CREATING A CRITICAL CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS: Reporting local government in the nineteenth century provincial press

Abstract

This paper examines two themes in local government reporting in the nineteenth century – municipal governance and social reform and the reporting of municipal elections, electioneering and scandals. These themes formed part of the discourse of political reporting during this period, along with the detailed recording of town council meetings. The study concentrates on a representative sample of the provincial press in England from the *Leeds Mercury* to the *Norfolk Chronicle*. The article deliberately avoids an over-emphasis on the metropolitan press in an attempt to gauge the spread and influence of local government reporting outside of London. It also focuses on municipal political affairs and not on other forms of local government such as Poor Law Guardians, Improvement Commissioners and School Boards for the sake of clarity and unambiguity. Some writers have presented the provincial press as functioning as positive promoters of civic institutions and as underpinning the 'municipal status quo'.[1] This study challenges this view and offers an alternative perspective – the creation of a critical civic consciousness that directly addressed the reader as a member of a critical urban community.

Keywords

Civic consciousness; local government reporting; social reform; provincial press; public intelligence

Introduction

The nineteenth century British press has been referred to as a 'civic Hansard', emphasising its ability to reproduce, often verbatim, the content of municipal meetings and debates.[2] At national political level, Parliament had only made formal arrangements for presence of reporters in 1803.[3] The 1835 Municipal Reform Act created elected town councils and the contemporary structure of local government had begun to emerge. Following the 1835 Act, there was an increase in newspaper interest in reporting and scrutinising the activities of local government. This Act, combined with the extensions of the franchise during the nineteenth century (by successive Acts in 1832, 1867 and 1884), gave a new impetus to the local press to offer the kind of information needed by the voters to decide on the effectiveness of their local representatives.

In this way, the press functioned as a vehicle for the transmission of civic culture and civic identity. It assisted in the formation of a sense of an individual's position as part of the civic discourse and positioned the local press as the 'defining force of and in the local community'.[4] Thus, the press promoted the idea of the city as a form of collective enterprise and not a 'didactic pulpit'.[5] All of these elements may be regarded as a civic consciousness, including such nineteenth century priorities as active citizenship, civic pride and the common good (however defined). Indeed, some of these predated the nineteenth century - Ellis has argued that idea about self-confidence and civic pride were key components of provincial culture in the eighteenth century.[6]

One of the most striking traits of the provincial press was the diversity of knowledge offered. Deeply embedded in the civic landscape, they produced what Joyce termed "townology" or knowledge of the town as a whole.[7] **This knowledge was often presented to the reader as a series of favourable or otherwise comparisons between their town and others and was often used to make the case for municipal improvements of various kinds, as we shall see. The press often made such comparisons itself or 'else by implication, invited the reader to make such comparisons themselves'.[8]** This study examines the success of the press in functioning as vehicles of public intelligence and in forming a critical civic consciousness. This paper studies the kinds of knowledge about local politics on offer during the latter part of the nineteenth century (1850 – 1900). A deliberate decision was made to focus on the non-London press to acknowledge the richness and variety of local newspapers (many of which circulated considerable beyond their town or city of origin).[9] The digital database the British Newspaper Archive was used for keyword searches related to municipal reporting. This yielded two main themes – municipal governance and social reform (including a detailed content analysis of reporting of town council meetings drawn from a sample of 8 newspapers across England) and elections, electioneering and scandals. Many of the assumptions about the trends of political reporting in the nineteenth century are challenged by the results, especially the content analysis of reporting of town council meetings.

Social Reform, Municipal Governance and Civic Tradition

The journalism of social reform was a keystone of mid-nineteenth century reporting and pressure was often exerted on municipal authorities by local newspapers campaigning for civic improvements such as libraries, art galleries, museums and parks. This attitude was motivated, at least in part, by a mixture of genuine concern and a modicum of self-interest.[10] As Roberts has demonstrated, the importance of local civic traditions was emphasised in the detailed reporting of public funerals.[11] However, this type of civic tradition along with the opening of new town halls, libraries and parks had been a feature of the provincial press since the earlier part of the nineteenth century and played a significant role in creating a sense of a civic community in which everyone had an interest. These reports often contained a forensic amount of detail, amounting to what Hobsbawm has termed 'the invention of tradition'.[12] This term was used to refer to a process of formalisation and ritualisation, which was designed to establish or legitimise authority. The aim was to assist the audience to understand the significance of the event and the role of the civic elite within it.

Hobsbawm did not acknowledge the importance of newspaper reporting of these occasions in both the invention of these civic traditions and in their continuance. The 'civic' in this sense had a much broader meaning than merely public health and included elements such as culture and education.[13] The detailed accounts of these events provides a valuable opportunity to assess not just the event itself and its participants, but how these occasions were carefully constructed and structured to reflect the city and its people back at itself. Joyce has suggested that the mechanisms of reporting local government during this period had the effect of creating 'a community of interests'.[14] This not only established a consensus about urban life and its priorities but also helped to create a sense of civic identity or consciousness through representing the town or city to itself. Thus, civic traditions, civic boosterism

and civic consciousness became inextricably linked both in the pages of the local press and in the mind of the reader.

There is an attendant danger here in assuming that there was a consensus on what constituted civic progress in the nineteenth century. In Leicester in 1845 and 1846, there was controversy about what the *Leicester Chronicle* termed 'improvement versus embellishment' ("Town Improvement versus Town Embellishment". December 27, 1845, p.3). The paper supported a campaign for improved sanitation in the town at the expense of a new town hall and an extended market place, rejecting the proposal for a 'Brummagen' town hall (ibid.). Municipal priorities were not always shared or agreed upon easily. The appeal of detailed coverage of civic events was based on the ability to implicate the reader as a party with a vested interest in his or her locality and its prosperity. Many provincial newspapers were firmly rooted in the Whig tradition and thus easily embraced ideas about civic progress.[15] These ideas were linked to others such as self-improvement and active citizenship, also in vogue during the Victorian period. However, as we have seen, there is a danger in assuming that, because many of the provincial newspapers were what Wasson has termed "Whiggish and reform-oriented", that all reforms were equally welcomed by the Liberal press and opposed by the Conservative newspapers.[16] As observed in Leicester in 1845-6, the *Leicester Chronicle* opposed some kinds of civic development unusually for a Liberal organ and urged caution "with proper regard for the purses of the public" ("Municipal Affairs". October 24, 1846, p. 3). If we accept that much of the English provincial press was "broadly Liberal", we cannot infer from this that these newspapers universally welcomed all schemes for civic improvement.[17]

There is no doubt, however, that many local newspapers did prioritise the reporting of civic events and celebrations. The opening of Liverpool's Sefton Park in 1862 provides an example of Hobsbawm's invention of tradition in action. The event was widely reported in newspapers all over the country, such as the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* and the *Birmingham Daily Post*, demonstrating that local events and concerns could have national appeal.[18] Such civic events involved a large number of local dignitaries and an abundance of civic rhetoric and provided the ideal ingredients for what has been termed 'civic boosterism'. The local press had a clear role to play in both generating and perpetuating this type of place promotion. In its report of the opening of Sefton Park, the *Liverpool Mercury* referred to the 'generosity' of both Lord Sefton, the owner of the land and of Charles Melly who was responsible for the design of the park ("Public Opening of the Sefton Playground and Gymnasium". March 12, 1862, p.5). Similarly, the opening ceremony of Horton Park in Bradford in 1878 was described in detail in the *Leeds Mercury*, which listed all of the dignitaries present and the civic procession to the park ('Opening of Horton Park, Bradford'. May 27, 1878, p. 4). The ceremony included, as it often did, the handing over of a golden key intended to symbolise the opening of the park. Opening the new library, art gallery and museum in Oldham in 1883, the archaeologist and biologist Sir John Lubbock (1834 – 1913) emphasised the links between the existence of such institutions and the prosperity of the town. Such accounts published in detail in the local newspaper explicitly encouraged readers to appreciate the connections between cultural establishments and what Lubbock termed "material progress" ("Oldham Reference Library and Art Gallery". The *Manchester Weekly Times*, August 4, 1883, p. 6). However, Lubbock also took his remarks further and overtly addressed the importance of the press in local political decision-making: "it is…most necessary for the welfare of the country that the electors should have the means of informing themselves as to the difficult and momentous questions which they have to decide"

(Ibid.). In creating an association between the provision of "the information necessary for the exercise of an intelligent judgement", educational institutions such as libraries and the role of the voter to exercise their franchise, Lubbock was articulating the epitome of a critical civic consciousness.

Walker has argued that extensions of the franchise during the century produced an increase in voters, which contributed to an interest in local political matters.[19] By contrast, he suggests, the waning of much local government power at the end of the century diminished the appeal and the need for these reports.[20] However, some content analysis demonstrates that this was not really the case. A sample was taken of 8 local newspapers from Hull (*Hull Packet*, weekly which was incorporated into the *Hull Daily Mail*, Conservative, daily), Ipswich (*Ipswich Journal*, bi-weekly), Blackburn (*Blackburn Standard*, weekly, Conservative), Bath (*Bath Chronicle*, weekly, Conservative), Leicester (*Leicester Chronicle*, weekly, Liberal), Nottingham (*Nottinghamshire Guardian*, weekly, Conservative), Norwich (*Norfolk Chronicle*, Liberal) and Newcastle (*Newcastle Courant*, weekly, no political affiliation) to measure the amount of space devoted to reporting of ordinary town council meetings (not including special meetings) from 1850 to 1890.

[Table 1 near here].

The British Newspaper Archive was used and care was taken to ensure a geographical spread of newspapers outside of London and a blend of daily, weekly and diverse political affiliations. The base measurement was the word count generated by the reports and logged on the British Newspaper Database. This was found to not always be accurate in every case as the digital footprint of the article and its actual length did not always coincide. In this case, the whole article was cut and pasted into a Word document and a more accurate word count obtained, not allowing for errors in the OCR software.

The main finding challenges the conventional view that reporting on local political matters declined consistently, as the nineteenth century progressed. Undoubtedly, some newspapers did follow this pattern, most notably the *Blackburn Standard* and the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*. The latter introduced the byline of "by an occasional correspondent" to its town council reports in 1875 and 1876. This prefaced each meeting report with some subjective comment such as: "the members came late and they were in low spirits when they did arrive" ("Nottingham Town Council". September 15, 1876, p. 2) and was followed by a more factual account of the proceedings. This was discontinued in 1877. The *Nottinghamshire Guardian* showed a slight decline in the length of town council reports during the 1880s and a significant decline in the 1890s when reports of Nottingham town council meetings were incorporated into a new section entitled Local and District News with word counts of between 200 and 300. These reports were presented to the reader beside reports of local court cases, results of the local agricultural show and political association meetings. Other newspapers, however, increased their local political coverage, such as the *Leicester Chronicle*. This may be explained, in part, by the increase in the size of the borough of Leicester after the Leicester Extension Act of 1891, which increased its population by 32,000 people.[21] In addition, the Leicester local newspaper market was an especially vibrant one with several competing titles, which made it vital that the *Chronicle* was able to demonstrate its ability to cover local politics in depth.[22] **The fact that a similar point could be made about Nottingham, where local political coverage declined during the same period, demonstrates the nuances inherent in this subject and the dangers of assuming**

that a consensus existed about a waning of interest in local government reporting by the provincial press.

Some newspapers maintained a consistent rate of town council meeting reports - The *Newcastle Courant's* town council reports were an average of 2,000 – 3,000 words in the 1890s, very similar to the 1850s. Most of the newspapers in the sample made used of crossheads to break up these long reports and to orient the reader to the different subjects that arose for discussion. This practice allowed the reader to identify the themes that interested them and to develop a sense of the issues that had arisen. In Newcastle, the *Courant* began to incorporate reports of Newcastle town council meetings into a section with reports from neighbouring Gateshead and Sunderland town councils, where space permitted from the 1880s. There was little variation in the accounts in the time period covered in the *Ipswich Journal* (average of 2500 words) and the *Blackburn Standard* (average of 2000 words).

Annual attendances and the voting patterns of council members were published also. This type of information, combined with the detailed meeting reports enabled readers to develop an informed judgement about the suitability of their municipal representatives for office. Some commentators have assumed that local newspaper readers found the reporting of local government matters of little interest. Both Wiener and Koss have argued that amounts of political reporting declined as the century progressed.[23] This is clearly an untrustworthy assumption and is not borne out by the evidence presented here.

Reporting matters of local government became a significant part of local democracy during the nineteenth century, with the press playing an increasingly central role in the creation and circulation of knowledge about the local town. Thus, they did play a role in the creation and circulation of public intelligence. Chalaby has suggested that the British press became depoliticised during the late nineteenth century when political content was gradually replaced by content such as sport and entertainment (so-called 'New Journalism').[24] He also argued that the political content that remained focussed on political personalities rather than political issues. This undoubtedly applies to the national press (which Chalaby was discussing) but the results of this study demonstrate that this process was not uniform across the provincial press in England and was often influenced by patterns of local development such as the expansion of the borough or the number of newspapers available in the town.

Harold Laski wrote dismissively of the work of the municipality being 'too technical and too detailed' to be attractive to the newspapers or their readers.[25] He argued that municipal news only became interesting when it achieved a more confrontational character (such as during municipal elections), which increased its newsworthiness. The following section examines the specifics of municipal election reporting in the provincial press and provides an opportunity to interrogate the meaning of a critical civic consciousness in this context.

Elections, Electioneering and Scandals

Matthews has suggested that the relationship between the provincial press and local politicians was one of "mutual dependency".[26] However, on closer examination, it is possible to observe some more nuances in this association. The annual elections held in November gave local newspapers the opportunity to assess the landscape of municipal representation and, frequently, find it wanting. Much, of course, depended

on the size of the electorate, which varied throughout the nineteenth century. The 1835 Municipal Reform Act specified that the franchise was for "a male occupier of rateable property and to have fully paid the rates over the preceding two and a half years".[27] This excluded not only women and the poor, but also many ratepayers who did not meet the residency requirement. The Act also included a provision for private voting in the home, which replaced the previous oral and visual voting methods.[28] These moves presumed a literate electorate that effectively disenfranchised those who were not literate, but also placed a premium on political knowledge, which could be gained from the local press. The Second Reform Act of 1867 and the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872 further extended the franchise and placed more emphasis on literacy and the importance of electoral information. The former also attempted to address electoral corruption, which will be examined later in this section.

One of the characteristic aspects of the reporting of municipal elections was a very critical assessment of the poor qualities of some of the candidates. Much of this commentary emanated from the idea (common in the nineteenth century press) that the right kind of person was not standing for local election. The characteristics considered desirable for holders of these positions were:

- "men of station/ respectability
- men of substance/ wealth
- men of intelligence/ education".[29]

Such 'fit and proper persons' were needed as most local councils after the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 had control over considerable budgets and were permitted to provide local amenities such as gas, public transport and housing, subject to local legislative changes. Many of the local representatives who appeared in the pages of the local press were drawn from the local business class. Indeed, as Garrard has pointed out, these men preferred to exercise their political skills at local, rather than national level.[30] Not only did they often have the business acumen to contribute to the running of a large borough but, as large ratepayers, their financial interests and the interests of the locality were often strongly aligned. They had effectively replaced the landed aristocracy and many sought to emulate their social power and influence, *pace* Asa Briggs's idea of the 'urban aristocracy'.[31] The plaudits attached to such men in the council chamber often drew specific attention to the alignment of their commercial skills with the requirements of the borough and stressed their 'self-made qualities'.[32] This can be seen in the reaction to the election to the Mayor of Leicester of Alderman Edward Wood in 1888 and reported in the *Leicester Chronicle* and *Leicestershire Mercury*. Alderman Bennett, in welcoming Wood's election, reminded the council that Wood had not been a member for a great number of years but that 'his enterprise and business energy' were more important, as was his 'integrity, sound judgement and discriminating generosity' ("Leicester Town Council". November 10, 1888, p. 8). Wood went on to serve four terms as Mayor of Leicester as well as being Managing Director of Freeman, Hardy and Willis the shoe manufacturer, Vice-Chairman of the Derwent Valley Water Board and a benefactor of Leicester Royal Infirmary. In this sense, serving on a town council was a mechanism for larger philanthropic concerns but it was not enough to be doing good, one had to be seen to be doing good and one of the best methods of achieving this was public service on a municipal council. The local newspaper provided an idea outlet for the results of this philanthropy as a 'vehicle of public intelligence', which regularly reminded readers of the social status of their public representatives and of their benevolence in public service.[33]

While their colleagues on the council were lauding men such as Wood, many local papers were supplying the opposite view of their characters. The *Liverpool Mercury* did not shrink from giving a candid assessment of the personality of each candidate in the municipal elections. The newspaper condemned an individual candidate as 'of no value whatsoever as a Town Councillor' and another as 'of no perceptible usefulness' ("Approaching Municipal Election". October 9, 1846, p. 12). A paper's comments on particular candidates often revealed their own political stance. The Conservative *Blackburn Standard* described Mr Edmundson (**politics unknown, according to the paper**), standing in Trinity ward in 1872 as a 'very undesirable candidate' and condemned his 'entire unfitness for the position of a Town Councillor' ("The Municipal Elections". November 6, 1872, p. 4). His opponent, the Conservative cotton spinner Mr Coddington, was praised as having the potential of adding 'not only to the status of the Council (which is sadly in need of raising) but also to that practical knowledge and good sense which we would like to see in the ascendant' (ibid.). **This focus on personal qualities confirms Chalaby's argument about the increasing primacy of the personal in political reporting but this rarely occurred in isolation in the provincial press but was integrated with comments about business skills and acumen or the lack of them[34].**

The *York Herald*, commenting on the retirement of Mr Husband from York council in 1854, noted his 'utter inability to attend to his extensive and lately increased professional engagements and at the same time to fulfil the duties of a Councillor' ("The Approaching Municipal Elections". October 28, 1854, p. 5). The paper commended his decision to retire and urged that other councillors with poor attendance records should do the same. This illustrates one of the great paradoxes of municipal politics in the nineteenth century – the perceived need for council members with business expertise to serve growing towns and cities and the amount of time such men had to devote to municipal duties. Assessing the civic worth of council members via their attendance records was a popular method for the press to judge the contribution, or lack of it, that they made to civic life. Attendance and voting records were regularly published in the local newspaper (usually without comment), which allowed readers to judge the effectiveness of their local representatives for themselves.

The *Leicester Chronicle* reflected in 1875 on the poor quality of councilmen in that city. Commenting that the council did not include those 'who are best fitted by education, experience, business ability and social position', it concluded that 'there are better men off than on the Council' ("Municipal Reform". July 24, 1875, p. 10). The paper condemned those who stood for the council as a mere pathway to Mayoralty and the Magistracy – 'to soar from obscurity to local distinction is a fine thing for many men among us and they will spend money and cultivate popularity…in order to attain their ends'. It suggested that the 'object of our municipal system (is) to be the good government of the borough – not the gratification of personal ambition and selfish purposes', thus identifying good governance and personal ambition as at odds with one another.

However critical the daily press was of local candidates, the satirical press was even more vituperative. **As Jones has argued, the role of these publications was to offer a 'fundamentally different way of imagining the city' and to challenge the ways in which the city was imagined, articulated and consumed.[35] This genre of the press paradoxically attacked both local government profligacy and parsimony, thus representing a kind of 'gleeful anarchy'.[36] This could have powerful effects - Cawood and Upton's research on Birmingham's satirical**

periodicals demonstrates that they 'had a direct impact on the national media's visual depiction' of city Mayor, Joseph Chamberlain.[37] Liverpool's *the Porcupine* offered a pen portrait of local sugar magnate, Henry Tate in 1866. It lampooned his 'ridiculous inferiority as a public man' and lamented that 'he appears not to have two municipal ideas and, if he had, he could not rub them together' ("Pen portrait: Henry Tate". June 30, 1866, p. 148). The sketch concluded by directly questioning the assumption that business success would be an asset in municipal representation: 'it is too often concluded that, because a man has managed his own affairs well and made his fortune, he will be the very man to do justice to the public in a representative capacity' (ibid.). Again, the agendas of these publications were often evident in their choice of targets. Manchester's *City Jackdaw* attacked Salford councillor John Middlehurst for holding a public meeting in 1878 which no one attended ("Pity a poor councillor". December 6, 1875, p. 28). They did not mention that Middlehurst was the owner of a rival satirical paper, *the City Lantern* some of whose disgruntled staff had left to start *the City Jackdaw* in 1875.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the reporting of municipal elections continued to form a significant part of local government reporting. There was now more emphasis on the personalities of the candidates and more in-depth information on their occupations, for example. This can be explained by the fact that, slowly, municipal authorities were becoming more socially diverse and occupations such as trade union official, estate agent and even journalist were becoming evident. The *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* of 1882 noted that the municipal elections that year 'made it abundantly evident that the great majority of the burgesses are supremely indifferent about the choice of their representatives' ("The Municipal Elections". November 2, 1882, p. 2). The same paper also noted that defeat of a local businessman at the polls who now found 'that success in business is no guarantee for triumph at election time' (ibid.). The account of the election in Sheffield's Park ward sheds light on some common tactics used by the local press in attempting to direct reader attention to these local contests. Describing this ward as 'the best fight of the day', the paper outlined the contest between the three retiring Liberal members and the attempts of the Conservatives to find candidates willing to oppose longstanding council members. Best fight of the day though it may have been, there was little material for the reporter to use, meaning that he had to concentrate on finding or creating sometimes banal points of interest on which to comment. The report noted the good nature of the contest, slyly evoking 'an almost entire absence of personalities (meaning personal comments)', with a variety of wall literature (posters) that was 'scarcely worth the reading' (ibid.).

Alongside reports about municipal elections, there were many reports of corruption during the process in certain areas of the country. Bribery and personation formed the bulk of the reports of municipal corruption – most of which was confined to election time. Other more subtle forms of corruption included payments for awarding municipal contracts and the exploitation of vested interests. The latter formed the basis for a report in the *Aberdeen Weekly Journal* in 1878 when it reported on the preponderance of town council members on the Harbour Board of the town and the conflicts of interest that resulted. 19 of the 31 Harbour Board members were local councilmen, while one member of the town council suggested increasing the numbers of civic representatives on the Board so that the Board would be 'kept in its own place' ("The New Municipal Scandal". May 16, 1878, p. 2). The newspaper continued to point out the lack of qualification of the councilmen for the posts they occupied on the Harbour Board and to suggest the reduction of their numbers. Vested interests

were a constant theme in local government reporting during this century – due to the preponderance of local businessmen serving on municipal bodies, this was an easy accusation to make but it also reflected the fact that serving and protecting one's own interests was an important attraction for many would-be councillors.[38]

Such conflicts of interest were perhaps inevitable given the reliance of many nineteenth century councils on local businessmen but more serious forms of corruption were also evident. Rix has noted that corruption at municipal level was more prevalent and more acute than in national politics and this was reflected in the comments of some newspapers that 'municipal corruption precedes and produces parliamentary corruption and it will be generally found that constituencies in which violence, bribery and intimidation are practiced at parliamentary elections have learned them first in municipal contests' ("Municipal Government". *The Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*. October 19, 1867, p. 2).[39] The paper continued its theme two years later, when it argued "the men who do the municipal bribery are always those who direct the parliamentary bribery" ("Municipal Elections". October 30, 1869, p. 2). The paper was well placed to comment as Warwick joined other towns such as Beverley, Norwich and Newcastle as places associated with political corruption in the nineteenth century. The 1868 Election Petition Act was introduced in an attempt to combat such corruption and, as a result, Royal Commissions were established to investigate in each constituency where corruption was suspected. Such scandals carried the threat of reputational damage to individuals, the local authority and the entire town, as Garrard has remarked. He argued that the nineteenth century town was especially vulnerable due to their 'self-absorbed and communally-conscious' status.[40] The reports of these Royal Commissions were carried in great detail in both the national and local press, thus contributing to the readers' consciousness of inappropriate political activity. In 1880, the *Lancaster Gazette* carried detailed reports of electoral corruption investigations in Macclesfield, Sandwich, Wallingford, Canterbury, Oxford, Chester and Knaresborough ("The Election Commissions". October 9, 1880, p. 3).

Some towns' political culture made them more vulnerable to political corruption. Beverley in East Yorkshire had no landed aristocracy or dominant employer and **there was a 'long-standing tradition among the electors that votes were a source of income'.**[41] An inquiry into the 1868 parliamentary elections in Beverley had yielded 600 people who had given or received bribes and the evidence demonstrated how well the local party institutions had been infiltrated by those intent on influencing the parliamentary election.[42]

Norwich provides another useful example of the impact of electoral corruption on local political culture, including the local press. The Liberal candidate Jacob Henry Tillett, a former Mayor of Norwich, was elected MP for the town in 1870 but his election was declared void due to suspicions of corruption, specifically that his party agents gave paid jobs of little importance to local people.[43] Tillett was again subject to a voided by-election in 1875 for the same reason. A Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the issue. Tillett had local press connections – he was one of a number of men who founded the weekly *Norfolk News* in 1845 from which arose the *Eastern Daily Press* in 1870.[44] Local businessmen involving themselves with a local newspaper for political purposes was nothing new – *the Manchester City News* was started in 1864 by a group of local councillors for the express purpose of reporting on municipal business while the *Hull Daily Mail* was started in 1885 in order to secure the election of Frederick Grotrian as Conservative MP for Hull.[45] For much of the nineteenth century, Norwich had been "synonymous with electoral

corruption".[46] It was also one of the first towns to establish a provincial newspaper, the *Norwich Post*, in 1701.[47] The Royal Commission into corruption in Norwich was extensively reported on in the *Norfolk Chronicle* (Conservative) and the *Norwich Mercury* (Whig) but Tillett's close connections with the *Norfolk News* resulted in minimal mentions of the proceedings but detailed coverage of the supportive meetings held on Tillett's behalf by local groups such as the Liberal Ward Associations and working men's groups ("Norwich Election Petition". May 1, 1875, p. 11 and "Norwich Election Petition". May 15, 1875, p. 7). The *Norfolk Chronicle* explicitly criticised Tillett's "affected coyness" ("Editorial". July 4, 1868, p. 4) and wrote of the "petitioner's organ, the News, or he himself, for it is impossible from his acknowledged position on the paper to write of the two otherwise than as one" ("Editorial". January 30, 1869, p. 5).

The reporting of municipal elections and the scandals and corruption associated with them provides an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the local press as vehicles of public intelligence and civic consciousness. Certainly, there was no shortage of coverage of these matters and it is true that many local newspapers were used as mechanisms to advance the political careers of those who owned and ran them. Elections were, however, infrequent events in local political life and thus are worthy of some caution about the conclusions to be derived from their reporting.

Conclusion

The content analysis deployed in this paper has demonstrated that, contrary to established academic opinion, there was no consistent pattern to the amount of town council meeting coverage in a sample of the English provincial press. Each title covered its local area in its own way, with some titles displaying a gradual reduction in the amount of coverage during the latter part of the nineteenth century while others saw no significant reduction and others an increase. **This confirms that detailed knowledge about local municipal affairs remained a priority, at least in the second half of the nineteenth century.** In practice, this actually functioned to make the local press more focussed on local democratic accountability than the national newspapers. While this often merely took the function of a vague and general awareness of what Laski has termed 'the angry eye of the ratepayer',[48] it also provided a vital source of information with which a reader could form connections with his or her experience of the locality and contribute to the development of a network of meaning about their immediate environment – a civic consciousness.

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[48] Laski, "Committee System", 107.

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