Media History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmeh20

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To cite this article: Carole O'Reilly (2022): Municipal Matters, Media History, DOI: 10.1080/13688804.2022.2051461

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2022.2051461

Media History, 2022
https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2022.2051461

MUNICIPAL MATTERS
Local government reporting and news values in England's provincial press, 1900–1950

Carole O'Reilly

This study examines local government reporting in the English provincial press from 1900 to 1950. It has two main findings—firstly, that the press moved from verbatim council reports in the early part of the century to selective news stories that were designed to maximise news values and commercial revenues. City council meeting reports were re-shaped, re-focused and re-formulated to resemble news stories, often featuring on the front pages. They conformed to journalistic news values such as drama, conflict and personalities and provide evidence of a move to a more news-driven approach to local government reporting.

The paper also demonstrates the often-invisible commercial links between some elected representatives and the local press, on whose boards of management they sat. Overall, it provides a challenge to the conventional wisdom that the provincial press interest in municipal issues declined in the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS Local government; provincial press; news values

Introduction

This paper examines the impact of journalistic change on local government reporting in a sample of ten English provincial newspapers from 1900 to 1950. It demonstrates the transition from long, verbatim council meeting reports to shorter, more concise news stories that were shaped by journalistic conventions such as news values and the impact of an increasingly commercial environment. It considers how women councillors were reported and identifies often-invisible relationship between the local press and local political elites.

There is an abundance of and continually growing academic interest in the Victorian provincial press and some scholarly work on the crisis of the provincial press from the mid-twentieth century onwards.[1] For example, Clark has argued that there has been a serious decline in local government reporting which has led to an accountability failure at local level.[2]

There has been less work on the early part of the twentieth century, a time when the provincial press has been presumed to have begun the decline that has featured in most of the works just mentioned and a decline in the amount of local political reporting in particular.[3] This decline has been attributed to a more regionally-penetrating national press. However, this overlooks the continuing success of the provincial paper and its relationship to its locality in particular. O'Malley's work has pointed out the care which must be

exercised when discussing the relationship between the national and provincial press during this period, arguing that some key provincial papers had circulations which outstripped some of the national press by 1947.[4]

The 1920s and 1930s are especially worthy of examination as the latter represented an increasing range of responsibility being taken on by local government along with an increasing sophistication in the relation between local political parties and local councils.[5] Both the expansion of local government power (at least before the economic depression of the 1930s) and the increasing commercial confidence of the local press indicates the significance of this time period for consideration. This was also a time of considerable expansion, especially the emergence of the more entertainment-focused evening papers.[6] None of the papers in this sample are evening newspapers but a future study of any contrasts between morning and evening papers' reporting of local government would certainly be fruitful.

Context for the Study—Trends in Local Government Reporting, 1900–1950

Bromley and Hayes described the characteristics of the interwar provincial press as 'scrutineers, interpreters, arbiters, social integrators, businesses and entertainers.[7] This paper sets out to test the evolution of this hypothesis and to demonstrate that it was not merely a question of being all of those but some more than others at varying times. Following on from previous work on the nineteenth century by O'Reilly, the study concentrates on the years 1900–1950 as these have been comparatively neglected by historians of local government reporting.[8] A sample of seven weekly (and one bi-weekly) and two daily provincial papers from this period was selected from the British Newspapers Database (BNA)—*Bath Chronicle, Boston Guardian, Burnley Express, Cheltenham Chronicle, Derby Daily Telegraph, Grantham Journal, Hampshire Telegraph, Hull Daily Mail, Lichfield Mercury and Penrith Observer* (Table 1).

The degree of mergers and acquisitions among the provincial press during the period of this study was significant. This was an issue of national concern and the first Royal Commission on the Press (1947–1949) had focused on this subject, albeit finding that it was not especially worrying.[9] Koss has argued that the result of the Commission was 'a mound of indigestible and sometimes contradictory material' but there is little doubt that the provincial press was losing its independence through these mergers.[10] The Cheltenham Chronicle Newspaper Company bought the *Cheltenham Looker*-On in 1920 to make it the only publisher of a daily (*Cheltenham Echo*) and weekly newspaper (*Cheltenham Chronicle*) in the town (*Cheltenham Chronicle*, Cheltonian Chatter, 17 July 1920, p. 3). Wessex Associated News, owner of the *Bath Chronicle* also owned the *Wiltshire News*, *Somerset Guardian* and the *Mendip Press* while the conservative *Burnley Express* merged with the liberal *Burnley News* in 1933 (Local Journalistic Merger, *Burnley Express and News*, 30 December, 1933, p. 18), leaving it as the town's only newspaper. The *Lichfield Mercury*, a conservative paper begun in 1877, also owned the *Rugeley Mercury* and *Tamworth Mercury*. The papers were sold to Richard Bowen, the owner of the *Staffordshire Chronicle* in 1920. Bowen was an active Freemason but not a member of any municipal authority. On his death in 1933, a new syndicate of local businessmen was formed to buy the paper and this was the beginning of a series of municipal representatives such

TABLE 1
Founding, ownership and format of newspapers in sample

Name	Founded	Owned by	Format
Bath Chronicle	1760	Cornelius Pope	Weekly
Boston Guardian	1854	Robert Roberts	Weekly
Burnley Express (*Burnley Express and News* from 1933)	1877	George Frankland	Bi-weekly
Cheltenham Chronicle	1809	Samuel Young Griffith	Weekly
Derby Daily Telegraph	1879	Eliza M Pike	Daily
Grantham Journal	1854	Joseph Rogers 1862: Henry Escritt	Weekly
Hampshire Telegraph (Portsmouth)	1799	John Charles Mottley	Weekly
Hull Daily Mail	1885	Conservative party members. 1890: Frederick Brent Grotrian MP	Daily
Lichfield Mercury	1815/ 1877 (new version of the paper under a new owner)	1815:James Amphlett 1877: Frederic Brown 1905: WH Smith Allison and Bowen	Weekly
Penrith Observer	1860	R. Scott	Weekly

as former Mayor, Alderman Alfred Garratt, serving on its board of directors (Announcement, *Lichfield Mercury*, 23 February 1934, p. 4).

The ten chosen locales comprise cities and towns of diverse sizes from Hull and Portsmouth, both with populations in excess of 200,000 by 1921 to Penrith and Lichfield which had less than 10,000 inhabitants in 1921.[11] The decision was made to concentrate on papers located outside of London and with a reasonable geographic spread to capture some nationwide trends. Digitisation of newspapers from these years is not very widespread so a sample of ten was all that was possible from the BNA. While many local newspapers are available on microfilm, this was not an option as local libraries were closed due to the pandemic. The digitised newspapers offer an advantage in that they are searchable and it is possible to capture the council meeting reports and to estimate the word counts accordingly. This is not possible with microfilm. Ideally, a study such as this would be able to combine newspapers from both analogue and digital sources but exact transcriptions would have to be made of the non-digital council reports. The BNA, by its nature, has a limited selection of the provincial press. Some towns and cities are well-covered while others, such as Salford, have no coverage at all due to reasons of copyright.

A detailed examination of word counts of the reports of the monthly council meetings was undertaken—in most cases, the reports were downloaded into a Word document and word count totals compiled from this (not allowing for errors in the OCR transcriptions). Thus, it was possible to identify trends across the samples for each decade of the study (Table 2).

The resulting tables convey some broad trends observable across most of the papers —an increase in the length of reports during the 1930s and a gradual decline in the 1940s, especially after the Second World War (Tables 3–7). The main finding of this study is that the business of local government continued to fascinate and frustrate the provincial press

TABLE 2
Average word count of monthly municipal authority meeting reports, by decade 1900–1949

Newspaper Name	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s
Bath Chronicle	3712	3880	1455	3374	1927
Boston Guardian	4269	3852	3864	4022	2363
Burnley Express	3739	2509	4361	4667	3532
Cheltenham Chronicle	3515	2525	2585	3795	1518
Derby Daily Telegraph	3368	3046	1928	3065	1032
Grantham Journal	3454	2861	2733	2462	1681
Hampshire Telegraph	1984	2190	3006	2279	1346
Hull Daily Mail	835	1082	1468	2008	1823
Lichfield Mercury	4076	3327	2398	3340	2939
Penrith Observer	3063	2260	1997	2484	1246

TABLE 3
Average word count of monthly municipal authority meetings, 1900–1909

Newspaper name	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909
Bath Chronicle	3146	3051	2776	3189	3095	3577	3391	4363	4129	6198
Boston Guardian	4225	3669	4004	4549	5619	4991	4565	4569	4043	2458
Burnley Express	2305	5244	4316	5169	4422	3230	3072	2670	3479	3487
Cheltenham Chronicle	2071	2289	3169	3811	3774	3195	4070	4162	4223	4386
Derby Daily Telegraph	3299	2276	3254	4260	4013	3495	3696	3700	3046	2645
Grantham Journal	2072	2418	3029	4577	4258	3783	3550	4073	3461	3320
Hampshire Telegraph	2140	2638	1558	1663	1583	1574	1821	1785	2309	2772
Hull Daily Mail	952	826	676	578	708	618	572	681	1128	1609
Lichfield Mercury	3938	3913	4117	3016	2561	4885	5041	4777	4135	4374
Penrith Observer	2773	3741	3493	3487	2086	3044	3068	3293	3120	2527

TABLE 4
Average word count of monthly municipal authority meetings, 1910–1919

Newspaper name	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919
Bath Chronicle	5005	5613	5642	6688	4124	2620	3063	2919	572	2551
Boston Guardian	4164	5527	4748	4276	3331	4223	3485	3295	3249	2221
Burnley Express	2042	0*	2661	2810	2700	2576	2055	2129	1805	3799
Cheltenham Chronicle	3321	3397	2539	2643	2748	2569	2473	1992	818	2750
Derby Daily Telegraph	3078	3783	3559	3601	3624	3555	2757	1929	2219	2359
Grantham Journal	2266	2224	2665	2748	2190	2576	2966	4521	3484	2969
Hampshire Telegraph	2471	0*	2941	3013	1765	2318	1447	1612	1356	2787
Hull Daily Mail	1291	718	1710	1035	1413	1033	1090	830	761	935
Lichfield Mercury	4099	3811	3510	4587	4048	4242	3421	2733	1513	1304
Penrith Observer	2214	2773	2374	3440	2185	2757	1851	2190	1180	1635

*no issues in database available for this year.

TABLE 5
average word count of monthly municipal authority meetings, 1920–1929

Newspaper name	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929
Bath Chronicle	2967	1793	851	999	1212	1359	1683	1037	1161	1490
Boston Guardian	3623	4785	4474	3753	5076	3751	4668	2902	2387	3223
Burnley Express	2327	2772	3108	4917	4753	3829	5595	5459	5163	5691
Cheltenham Chronicle	3396	2802	2917	2123	2832	2847	2206	2500	2062	2169
Derby Daily Telegraph	2272	2105	1995	2184	1860	2182	2003	2107	1136	1436
Grantham Journal	2253	2823	2593	2649	2306	2230	2607	3334	3694	2843
Hampshire Telegraph	4836	4489	2442	2325	1914	2338	2313	2687	3491	3225
Hull Daily Mail	1083	1195	1141	1388	1349	1514	1173	1894	1837	2109
Lichfield Mercury	1902	2294	1851	2256	2103	1849	1963	3567	3323	2966
Penrith Observer	1555	1564	2124	1933	2033	2206	1869	2122	2632	1932

TABLE 6
Average word count of monthly municipal authority meetings, 1930–1939

Newspaper name	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Bath Chronicle	2509	3242	3434	3126	3084	4269	3560	3732	3654	3132
Boston Guardian	3542	2168	3364	3651	4982	5140	5135	4872	3935	3432
Burnley Express	4891	6684	4699	4145	4638	3401	2910	4658	4746	5898
Cheltenham Chronicle	2038	2418	3890	4302	4457	5387	5126	4489	2863	2978
Derby Daily Telegraph	2191	2595	3672	4620	3338	2603	3475	3299	2440	2421
Grantham Journal	2380	2132	1879	1969	1779	1992	2053	2759	4753	2566
Hampshire Telegraph	2593	2123	2195	2197	2557	2064	1887	1555	2890	2729
Hull Daily Mail	2362	1702	2403	2324	2020	2435	1566	1771	1950	1551
Lichfield Mercury	2809	3143	3040	3238	3615	3373	4258	3022	2108	4796
Penrith Observer	2563	1785	1479	1781	2047	1480	2612	3718	3785	3593

TABLE 7
Average word count of monthly municipal authority meetings, 1940–1949

Newspaper name	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
Bath Chronicle	2516	2446	1485	1017	1261	2193	2213	2206	1403	2526
Boston Guardian	2723	2375	2208	1523	1539	1773	2841	2667	3646	4335
Burnley Express	2850	2275	2001	3035	3230	3273	6683	4514	4104	3356
Cheltenham Chronicle	2661	2540	2015	1396	1398	1155	1361	1062	642	951
Derby Daily Telegraph	1575	1321	942	842	671	732	1000	1184	1373	679
Grantham Journal	2835	3509	2346	1787	1173	1426	954	799	866	1110
Hampshire Telegraph	2037	2101	1542	1090	1369	1075	1414	958	936	938
Hull Daily Mail	2243	819	1971	1972	2105	2342	1918	1529	1652	1675
Lichfield Mercury	3607	4061	3121	2989	2112	2282	2994	2917	2690	2616
Penrith Observer	3305	1573	1475	1315	1214	611	1421	425	575	549

during this period. A flourishing of local authority activity during the 1930s was echoed in the reporting of these endeavours and the decisions made about local services and amenities was identified as newsworthy by a press that was increasingly commercially-focussed. Packer's work has indicated a trend toward the purchase of provincial newspapers for commercial rather than political reasons and that such papers were increasingly expected to 'pay their way' by virtue of raising circulations.[12] The impact of this was to place greater emphasis on political stories that attracted readers' attention and that were more personal and more dramatic.

One of the key characteristics of the provincial press during this period was the growth in the number of titles. The more populist form of the evening press offered a counterpoint to the more serious morning papers. The impact of this was the emergence of a more entertaining approach to the coverage of local political affairs as evidenced by the application of news values such as conflict, human interest and drama to political stories. The same newspaper was capable of addressing its audience in very different ways simultaneously—in the form of gossip and other snippets, exposes of corruption and ethical issues and, one of the key themes across all of the papers, the scrutiny of public expenditure.

The lengthy verbatim reports that characterised the nineteenth century can be observed in the early decades of the twentieth century in many of the newspapers sampled. These followed the agendas of the meetings closely and often tended to summarise the reports of the various committees as they were made to the full Town or City Council, separated only by sub-headings in full capital letters. These longer reports gave a strong sense of context and priority to the reader whose understanding of local municipal issues was informed by the details of the meeting. It was, however, difficult to assess the relative importance of the issues in these reports due to the style of layout. This style of report only began to wane by the outbreak of World War One, when local war stories predominated and newsprint availability began to fluctuate, affecting the amount of space available.[13] This forced not only greater economy, but a choice of subjects to cover, omitting some issues deemed to be less important.

Although shortages of newsprint were not felt as severely as in World War Two, many of the newspapers in this study printed shorter issues during World War One—the *Burnley Express* went from 16 pages pre-war to eight by 1916 and the *Hampshire Telegraph* was six pages by 1918 from its pre-war 16 pages. Many Council committees did not meet regularly during wartime, except for special purposes such as air raid precautions during the Second World War. War-time also depleted staff numbers on newspapers, causing more disruption to content. Some working journalists took their skills into the military—the *Grantham Journal* reported in 1944 that one of their editorial staff (a district correspondent for Melton) had started a newspaper for his unit while serving in the Middle East (Started newspaper for his unit, 3 November 1944, 3).

Some newspapers were slower than others to diverge from the nineteenth century practice—the *Lichfield Mercury* was still reporting council business by committee in the early 1930s. Other papers began to print multiple meeting reports, organised around particular themes—housing, transport or education—while some offered more of a digest of the main discussion points. The *Penrith Observer* covered a mostly rural area and tended to report on urban matters to a fairly limited extent, with most of its focus on rural issues.

The style of presentation also began to alter, mostly in response to changes in printing and publishing technology. Matthews' work on the *Midlands Daily Telegraph* has revealed the use of drama and eye-witness accounts to enliven local news stories which, combined with the new production techniques, enhanced the commercial appeal of the provincial paper and inspired further innovation.[14] Subheadings under the main heading were introduced to give the reader a flavour of the main themes (in 1914 in the *Grantham Journal*), use of boldface type for some subheadings was introduced by some newspapers (in 1911 in the *Penrith Observer* and 1918 by the *Derby Daily Telegraph*). The effect of this was to present an easier to navigate and clearer interface to the reader and to enable them to quickly identify any parts of the report that were of particular interest to them. Another later innovation in the meeting reports was the use of the cross-headline (or 'cross-head') which stretched across more than one column and was intended to draw the reader's eye to something of significance. Most of the newspapers in this study began this practice in the 1930s but the *Bath Chronicle* was using it from 1909 and the *Lichfield Mercury* from 1912.

Other opportunities were taken by these newspapers to report and to comment on council business as well as in meeting reports. Often this was done in editorials if the subject was sufficiently serious for the newspaper to wish to give its own opinion. These often repeated the details of an event at a council meeting, but with added commentary. In 1936, the *Burnley Express* criticised the Town Council for spending £10,000 on establishing a municipal printing works (Editorial, 8 February, 9). This also allowed the Tory-supporting newspaper to criticise the lavish spending of the Labour Town Council.

Other types of commentary took the form of what Wiener refers to as 'gossip'.[15] His work has shown how gossip in general and political gossip in particular began to appear in the British press from the 1880s.[16] Local council meetings were ideal arenas for the generation of political gossip and, as local newspapers moved toward presenting council meeting reports as news, gossip also formed a significant component of this reporting. Gossip was presented to the reader under various headings: Mail Mems (*Hull Daily Mail*), Cheltonian Chatter (*Cheltenham Chronicle*), Caws from the Stump (*Boston Guardian*) and Armchair Musings (*Bath Chronicle*). These became more overtly gossip and personality-focused in the 1940s—the *Bath Chronicle* ran a feature entitled Names in the News which often featured members of the municipal authority, while the *Derby Daily Telegraph* had a column specifically called Town and County Gossip. The purpose of this gossip was to entertain as well as inform. It ranged from the celebrations of the former Mayor of Cheltenham's fiftieth wedding anniversary (Town and County News, 21 October 1939, 2) to the arrival in the newsroom of the *Boston Guardian* of Councillor J H Mountain (one of the paper's directors) who presented the staff with some giant leeks from his garden (Boston Paragraphs, 19 April, 1944, 9). While relatively small in terms of column inches, the provision of these items of gossip on a regular basis reminded readers of the insider knowledge (what Joyce has termed 'townology') of the newspaper and provided some evidence of their commitment to providing local political coverage that was increasingly varied in tone and content.[17]

The issue of press access to local council meetings was an intermittent controversy during the time period of this study. The original legislation affecting this dated from the

Local Authorities (Admissions of the Press) Act of 1908. This had been produced in response to a lawsuit filed by Frank Mason, editor of the *Tenby Observer* against Tenby Corporation in 1907 for attempting to bar a reporter from Council meetings because they suspected him of misreporting them.[18] The Act enabled the right of admission to the full Council meetings (although not to committee meetings) but allowed the press to be excluded if the Council made a formal decision that the matters under discussion were confidential. Clearly, the Act was thus inadequate as a guarantor of press access at all times and it was subsequently challenged unsuccessfully on several occasions, most notably in 1930 and again in 1949.

In 1930, James Ede, Labour MP for South Shields, tried to update the Act in response to the 1929 Local Government Act which had significantly increased the powers of local authorities and restructured some local government bodies such as boards of guardians and replaced them by public assistance committees (Hansard, HC Deb 12 March 1930, Vol 236 cc 1331–1335). Ede argued that the press should have equal entitlement to access to those meetings as well as those of the council (Hansard, HC Deb 12 March 1930, Vol 236 cc 1333). The amendment was opposed by the Conservatives and failed. In 1949, there was another attempt, this time by the Conservative MP Robert Grimston, MP for Westbury (Hansard, HC Deb, 25 March 1949, Vol. 463, cc 797–802). Grimston pointed out that the existing legislation was too easy for Councils to evade allowing press access as they could present a public interest defence (Hansard, HC Deb, 25 March 1949, Vol. 463, cc 798). Any Council could exclude the press simply by forming a committee that included all Council members, although there is little evidence of this happening regularly. Again, the Bill was defeated.[19]

The cross-party nature of these attempts to update the 1908 Act indicates that both of the main political parties (at national level at any rate) had misgivings about allowing the press to have free access to Town and City Council meetings. This was not identified as a matter of right but of the ability of the press to act responsibly, especially in cases of confidentiality. Despite the evidence to the contrary, there are indications that many local politicians simply did not trust the press to report accurately on their activities. In Penrith, concern was expressed in 1933 at the omission of the press from a special meeting of the General Purposes committee of Penrith Urban Council which focused on slum clearances (Penrith Urban Council, 27 December 1933, 7). One Councillor worried that the accidental omission would reflect badly on the reputation of the Council for transparency. A report of the meeting had been issued to the local press when the omission had come to light and most of the councillors did not regard this as anything more than an accident. While some elected members were conscious of the need to ensure press attendance, others did not regard this as a priority, especially when sensitive matters were being discussed.

The nature of local government during these decades also merits some brief discussion here. One of the significant factors was the emergence of the Labour Party at local level from 1913. Chandler has remarked that attitudes within the party to local government varied at best but we can identify Labour successes in the towns and cities in this study from the second decade of the twentieth century.[20] The suspension of elections during the First World War stalled their progress but, from 1919, they began to make substantial gains including full control of Bradford City Council.[21] The rise of Labour with its political ideology often in direct contrast to the Conservatives was helpful to the local

press in terms of providing instances of political conflict in the Council Chamber which often made for good news stories. The Conservative-supporting press titles such as the *Hull Daily Mail* and the *Burnley Express* usually referred to the Labour groups in Council as 'Socialists'. This was a useful mechanism to present the opposing political ideologies of the two parties and to ensure the newsworthiness of the conflicts that occurred at the meetings.

Some of the papers in this sample not only covered the activities of their own town council but those of contiguous authorities as well—the *Grantham Journal* regularly featured Kesteven Town Council as well as reports from Lincolnshire County Council, providing an increasingly granular picture of municipal decision-making. There was increasing scrutiny of financial decisions by the local press after the 1925 Rating and Valuation Act which placed an onus on local authorities to increase their transparency with regard to spending, while the 1929 Local Government Act abolished boards of guardians and transferred their responsibility to county boroughs and county councils.[22]

Women as Councillors

Women had already been elected to serve on town and city councils prior to the Representation of the People Act 1918. Regina Lawrence was elected to Hampstead Council in London in 1907 following the Qualification of Women (County and Borough Councils) Act of 1907, while Margaret Ashton was successful in Manchester in 1908.[23] Campaigns began in many cities and towns to encourage women to take advantage of this opportunity. Baldwin's work suggests an uneven distribution of female councillors around the country, with 20 county councils having between one and three women by 1938 and others such as Lancashire and Surrey having 11 and ten respectively by 1938. [24]

The evidence of this study suggests that, once elected, some women were treated quite differently to men in the council chamber and some of their municipal activities were also reported on quite differently. Attitudes towards female councillors in the press tended to reflect how they were treated in the Council Chamber. As Hollis has argued, women were mostly confined to certain committees that were defined as suitable for their skills and expertise such as education, libraries and parks and this resulted in their being positioned at the 'margins of city council work and at the periphery of power'.[25]

However marginal they may have been, some women's actions in Council ensured their newsworthy status. In Hull, this was Independent Councillor Mary Hatfield. She was Hull's first female councillor, elected in 1919. During a Council meeting in March 1923, Mrs Hatfield made a series of accusations about conditions at Willerby Asylum in the city (Asylum Conditions, 5 March 1923, 3). The allegations, described by the *Hull Daily Mail* as causing a 'profound sensation', centred on the treatment of female inmates and included several women having to share the same bath water and the same towels. All of her allegations were denied by Alderman Taylor, chairman of the Asylums committee and a decision was made to hold an inquiry into Mrs Hatfield's allegations.

The inquiry took place over two days and was extensively covered in the *Hull Daily Mail*, including the first front-page news story, published on 31 March and centred on evidence given by a former patient. During the inquiry, Mrs Hatfield increased her allegations to physical abuse of the patients and referred to the chairman of the Asylums committee

as a 'liar' and accused Councillor Benno Pearlman of 'bullying' at a City Council meeting (More Allegations! 13 April, 1923, 5). The outcome of the inquiry was that some minor matters at the Asylum needed attention but that the major allegations were not upheld. The result of the inquiry was praised by the *Hull Daily Mail* in an editorial which alluded to the feelings of the families of the inmates at the Asylum and to the 'wisdom and an easy conscience' signalled by the Asylum committee's willingness to allow the press to attend all of the inquiry (Willerby Asylum Findings, 2 July, 1923, 4).

Many of the stories that featured women councillors focused on those occasions when they challenged their male counterparts directly. In Burnley, Councillor Mrs Whitehead (Liberal) complained of the attitude of Labour members of the Public Assistance Committee in 'throwing away money' in exchange for votes (Lady Councillor 'Pilloried', 5 December 1931, 13). The *Burnley Express*, as a conservative paper, was well-placed to take advantage of a story criticising Labour councillors. In Boston in 1942, Councillor Mrs Lily Mawer (Independent Conservative) challenged the right of Councillor Bird to be nominated for Mayor and suggested that she was equally entitled to that role (Coun. Mrs Mawer and Boston Mayoralty, 28 October 1942, 5). The discussion about Mrs Mawer's entitlement and seniority within the Council became so heated that the Mayor decided to move the meeting into committee, from which the press could be excluded. Two years later, Mrs Mawer was convicted of libel against a former Conservative Mayor of Boston, Alderman William Lunn and fined £200 (Libel on Former Mayor of Boston, 19 April 1944, 5).

Council Business as News Stories

Jackson has suggested that the readership of the provincial press demanded different normative standards of their local paper as opposed to the national press.[26] He has argued that the purpose of the local press was to act as a 'vehicle for the articulation of grievances against local institutions and policies'.[27] In some ways, this sample provides some evidence of this where it was warranted but the totality of the reporting of municipal business was more varied.

Where Council members objected to the presence of the press at their meetings, the relationship could deteriorate quite swiftly. Councillors knew that any attacks on the local press at their meetings would be reported on in detail the following day. This did not always prevent some representatives from voicing their feelings, especially where they felt that trust had been breached. The Mayor of Boston complained of members leaking information to the local press in 1924 (Protest by Mayor, 9 August 1924, 7). In Grantham in 1938, Councillor Alfred Roberts (father of Margaret Thatcher) accused the *Grantham Journal* of publishing a 'misleading' article which prompted a firm rebuttal by the paper (Journal Article Annoys Councillor Roberts, 5 March, 1938, 15). These allusions to their relationship with the press by elected representatives gave the local newspapers the opportunity not just to report on these comments but to discuss and to respond to the issues. The paper's rebuttal article accused Roberts of what was a common grievance of many councillors in respect of the press—misquoting and selective quoting. The detailed and forensic nature of the rebuttal article reveals that the local press was just as keen to protect its reputation as were elected representatives. The paper's confrontation with the

Councillor also provided an opportunity to demonstrate its independence but in a dramatic and combative manner which increased the news value of the story.

The interwar years was a time of experimentation when it came to the reports of town and city council meetings. In some of the papers studied here, it was a period dominated by an entirely inconsistent approach to this practice. The *Burnley Express*, for instance, rarely settled on an established page for its meeting reports, moving them around the paper continuously. The paper covered not only Burnley Town Council but those of neighbouring Nelson and Colne as well. The general pattern followed by the paper in the 1920s was to have multiple reports, all highlighting particular themes, scattered all over the paper. By the end of the decade, this had reverted to a single meeting report, often stretching across two consecutive pages. By the mid-1930s, the approach had altered again to an average of two separate articles on different aspects of council business, usually on two different pages. The issue of 6 May 1922 carried three reports from the Town Council monthly meeting on pages 9, 13 and 16. This lack of consistency made it difficult for the reader to form a coherent opinion of council matters and to digest them accordingly. Undoubtedly, the practice was designed to break up the previously lengthy reports and to present them in a more palatable format but the impact was to de-contextualise the totality of council business and this rather disordered approach was indicative of an attitude to municipal coverage that was less than consistent. However, it was potentially more engaging for the reader than the early twentieth century meeting reports.

Shoop-Worrall has examined the impact of the national daily popular press on the reporting of general elections on the provincial press in Liverpool. He has argued that the real impact of the daily press on the provincial was not merely on resources but on content. He suggested that 'popular, accessible news content' was the reason for the nationwide success of popular dailies such as the Daily Mail and Daily Express.[28] It seems reasonable then that the provincial press should attempt to emulate this in their own coverage of local matters. The move away from verbatim style reports to more narrative, news-led content shortened and enlivened municipal meeting reports by presenting them as de facto news stories, reliant on personalities, direct speech and on the implications of the decisions taken, rather than on the decision-making process itself.

Researchers Galtung and Ruge were the first to specifically identify news values as a significant component of the production of news stories in 1965.[29] Their work has been augmented by others such as Harcup and O'Neill (2016) who posited that news values formed the basis of the decision-making process about what stories end up becoming news.[30] Scrutinising the council meeting reports that became news stories we can observe that some news values such as conflict, drama, focus on personalities are readily identifiable in the selection of the stories by the newspapers in this study. This especially applied to those that were located on the front page, but also to those featured elsewhere in the paper.

However, an examination of journalism textbooks and training manuals from early in the twentieth century demonstrates that an awareness of the need for such news selection criteria was already well-established. Parks' work on American textbooks establishes that selection criteria such as prominence, timeliness and conflict were used from the first decades of the century, primarily in order to attract readers' attention.[31] A comparison

of news values used in 1991 with those identified in 2016 shows hardly any variation.[32] Walter Lippmann emphasised the importance of the entertainment value of political stories, especially those involving conflict or drama.[33] F. J. Mansfield's *The Complete Journalist*, published in 1935 recommended local political stories for their human interest and controversy potential.[34] This present study provides more evidence that similar news values were already shared informally among provincial journalists in England and were being used regularly.

Examining the word count tables for the war years gives an indication of the varying amounts of coverage in the sample (Tables 4 and 5). Only one paper, the *Grantham Journal* increased the length of its coverage during World War One and all newspapers decreased their coverage in the Second World War (suggesting that these years constituted something of an anomaly). Some, notably the *Burnley Express*, did begin to rise again post-war but for most, this marked a period of continuing decline. However, this did not mean that municipal stories were no longer of interest. Indeed, it is striking how often municipal stories became front page news during the 1940s. This indicates a new direction away from viewing council business as meetings and instead treating them as news stories. This may be a reflection of that fact that most councils were being run increasingly as large businesses but so also were newspapers. This was not especially new for either enterprise but we can now begin to see the full impact of this on both institutions. Ensuring 'economic and cultural stability' became more important but it was the economic dimension that became especially significant during the 1920s.[35]

Business and Social Connections in the Provincial Press

It is also worth noting the many and often invisible business and social connections between local elected representatives and local newspapers. The *Boston Guardian* had three elected members on its Board of Directors in 1926, including its Chairman, Councillor JH Mountain (Concerning Ourselves! 9 January 1926, 5). The *Grantham Journal* had Councillor F. H. Holmes (Chamber of Trade representative) as its Director and General Manager in 1936 (Progress—Keynote of the new Journal, 16 May 1936, 11), while Conservative Alderman Alfred Garratt was a director of the *Lichfield Mercury* and a former Mayor of the town (Largest Circulation on Record, 15 November 1940, 5). A profile of the Alderman published to mark his election as a County Councillor made no mention of his connection with the newspaper (Lichfield's New County Councillor, 28 July 1944, 5). The involvement of local political elites in the business of the provincial press is a reminder of the close ties between local elites that were often invisible to the ordinary citizen. Stephen Koss, while concentrating mostly on the national press, has demonstrated that such relationships could be organised at either the level of a megaphone or as 'ventriloquial devices through which hints could be dropped and dialogues could be conducted'.[36] That this situation was potentially compromising for the paper's ability to be a watchdog is borne out by some scholars who have expressed their reservations about the provincial press as a successful and independent fourth estate or even those who have yet to be totally persuaded that this is the case.[37] This could also be perceived as evidence of the nimble nature demanded of the local press that had to simultaneously occupy several,

often contradictory, spaces—as watchdog, as local 'booster', as successful commercial enterprise and as 'community champion' in Matthews's words.[38]

In August 1924, a judgement made in the Commercial Court brought into sharp relief the relationship between local authority members, local businessmen and newspapers. Before Justice Clement Meacher Bailhache, the case of Lapish versus Braithwaite was resolved in favour of the plaintiff, with the judgement stating that anyone with a share or interest in a contract with a municipal body could not also sit as a member of that body [1924 10 WLUK 27].

The implications for many local authorities across Britain were severe. The *Bath Chronicle* had a contract for printing the City Council minutes which it immediately surrendered (Council Contracts, 23 August 1924, 21). Sir Harry Hatt was the chairman of Wessex Associated News (owner of the *Bath Chronicle*) and a member of the City Council as an Alderman and former Mayor. It was estimated that between eight and ten members of the City Council were affected by the decision, making Bath one of the most seriously affected councils. The decision and its consequences was extensively reported by the *Bath Chronicle* in the days and weeks following the judgement but the story did not receive due prominence, usually appearing on pages 18, 19 or 21 of a 28-page newspaper. A contract to extend Bath's Electricity Works, worth almost £30,000 was surrendered due to a connection with Alderman Charles Long, while the next highest bidder also had to be bypassed due to a connection with Alderman A. W. Willis (Council Contracts, 23 August 1924, 21).

Council members who had interests in firms holding current contracts with Councils could be fined £50 per day for attending Council meetings as a result of the decision. Some companies responded by immediately giving up their council contracts, while other elected members resigned their seats instead—in Burnley, two councillors resigned (The Bailhache Judgement, 8 October 1924, 4). The *Burnley Express* lamented the loss of business expertise of these councillors and took advantage of the opportunity to display their conservative credentials by questioning why co-operative members were not also resigning their seats as a result of the decision (The Bailhache Judgement, 8 October 1924, 4).

The decision was overturned by the Court of Appeal by a two to one majority on 23 October 1924. The *Bath Chronicle*, in its report on the decision, noted that the consequence of the original judgement was to award council contracts to firms tendering higher bids and thus costing more money to the ratepayers, in one case several thousand pounds according to the newspaper (Those Council Contracts, 26 October 1924, 19). It is notable that this particular newspaper chose to frame the story in this way—they had been the subject of much publicity in other newspapers as one of the councils in the country that was worst affected by the Bailhache judgement and were anxious both to distance themselves from any insinuation of impropriety and to emphasise that the decision was one that was likely to cause an increase in the rates. The paper's attempt to protect its own business interests and to re-position the readers' focus onto the financial consequences indicates the strength of the connections between the provincial press and local representatives, a nexus that was often invisible to the reader. This co-dependence between the multiple local business interests of elected representatives and the provincial press is evident and will be the focus of further study.

M.M.W. noted in the *Cambridge Law Journal* that the real danger was that 'the contract once obtained, an alderman may bring his prestige to bear upon the surveyors and servants of the corporation *out of public view* (my emphasis) and procure the passing of shoddy work'.[39] Any public view of this in the press could not be guaranteed, due to the business connections between the local newspaper and the elected representatives. This is also evidence of the provincial press' ability to offer what Jane Taylor has termed 'a plurivocal chorus of competing voices'.[40] These competing voices could and often were subordinate to the commercial needs of the newspaper. The merger of the conservative *Burnley Express* with the liberal *Burnley News* in 1933 brought three additional directors to its board, one of whom, Herbert Brent Grotrian, was the son of the founder of the conservative *Hull Daily Mail*. The *Burnley Express* continued to pursue its critiques of local Labour spending and its anti-socialist agenda after the merger, suggesting that being the sole newspaper in the town was more important than its political leanings.

Later Patterns of Reporting

Many contradictions are evident in other dimensions of later local government reporting. Articles that were critical of aspects of the municipal authority's decision-making were placed next to promotional pieces written by the Mayor or an Alderman. The *Burnley Express* printed a selection of readers' letters on the subject of excessive public expenditure in 1934. Next to this was a detailed account of a speech made by the Mayor at the Burnley Chamber of Trade which sought to justify and explain the necessity for the payments (Mayor and Elective Auditors and Public Expenditure, 10 March 1934, 5). These contradictions are indicative of a more commercially-minded instinct to avoid blatant partisanship and to embrace as many readers as possible. These instincts were to evolve further with the selection of some council stories as front-page news.

Introducing news stories to the front pages (where advertising had traditionally been placed) was a gradual process for the provincial press during the twentieth century. The *Hull Daily Mail* included a front-page news story involving Hull City Council in 1926 while Grantham Town Council news featured on the front page of the *Grantham Journal* in the 1940s. Looking at one year (1948), the pattern of council meeting-related front-page stories is as follows: *Bath Chronicle* had the most with 14, *Hampshire Telegraph* had 12 and *Burnley Express* and *Hull Daily Mail* each had 10. The *Derby Daily Telegraph* was last with only four. Neither the *Boston Guardian* or *Lichfield Mercury* had front-page stories as they retained advertising on the front page. As daily newspapers, the *Hull Daily Mail* often featured international news on its front page, while the *Hampshire Telegraph* tended to prioritise stories about the Royal Navy (Portsmouth being the command headquarters of the Navy). In contrast, the *Penrith Observer* usually carried stories about farming, the National Farmers' Union and countryside affairs, reflecting its rural readership. What is significant about all of these stories is how they conform to what became the typical news values of journalism.

The Hull story (City Council in meeting nearly 6 hours, 16 October, 1926, 1) had a five-column cross-headline that focused attention on the length of the meeting—six hours. By later standards, the size of the headline's font is relatively small. The front page actually consisted of two Council meeting stories, one about the reinstatement of

Council tramwaymen and one regarding a controversy about stained glass windows in the Guildhall, separated by a completely different story about a jewel robbery in Paris. The balancing of a policy story with one about personalities reveals a characteristic of twentieth century journalism—variety and complementarity. Indeed, the editor of the *Grantham Journal* emphasised this in an article in 1943, stating that: 'variation was the secret of success of the front page' (Is the front page popular? 8 January 1943, 5). Elements such as these were part of the so-called New Journalism which had begun to affect British journalism during this period. Matthews has argued that the 'flamboyant reporting of personal details' was a key feature of this New Journalism.[41] Her consideration of the impact of this new style of reporting does not extend much beyond 1905 but the evidence of this study demonstrates how approaching council meeting reports as new stories had become a convention of the newspapers in the sample.

The *Hull Daily Mail* continued to feature Council-related stories on its front page throughout the 1930s. These included items such as the Council's decision to award a contract for telephone cable to a German firm (6 April 1933), concern about the cost of acquiring land for a new municipal golf course (9 November 1934) and a controversy about an increase in the rates (7 February 1935). The latter two stories centred on the theme of potentially reckless expenditure by the majority Labour Council—the *Hull Daily Mail* had actually been started by members of the local Conservative party in 1885 so its political allegiances were clear. A major Council controversy featured in 1948 which concerned a senior Labour member of the Council and a former Mayor, Alderman Archibald Stark, who was taken to Leeds by a police car having missed a bus due to rendering assistance following a fatal accident at the coach station (Call to Alderman A. Stark to Resign, 14 October, 1948, 1). [Figure 1].

It was alleged that Stark had missed the bus because he was merely a spectator at the accident and that he had allegedly obtained the use of the police car and driver under false pretences. Stark's account was contradicted by several employees of the East Yorkshire Motor Services which gave rise to considerable consternation in the Council Chamber. The newspaper headline extended the entire width of the front page (eight columns) and it was the lead story on that page. The focus on the behaviour and integrity of the Alderman (and, by implication of the whole Council) provided a dramatic angle to the story and the newspaper took full advantage of this. There were frequent references to the 'pandemonium' that broke out during the meeting (despite the presence of a group of schoolchildren in the gallery) when many members were shouting at the same time and the Lord Mayor could not be heard. Given that it centred on a Labour member, it was another opportunity for the paper to demonstrate its Conservative credentials while presenting the reader with an attention-grabbing local story.

The degree of mergers and acquisitions among the provincial press during the period of this study was significant. This was an issue of national concern and the first Royal Commission on the Press (1947–1949) had focused on this subject, albeit finding that it was not especially worrying.[42] Koss has argued that the result of the Commission was 'a mound of indigestible and sometimes contradictory material but there is little doubt that the provincial press was losing its commercial independence through these mergers.[43] The Cheltenham Chronicle Newspaper Company bought the *Cheltenham Looker-On* in 1920 to make it the only publisher of a daily (*Cheltenham Echo*) and

FIGURE 1
Hull Daily Mail, Front Page, 14 October 1948A reproduction of the front page of the Hull Daily Mail from 14 October 1948 with the headline 'Call to Alderman A. Stark to resign'

weekly newspaper (*Cheltenham Chronicle*) in the town (Cheltonian Chatter, 17 July 1920, p. 3). Wessex Associated News, owner of the *Bath Chronicle* also owned the *Wiltshire News*, *Somerset Guardian* and the *Mendip Press* while the conservative *Burnley Express* merged with the liberal *Burnley News* in 1933 (Local Journalistic Merger, 30 December, 1933, p. 18), leaving it as the town's only newspaper. The *Lichfield Mercury*, a conservative paper begun in 1877, also owned the *Rugeley Mercury* and *Tamworth Mercury*. The papers were sold to Richard Bowen, the owner of the *Staffordshire Chronicle* in 1920. Bowen was an active Freemason but not a member of any municipal authority. On his death in 1933, a new syndicate of local businessmen was formed to buy the paper and this was the beginning of a series of municipal representatives such as former Mayor, Alderman Alfred Garratt, serving on its board of directors (Announcement, 23 February 1934, p. 4).

Dawson has argued that the purpose of the local newspaper was not to persuade readers to change their beliefs but to reinforce them, thus allowing the reader to choose the newspaper that best reflected their worldview.[44] This does, however, presuppose that there is such a choice and, as we have seen, this has increasingly unlikely to be the case as the century progressed. Bromley and Hayes' argument about the 'ubiquitous civic voice' of the interwar provincial press seems less convincing when examining the 50-year span of this study.[45] The ability to combine so many apparently contradictory positions on local political matters is more an indication of the recognition that there was no single, identifiable community of readers but a multiplicity of possible positions, depending on the issue at hand. What was visible and discussed was often important local matters—health, housing and education—but what was invisible to the reader was arguably more so. The network of social and commercial contacts and business relationships that lurked in the board rooms of the provincial press and its often not-local owners pervaded the landscape and introduced the potential for insidious influence and power. Thus, the provincial press of this era represents a compromised fourth estate based on some overt criticism of municipal decision-making but whose 'decontextualised snippets' concealed rather than revealed the source of local power and influence.[46]

Conclusion

It was the civic duty of the nineteenth century local newspaper to present a verbatim account of municipal proceedings. The twentieth century was the advent of more selective news reporting to maximise news values and commercial revenues. Due prominence was given to stories that featured news values such as drama, personalities and conflict. When considering the reporting of local government during the years 1900–1950, the evidence presented here suggests that there was a transition from verbatim-style meeting reports to news stories that reflected emerging journalistic news values such as drama, conflict and personalities. That these were already in place much earlier than the 1960s is a significant finding from this study. The patterns of reporting from this research adds some nuance to Walker's assertion that local political content declined during the twentieth century and demonstrates that this decline only really became apparent after the Second World War.[47]

The increasing commercialisation of the local press was also an important factor—the press was becoming more conglomerate in nature and more focused on news that was

entertaining and eye-catching. Instead of capturing the entire process of decision-making at municipal level, the local press instead concentrated on identifying local priorities and controversies. The result of this was often a rather incoherent narrative, dispersed throughout the paper but still indicative of an assumption of considerable reader interest in local municipal matters. The general high point of municipal reporting in the 1930s was to gradually decline by the end of the 1940s but council business continued to be treated as a news story from this point onwards.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. Cox and Morgan, *City Politics*; Hobbs, *Fleet Street*; Jackson, *Provincial Press*; Matthews, *History of the Provincial Press*; Murphy, *Silent Watchdog* and Shoop-Worrall, "Scouse Sensation."
2. Clark, "From the Silent Watchdog," 10.
3. Walker, "Development of the Provincial Press."
4. O'Malley, "National Press," 510.
5. John, "The Great Survivor," 690.
6. Matthews, "Provincial Press," 648.
7. Bromley and Hayes, "Campaigner, Watchdog," 299.
8. O'Reilly, "Civic Consciousness."
9. Matthews, *History of the Provincial Press*, 130.
10. Koss, *Rise and Fall of the Political Press*, 1078.
11. University of Portsmouth, *Vision of Britain* website, 2017.
12. Packer, "Curious Exception?," 418.
13. Matthews, *History of the Provincial Press*, 144.
14. Matthews, "Emergence of the News Paradigm," 173, 180.
15. Wiener, "Americanization," 61.
16. Ibid., 67.
17. Joyce, *Rule of Freedom*, 204.
18. Chandler, "Freedom of Information," 106.
19. The legislation was eventually replaced by the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act of 1960 (It is notable that this bill was introduced to the House in her maiden speech by Margaret Thatcher).
20. Chandler, *Explaining Local Government*, 130.
21. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party*, 448.
22. Chandler, *Explaining Local Government*, 145–6.
23. Hunt, "Local and Everyday," 270.
24. Baldwin, "Progress and Patterns," 134.
25. Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, 423.
26. Jackson, *Provincial Press*, 41.
27. Ibid., 41–2.

28. Shoop-Worrall, "Scouse Sensation," 2.
29. Harcup and O'Neill, "What Is News?," 2.
30. Ibid., 2.
31. Parks, "Textbook News Values," 794.
32. Ibid., 796.
33. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 108.
34. Mansfield, *The Complete Journalist*, 99.
35. Hodgson and Matthews, "Never Failed?," 2.
36. Koss, *Rise and Fall of the Political Press*, 447.
37. Bromley and Hayes, "Campaigner, Watchdog"; Matthews, *History of the Provincial Press* and Murphy, *Silent Watchdog*.
38. Matthews, *History of the Provincial Press*, 137.
39. M.M.W. "Comments on Recent," 374.
40. Taylor, "Town versus Gown," 412.
41. Matthews, *History of the Provincial Press*, 95.
42. Ibid., 130.
43. Koss, *Rise and Fall of the Political Press*, 1078.
44. Dawson, "Party Politics," 215.
45. Bromley and Hayes, "Campaigner, Watchdog," 197.
46. Hampton, *Visions of the Press*, 125.
47. Walker, "Development of the Provincial Press," 383.

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