journalism of consensus. Only the letters pages, constituted of contributions written by members of the public, retain a resolutely political flavour. This is because editors usually have little choice in what letters they publish, even though they clearly prefer personalised, rather than political, contributions.

Campaigns

Campaigns – crusades to change something that is amiss in the local community – are a staple of local and regional journalism in the UK, and "a key strategy in sustaining the papers' self-definition as important movers and shakers with whom a loyal readership will identify" (Aldridge 2003, 500). When a local newspaper is running a campaign, they usually include a story in each issue, updating readers on any progress. This means that campaigns provide ready-made story material for hard-pressed reporters. According to one veteran of local newspaper campaigns, the cause should be "capable of getting results; capable of getting a 'response from readers'"; and it should "allow editorial and sales staff to work to 'maximise sales and sponsorship opportunities'" (Johnson 1996; cited in Aldridge 2003). However, the choice of campaign is usually made in a "responsive rather than proactive" fashion (Aldridge 2003, 500). Decisions are based on gauging community reaction to an ongoing debate or story – through letters-to-the editor and phone calls – and initiating a campaign if the balance of local public opinion strongly favours a particular course of action. Ian Mean, editor of the *Gloucester Citizen*, explained his paper's most recent campaign – to keep open a local fire centre – as follows:

I'm deliberately trying to be controversial; the more controversial, the better, because it'll sell more newspapers. But I won't take a stand that disagrees with the readers. I'm interested in taking a stand on behalf of the readers, and then talk about it and write about it, that's the only way to develop a campaign.

To Mean, running campaigns is one way of cementing the newspaper's position within the community. He suggested in personal communication that cam-

paings are useful because as a community paper, “you need a local identity, you need to stand for things.”

Mean’s position is typical: When he describes his campaigns as being controversial, he is referring to the fact that the newspaper’s positions may run counter to the city council majority. However, the controversy rarely extends into the community. None of the editors I interviewed was willing to run a campaign on which there was disagreement or rift in the community.

There is no doubt that campaigns against the closing down of local services are political. But newspapers are only likely to engage in such campaigns when they are propped up by local public opinion. As such, the newspapers may represent majority public opinion against local authorities, and bring publicity to bear on actions and decisions likely to harm the community. But given that the editors I interviewed, without exception, described their readership as conservative, resistant to change and devotees of “nimbyism,” local newspapers are unlikely to rock the status quo.

While larger, resource-rich daily papers are more likely to run campaigns that hold local councils and other authorities to account, such efforts are much less feasible for the smaller weekly papers. For most weeklies, campaigns are just as central to their identity as they are to dailies, but their targets are radically different. Weekly newspaper campaigns typically focus on disseminating information about dangers from car burglaries to bowel cancer, or aim to help a particular community member or charitable organisation. For example, Don John of the *Cowbridge Gem* said that his campaigns are usually either related to health issues or fund-raising. Recently, the *Gem* has sought to raise funds for a young man in the community who suffers from brain cancer and requires treatment abroad that his family couldn’t afford. Another local weekly, *Barry & District News*, runs a regular campaign to raise money for a charity helping children with leukaemia, as its editor Shira Valek explained in personal communication (August 11, 2005). During the week I visited, the paper published an article about a Barry woman running in the Cardiff Marathon to boost the fund (“Dawn doubles up on fundraising duty” 2005). Such campaigns are “safe,” insofar as they are unlikely to require great resources, or offend either community members or powerful groups or individuals. They ultimately construct the newspaper as concerned about and central to the life of the area. However, some local newspaper campaigns are not even related to the well-being of the local community. Recently, the *Western Daily Press* in Bristol came under fire for its campaign to save Moon bears in China. The campaign, which raised £100,000 in just 28 days, was hugely popular with readers, but other local journalists suggested that the editor “should focus his energies on local issues” (Lagan 2005).

Either way, campaigns always serve the best interests of the newspaper. As they do this, they sometimes hold authorities to account, expressing the local public opinion. However, campaigns on matters of the common good are, without exception, exercises in the preservation of the status quo. And the vast majority of local newspaper campaigns – those run by resource-poor weeklies – are about entirely uncontroversial issues, primarily fund-raising for local charities.

Editorials

Editorials articulate the distinctive position of the newspaper and, in doing so, set the agenda for discussion in their communities. As Brian McNair has pointed out, editorials grant the press the:

power to set the dominant political agenda, as elaborated over weeks, months and years In this capacity the institutions of the press take the lead in establishing the dominant interpretative frameworks within which ongoing political events are made sense of (McNair 2000, 30).

Scholars have argued that editorials encourage “public discourse in an open forum of ideas that nurtures the community involvement so necessary to the effective functioning of government and democracy at all levels” (Ciofalo 1998, 18). They ideally function to “critique and advise specific (often elite) groups or institutions, and hence involve (power) relationships between the media, politicians and businessmen and readers” (van Dijk 1998, 62). Because the genre of editorial writing is so strongly tied to criticism and controversy, local editors struggle with this feature, and have thought up a range of strategies to avoid giving offence while still being seen to express opinion.

First, not all of the newspapers I studied published editorials. Don John, editor of the free weekly, the *Glamorgan Gem*, said that as an “uninvited guest in people’s homes” his paper has a special responsibility “to avoid giving offence or causing harm to readers, and therefore doesn’t include editorial opinion (personal communication, July 31, 2005). Carol Deacon, editor of the *Clevedon, Nailsea and Portishead Mercury*, decided against writing editorials when she assumed her job because she believes that “it isn’t my job to tell people what to think.” She recalled what the previous editor of the paper had told her when she took over: “Remember, we’re in the entertainment industry, we don’t want to educate.” Nevertheless, the *Mercury* has a columnist, the paper’s retired accountant, whom she described as “naughty” and “controversial.” However, Deacon stressed that this columnist is rarely controversial in his discussion of local issues, even if he often writes provocative pieces about national and international issues, which generate active debates in the letters section. On the week of my visit to the newsroom, for example, the columnist had written three short pieces, one praising Lance Armstrong, and another criticising television comedy (MacBride 2005, 6). Indeed, the practice of writing editorials about controversial national or international issues, such as the Iraq War and global terrorism, is not uncommon.

However, the most widely used strategy is similar to that employed by editors designing a campaign. Editors monitor the flow of local public opinion on an issue, and only write an editorial when it is clearly an expression of the community’s feelings. Viv Hargreaves, of *The Forester*, talked about the process of deciding which position to take on an editorial. She illustrated her procedure by discussing a local debate over the council’s plan to sell off a local hospital to a chain of hotels:

The hospital was built for the miners and their families, so there’s a sentimental link there. My personal viewpoint is that it’s best left where it is, I’m very much for the people who want to keep it, it’s only the health authorities and a few councillors who want to move it. But I’m very careful to thread a path that doesn’t conflict with what the readers are feeling on that one, have looked

at how it's progressed, and it's been rattling on for a while, so I will take a stand in a few weeks' time (Hargreaves, personal communication).

Finally, some editors – especially those working on weeklies – stay away from controversy by writing their comments on uncontested issues, viewing the editorial as an opportunity to boost the community spirit and maintaining moral standards, calling attention to good and evil deeds done by individuals and groups. Thus, Shira Valek of the *Barry & District News* and the *Penarth Times* writes her editorials on such resolutely non-controversial issues. During the week I visited her papers, her *Barry & District News* editorial denounced a mother who abused her own baby, suggesting that there “should be no soft option for her when it comes to sentencing” (“Opinion: Cruel mum with no pity” 2005, 16). In the *Penarth Times*, she praised the contributions of Penarth residents who participated in two local fundraising events (“Comment” 2005, 14). Such editorials move away from the critical tradition of the genre, but build a discursive identity for the newspaper and enforce the community spirit so central to its financial success.

Overall, then, the opinionated journalism of local newspaper campaigns and editorials can play a role in holding local and national government accountable for their actions. However, this watchdog role is limited to issues on which there is consensus among readers. Critical opinionated journalism is also more likely to come out of the resource-rich dailies, which are an endangered species in today's British local news ecology. The daily newspaper campaigns and editorials represent a journalism of consensus: One which has as its greatest strength the creation of “communities of compliance and consumption” (Hardt 2004, 6), but which lacks the ability to rock the boat.

Letters to the Editor

Local editors view the letters to the editor section as a crucial part of the newspaper. First, it is a “platform for our readers,” in the terminology used by many editors. As such, it strengthens ties between newspapers and their communities, and is frequently seen as a tool to maintain or boost circulation (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002b). Secondly, the section provides the newspapers with much-needed feedback on their coverage – especially useful for the vast majority of free and paid-for weeklies that cannot afford to conduct audience surveys. Finally, letters sections are often a source of ideas for feature stories.

While papers are careful to control and plan campaigns and editorials, it is much more difficult for them to entirely determine the direction of letters debate. This is because editors at the local newspapers I studied publish the majority – 60-90% – of letters they receive. Letters provide an easy and inexpensive way of filling the pages while giving voice to the readers. Most editors only reject letters that are anonymous, from outside the area, letters that have been submitted to a series of papers, or ones with potentially libellous or inflammatory content. The letter bag of local newspapers reflects ongoing debates on issues central to the well-being of the community – on topics as varied as the viability of wind farms, the availability of parking for disabled drivers, the development of sports facilities, the anti-social behaviour of teenagers, and the loss of local post offices. These are debates that follow on from news stories, but also ones fostered by community events, council meetings, and chat between neighbours. They show off letters sections as a vi-

brant public sphere institutions, or sites where “private people come together as a public “to discuss matters of common concern (Habermas 1989, 27). As such, the debate on the letters page is relentless political.

Nevertheless, these heated political debates are not particularly popular with editors. Though they celebrate the section as the place for the airing of views and opinions by “regular people,” they also profess a clear preference for the personal stories and anecdotes of readers, rather than the expression of views on local issues. For example, Robert Williams of the *Monmouthshire Beacon*, said that the best letter he had received on the day I visited his newsroom was about an elderly man who was pleading for help in finding his lost walking stick, “because it’s so important to this one person” (personal communication, August 31, 2005).

Relatedly, editors limit contributions from local political figures, because they are adamant that the top priority for the letters section is to allow regular readers a say. They suspect politicians of having an “axe to grind” or riding their “hobby horse,” and believe that they are using the page for “self-promotion” (cf. also Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). As Viv Hargreaves of *The Forester* described it: “Certain politicians will always beat a drum about a subject, and I’m selling a newspaper, so I don’t want to bore the readers. A politicians’ letter is not going to motivate them to read the paper.”

She also pointed out that the publication of a letter from a local councillor would usually elicit a reply from their opposition, leading to a “personal ding-dong between councillors” which has little relevance to public debate.

Finally, editors are less keen to include the letters of their “regulars,” or those letter writers who are frequent contributors. These “usual suspects” (Mean, personal communication), who see themselves as “frustrated newspaper columnists” (Jonathan Isaacs, personal communication, August 1, 2005) often have what editors describe as “bees in their bonnets” (Robert Williams, personal communication, September 1, 2005) and “pet issues” (Carol Deacon, personal communication, August 8, 2005). These pet issues often include significant topics, such as the future of the Welsh language (Keighley, personal communication, August 10, 2005) or the renovation of historical landmarks (Pharo, personal communication, August 12, 2005). For some editors, however, these contributions create a “stale debate” which is boring to readers, and they therefore prefer letters from “new writers.”

Overall, then, the preference of editors is for letters that are written by private individuals about very personal experiences. This makes for what they perceive as a more engaging public debate, but also one which is less political, focused as it is on privatised story-telling, rather than matters of common concern (cf. Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). However, because editors feel compelled to publish almost every letter they receive, their preferences rarely translate into practices of selection, and as a result, the letters pages of British local papers continue to be an idiosyncratic mix of personal anecdotes, calls for charity funding, thank-you-notes and a vibrant public debate on political issues. Nevertheless, the overall tone of the letters debate is – like that of local newspapers overall – against change of any sort. Having said that, many editors are keen to include a “balance of letters,” and therefore express a yearning for letters that go against the majority public opinion – for instance, letters that support wind power or new housing developments. As such, the letters section is the place most likely to generate the kind of controversy and critical scrutiny that a democracy requires.

Implications of Anti-Political Journalism

As Neveu (2002) has argued, local newspapers are uniquely positioned to articulate a “local” public opinion. This is certainly evident in campaigns, editorials and letters-to-the-editor in British local newspapers. These forms of opinionated journalism provide a snapshot of ongoing heated conversations about the things that matter to communities around Britain. However, this local public is ultimately constituted by editors and other journalists who operate within the constraints of newswork. I have argued that these constraints – the drive to maximise profits and the consequent lack of editorial resources, among other things – conspire to depoliticise local journalism.

Aldridge’s work on newspaper campaigns reveals priorities in coverage, suggesting the regional press is overwhelmingly orientated towards stories of “home and family” and their intersections with the “public world of policy and politics.” She argued that “only by appealing to universals like the safety and education of children and young people, and adults’ fear that help will not be forthcoming in illness and old age, can a contemporary city daily newspaper ‘imagine’ its community.” By contrast, any focus on divisions in the community, such as those of race, ethnicity, class and religion, would undermine this “imagined community.” As a result, the emphasis is on unity, and on constituting and celebrating the insiders of the community (Aldridge 2003, 503). In examining “opinionated journalism” more broadly, I have found the campaigns, editorials and letters in local papers construct a journalism of consensus which boosts communities but squashes any attempt at advocating social change.

The efforts of local newspapers at creating “imagined communities” through the journalism of consensus is not merely a theoretical point, but one which has real implications for the economic health of the newspaper: Without a viable and cohesive local community that engenders a sense of belonging, local residents have little reason to buy or read the local newspaper.

However, the journalism of consensus that is the outcome of local newsroom practices undermines open political discussion and silences dissent. Any content that requires the reader to step out of the position of the short-termist, self-interested consumer is left off the agenda. This includes debates about class, race, religion and ethnicity, as well as equality and justice – concerns that are of utmost importance in multi-cultural Britain. Out of the anti-political orientation of local journalism comes a distinctly political achievement: The full-scale commitment to conservatism which results in the preservation of the status quo. Along those lines, Hanno Hardt has suggested that in the contemporary media environment, “the lines between democratic capitalism and fascism are obscured, and their goals become indistinguishable...mass communication aestheticises politics by creating myths of community and nation, and of harmony and the stability of social values (Hardt 2004, 141).

These trends are not without exceptions. Local journalism always has and still does take an active role in addressing important social issues (Jackson 1972; Murphy 1976). Eric Neveu (2002) has documented how, in the French context, the local press provided constructive coverage of the farmers’ protests in 1998. In the US, local papers take an active role in promoting intercultural tolerance. For instance, Mid-

western papers in traditionally homogenous communities that have accommodated large groups of Hmong refugees have worked hard to understand and communicate the concerns of the newcomers, and to challenge stereotypes and misunderstandings (Cowling 1999, 10-15).² Nevertheless, the overwhelming drift of a market-oriented local journalism is away from an engagement in issues related to politics, social change and justice.

In making this argument, I do not mean to bemoan the loss of a golden age of local journalism in Britain. For one, I doubt that such a golden age ever existed – if anything, the evidence suggests that the debate over quality and standards has always been ongoing, and that local papers have been accused of, among other things, trivial and sensationalist coverage ever since they were first published (e.g. Jones 1993). The local press has always been “anxious not to offend local institutions or influential individuals” (Jackson 1971, 5).

It is to say, though, that market forces are pushing local journalism away from politics, and away from a critical watchdog role. The end result is a local press which offers little diversity, choice, information and opinion on crucial political issues, even if it provides a faithful chronicle of community life. Such a journalism that is consistent with a market logic, but militates against the right to communicate. As the MacBride Commission concluded:

Every individual and particular groups should be able to form judgments on the basis of a full range of information and a variety of messages and opinions and have the opportunity to share these ideas with others. The development of decentralized and diversified media should provide larger opportunities for a real direct involvement of the people in communication processes (MacBride 1980/2004).

The principle of diversity of media organisations, as well as choice in news content has always been central to British media legislation (e.g. Williams 1998, 57). Yet this has not prevented local newspaper monopolies from emerging, nor have monitoring bodies such as the Monopolies and Mergers Commission stepped in to limit or reverse such purchases (cf. Murphy 1998, 82). Nevertheless, pressure is mounting for newspaper owners to pay attention to the responsibilities, rather than the profits, of journalism. Journalists in Britain are increasingly playing an active role in protesting against profit-driven journalism. For instance, the veteran war reporter, Phillip Knightley, recently urged owners of newspapers to realise that there is more to journalism than “profits and share price, that slick accountancy, cost cutting and spending money on promotion are not going to win an editor or a proprietor a place in the history books” (cited in Pike 2005).

It is optimistic to rely on owners to reorient their practices towards the common good, but it also provides an avenue for positive change in local journalism. As the MacBride Commission suggested, “transnational corporations have a special responsibility in today’s world for, given that societies are heavily dependent upon them for the provision of information, they are part of the structure that fosters the development of economic and social models” (MacBride Commission 1980/2004, 111). This is as important an insight today as it was 25 years ago. Continuing to discuss the problems of the market logic is incumbent for academics who study journalism, especially those of us who teach students likely to become

the local journalists of the future. If anything, the 25 years since the publication of the MacBride Report have seen a decline of the status of the right to communicate in British local journalism and elsewhere, but it is a decline that can be reversed if we keep this problem on the agenda of scholarship and public debate.

Notes:

1. I conducted 15 interviews – 12 in person, and three over the phone – with editors of local papers in South Wales and the South-West of England, in July, August and September, 2005. These interviews, while not representative of the diversity of local journalism cultures in Britain, give a sense of production practices and their relationship to commercial pressures. The interviews focused on discussing the papers' policies on campaigns, editorials and letters to the editor, while also including questions designed to tap into local journalists' self-understanding.

2. In a study of local press reporting of race, Karen Ross (1998) concluded that the papers she examined dealt with race in stereotypical terms and did little to reflect the diversity and multiculturalism of British society as a whole, as well as the communities in which the papers circulated (see also Critcher, Parker and Sondhi, 1975).

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