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Spin, smoke-filled rooms, and the decline of council reporting by local newspapers: the slow demise of town hall transparency.

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a blizzard of legislation driven by a central government agenda to improve the appearance of local service accountability. Housing, environmental health, and planning departments have joined schools, hospitals, and care homes in being made subject to a seemingly endless array of targets, performance indicators, and ratings systems. Early 'beacon' and 'best value' (BV) approaches designed to rate individual services were replaced first by comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) and, in turn, comprehensive area assessment (CAA). Ofsted – now with a widened remit, as the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills - has had its ability to name and shame (and to penalise) poor schools and care providers extended by successive Labour Education Secretaries. In health and adult social care, the Care Quality Commission was recently formed from the amalgamation of three existing regulators, in the process gaining sweeping new powers to close dirty hospital wards and de-register 'failing' homes. County councils and unitary authorities have also gained an oversight role in relation to NHS hospitals and surgeries, in the guise of new health scrutiny committees which field public complaints and relay them to GPs, trusts, and health service managers.

The recent launch of a new Directgov website www.oneplace.direct.gov.uk - has even gone some way towards answering longstanding calls for the countless inspection reports arising from this bewildering array of watchdogs to be brought together in, as it were, one place. And, lest local service-providers were hoping to be able to mask more nuanced data from public inspection, there is even a Freedom of Information Act to enable ordinary citizens to lodge more specific enquiries, free of charge, about how their taxpayers' money is spent.

But while there is no shortage of facts and figures available about the efficiency or otherwise of local service delivery, the extent to which this data has until recently been transparently presented – or, indeed, publicised at all - is open to question. Moreover, even at its most illuminating, this battery of measures, inspection reports and league tables has given us a picture of how effectively our money has been spent - and our services delivered – *in the past*.

This piecemeal, post facto approach to holding services to account is only part of the problem. While Whitehall has been trumpeting its moves to improve monitoring of waste managers and care home owners, the machinery of local government *in the here and now* – in short, the way political decisions affecting *tomorrow's services* are being taken - has become ever more opaque.

At the same time as it was introducing the concept of local authority constitutions and codes of conduct, based on the Nolan Commission principles (Nolan et al, 1995), the Local Government Act 2000 sanctioned the introduction of Westminster-style council cabinets/executives with no obligation to meet publicly unless discussing key decisions they intend to take collectively (HM Stationery Office, 2000). The same act allowed directly elected mayors and executive leaders – the two types of council leadership it ushered in – to appoint political assistants modelled on ministerial special advisors.

The combined effect of these twin developments has been to maximise the ability of council cabinets/executives to take policy decisions in secret, while minimising that of the press, public, or indeed councillors shorn of ‘frontbench’ roles to scrutinise or challenge their actions. Meetings of council committees and the full council – once energetic arenas for public debate and knife-edge votes on controversial issues (not to mention sources of lively news copy) – have been reduced to little more than a rubber-stamp; experienced councillors relegated to the ‘backbenches’ and treated as lobby fodder (Dale, 23 January 2002).

With council meetings downgraded to the status of talking-shops, it’s little wonder that today’s local newspaper editors – faced with ever-tighter staff budgets, and 24-hour copy deadlines for their web operations – are voting with their feet and ceasing to cover them. The role of the dedicated local government correspondent (once a mainstay of any self-respecting provincial paper) is also threatened. And with these once vital links to town hall gossip sacrificed, some papers, particularly smaller dailies and weeklies, are in danger of losing vital contacts and channels of information that will be nigh-on impossible to replace.

Declining media coverage of town hall proceedings is far from the only factor to have undermined the transparency of local government. As traditional newspapers have scaled back routine council reports, local authorities themselves have adopted aggressive new communication strategies, with many now employing Westminster-style media managers to promote their messages, in place of the reactive press officers of old. All but a handful now produce their own in-house publications – many closely resembling commercial newspapers or magazines (Newspaper Society, 25 April 2009), and staffed by well-paid journalists who might otherwise have been reporting on them from outside.

The combined effect of all these developments is to dilute the ability of Press and public (and, indeed, some elected councillors) to scrutinise the workings of local authorities in the way they once could, let alone hold them to account. Meanwhile, the most prevalent interpretation of many councils’ policy decisions and their effectiveness is the inherently one-sided, invariably positive, yet increasingly journalistic output flowing out of their own spin machines.

This paper sets out to examine the evidence in support of the case that local authority accountability is being diminished, and to assess the implications of any such diminution for the democratic process. It focuses on three key strands - the charge of increasing secrecy in executive decision-making; the decline of traditional council reporting by newspapers; and the growth of proactive council public relations strategies, including the use of self-funded

journalism to promote their campaigns and policies – examining the implications of each for transparency and accountability in local government.

The paper initially explains the background to all three of these issues, reviewing existing literature, including several recent industry surveys, and citing relevant statistics and case studies to demonstrate their impact. It then presents some new evidence, drawn from three strands of primary research: a survey of local newspaper editors, news editors, and political reporters focusing on the impact of the above developments on newsroom economies and practices; data derived from Freedom of Information requests to local authorities focusing on the funding and profitability of council-run publications; and qualitative interviews conducted with individual players in this debate.

The existing evidence base

Cabinet government, secrecy, and the demise of open debate

The most notable recent change to the hierarchical structure of local authorities has been the introduction of “executive arrangements” for those covering populations of more than 85,000 (HM Stationery Office, 2000). In a move portrayed by Ministers as a means of speeding up local decision-making, authorities were invited to adopt either of two new principal leadership options: a directly elected mayor or an executive leader. Councils choosing the mayoral route (subject to prior approval in a local referendum) were initially allowed to choose between a cabinet and an alternative model under which mayors would take day-to-day policy decisions on the advice of a council manager – a senior civil servant likely to be the authority’s incumbent chief executive. This course proved immediately politically sensitive, given that it would reduce elected councillors to a second-tier role under a “presidential” mayor and his/her unelected aide (Heinelt, H. and Hlepas, N-K, 2006). Only one council, Stoke-on-Trent, ever adopted it, and when it subsequently abandoned this in favour of the leader and cabinet model the Government amended the provisions in the Local Government Act 2000 to remove the option altogether (HM Stationery Office, 2007). Executive leaders - normally drawn from the party with most seats after a local election – are permitted to form a cabinet, prime minister-style, appointing executive members to specific portfolios and, since 2007, vest all executive power in themselves (HM Stationery Office, 2007). Post-2007 executive leaders – at time of writing, only in place in 33 county council areas – therefore have broadly the same powers as mayors (Fairbrass, 16 March 2010).

The advent of cabinet government at local authority level has been contentious enough for some councillors, who argue it has broken the longstanding tradition that each member should have an equal say in policy-making, irrespective of whether they are in the ruling party or not. Though key decisions (those affecting two or more electoral wards) still have to be brought before meetings of the full council, and published in a monthly forward plan, with strong cabinet backing it is hard for them to be decisively challenged, let alone overturned, as in the past. Majority government Westminster-style all over again.

Of greater concern still, though, is the freedom authorities operating under the new executive arrangements are granted to limit the meetings their cabinets hold in public. Ministers had originally proposed that cabinets should be under no obligation to meet publicly at all – a clear break with years of practice in full council, committee and sub-committee meetings, as set down in the Local Authorities (Access to Information) Act 1985 (HM Stationery Office, 1985). A House of Lords amendment moderated this freedom, stipulating that cabinets should meet in public whenever discussing key decisions they were due to take on a collective basis. However, in a paper published in 2001, the Campaign for Freedom of Information identified a loophole, yet to be addressed, which enables cabinets to convene in private even on key decisions – if those decisions have been delegated to individual cabinet members (Campaign for Freedom of Information, 20 September 2001). In doing so, it highlighted another key issue of accountability under the new executive arrangements: the ability of council leaders and elected mayors to delegate authority to make major policy decisions, at least initially, to *individual* councillors – or, in some cases, officers - and for these decisions to be taken under even less scrutiny than collective ones.

The climate of secrecy surrounding many cabinet meetings has proved an obvious irritant to ‘backbench’ councillors - many of whom, despite being long-serving local representatives and/or members of the ruling party, nonetheless find themselves locked outside the inner circle of the leader/mayor and his/her frontbench confidants. But why, beyond this, does it matter?

One outcome is that many issues that would otherwise be out in the open – including some of genuine public interest – are in danger of slipping by unnoticed. Up to December 2001, all meetings of Birmingham City Council’s ruling Labour cabinet were held in secret – whether or not matters being discussed were those usually debated in public (i.e. not classified as either “confidential” or “exempt” under the terms of the 1985 Act). The council’s executive leader, Sir Albert Bore, later relented to splitting cabinets into ‘open’ and ‘closed’ sessions like those used in full council, committee, and sub-committee meetings, allowing press and public to attend the former and two Conservative and one Liberal Democrat councillors to remain in the room for the latter. However, he refused to extend this privilege to all elected councillors on the authority – despite their protests that, in years of service, they had never been banned from sitting in on confidential *committee* sessions. Sir Albert’s argument was that the council had become too “leaky”, and that third parties would be reluctant to confide in it if there was a danger of sensitive information they had disclosed being passed to the media (Dale, 23 January 2002). But, as in the many similar cases up and down the country, press and public are being expected to trust in cabinets’ and executives’ definition of what constitutes “sensitive” – or, indeed, “confidential” and “exempt”.

A more recent example illustrates the problematic nature of this arrangement. In February 2010, Woking Borough Council was accused of abusing the definition of commercially sensitive matters that qualify as “exempt” (HM Stationery Office, 1985) to hold a succession of closed meetings at which it finalised the purchase of a local shopping-centre for £68 million (Rider, 22

February 2010). The first local people knew about any negotiations - secured with the help of a loan from the Public Works Loan Board, which the council confirmed would take the borough 50 years to repay - was a press statement issued on its website after it had already signed on the dotted line. While it is established practice for councils to exclude the press and public from meetings, or parts of meetings, specifically concerned with negotiating commercially sensitive contracts, to hold the final session at which councillors formally vote on whether to conclude a deal in private is highly irregular.

Much more seriously, the recent scandal about inadequate child protection procedures in Doncaster was exposed only after a tenacious local newspaper, the *Doncaster Free Press*, doggedly followed a trail starting with a reference to “deep-rooted” issues around its services for children and young people in an otherwise routine Audit Commission CPA report. A series of follow-up stories led eventually to the paper’s revelation nine months later that a serious case review into a ten-month-old baby, known only as Baby A, had exposed a “chaotic and dangerous situation” in the council’s children’s services department. When this story was finally published, and it emerged that six further serious case reviews were also under way, councillors outside the cabinet accused the town’s elected mayor, Martin Winter, of presiding over a “culture of secrecy” (Ahmed, 20 January 2009). Mr Winter eventually resigned, and a new management team for children’s services was parachuted into the authority by the Schools Secretary, Ed Balls (Balls, 12 March 2009). While the story did finally get out, then - through the efforts of the local press - how much sooner might it have been exposed if the case reviews had been discussed more openly in council meetings?

For veteran councillors already irritated at being relegated to a secondary, scrutiny-only, role under cabinet government, the New Labour years have also sidelined them in other ways. Tony Blair’s administration ushered in a new era of partnership-working, using financial incentives to persuade councils to outsource the delivery of many policies on the ground in areas such as regeneration, early-years education, and social care to the voluntary and private sectors. If not handed over wholesale, decision-making has increasingly been transferred to small coterie of frontbench councillors sitting alongside unelected businesspeople and quangocrats, each with exactly the same say as them. Not only has this placed day-to-day decisions on service delivery in the hands of commercial companies, charities, agencies, and quangos with no direct accountability to the public – a further dilution of local democracy - but it has left many backbench councillors feeling even more distant from the policy process. A 2002 study by the University of Hull for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that backbench councillors were overwhelmingly critical of the “managerialist”, over-centralised nature of the partnership approach. Reviving the argument that local electors displeased with their councillors’ actions in office can at least boot them out at election time, Dr Mick Wilkinson, the study’s co-author, wrote:

“Successive governments have downgraded the key democratic role of elected members and stifled local government entrepreneurialism. Councillors clearly feel it is time for central government to let go of the reins and allow them the

space to follow political agendas and to innovate to meet the particular needs of their community.” (Wilkinson and Craig, 2002)

Decline of traditional council reporting

Equally seriously, from the point of view of local accountability, the spread of cabinet government has acted as a disincentive to the local media – operating in increasingly straitened times - to continue staffing any but the most important meetings of their local authorities. A 2009 survey of local newspapers by the Press Association, Britain’s national newswire service, found that nearly two-thirds of titles were using fewer local government resources – from press releases to the minutes and agendas of meetings – than ten years previously, and more than one in five were employing fewer council reporters than in 1999 (Fowler, 2009). Half of all editors surveyed admitted their “level of scrutiny” of their principal local authorities had been reduced by these two factors.

One of the most common reasons given for newspapers’ failure to attend meetings routinely was the fact that, with the advent of cabinet government, many newsworthy decisions are no longer made in public. After all, why send a reporter who could otherwise be providing vital copy for the web and overnight editions out of the office to report from a meeting at which little of value is being debated or voted on – and anything that is will merely be rubber-stamped, having been all-but decided on in the privacy of the cabinet room beforehand?

Qualitative comments from the survey included the following:

“Cabinet structure has diminished debate, independence, political rows and committee activity.”

“Decisions in local government are made less and less in full council and our coverage reflects this.”

Even one newspaper that talked up its council coverage, arguing it still gave over significant space to local authority stories, said:

“We endeavour to cover council and court as we ever did, but limited resources and also the way both council and court are organised means there is actually less to report when reporters attend.”

A significant admission made by some weekly editors was that the councils they were least likely to cover were the ones with the biggest majorities – i.e. those most needing to be held accountable for their decisions, due to the weakness of the opposition parties. Their rationale was that the quality of debate at meetings held in public by such councils, including those of cabinet, was negligible.

The decline in reporting from council meetings was not solely attributed to the advent of cabinet government. Budget pressures and staff reductions were also explicitly and repeatedly cited, particularly by smaller daily newspaper editors – with some identifying the closure of district offices in smaller towns as a

logistical issue that made it difficult to staff some shire district and borough council meetings (let alone those of parish councils). Others pointed to reductions in the number of daily editions their papers produced, and the resultant loss of space for page leads drawn from smaller local authorities.

In some cases, the councils getting the least coverage were the upper-tier counties – those with the biggest budgets and areas of responsibility. In general, the papers that were managing to continue providing the most comprehensive coverage of their local authorities were those fortunate enough to now have only one to worry about – i.e. those whose previous two-tier structure had been replaced by a unitary one since the early 1990s. On respondent laments:

“Staff shortages mean readers not in the heart of our circulation area get a worse service and many local authorities are not held to account as they once were. Staff have less time to cultivate contacts, with the result that we get fewer leaks and off-diary stories...”

Evidence for the decline of council reporting not only came from editors, but from local authority media managers – who, perhaps unsurprisingly, were more candid than the former about the cutbacks in coverage, and appeared to revel in their newfound ability to take controversial decisions without the fear of press scrutiny. Comments cited in the survey included the idea that specialist council reporters appeared to be a “dying breed”, and one which authorities did not expect to see replaced once those still in post had retired or moved on. Some went further to say that, such was the loss of expertise in newsrooms, councils were having to tutor inexperienced reporters on how local government worked, as this knowledge was no longer available from their journalistic peers or superiors. Metropolitan borough councils, in particular, stated that they were having to deal with fewer “embarrassing” stories than in the past, simply because journalists were no longer attending enough meetings or digging sufficiently deeply using contacts. One council went so far as to lament the lack of scrutiny by its local paper, ‘complaining’ that 85 per cent of coverage it received was now “positive”, while others said council press releases were routinely appearing in print almost verbatim – a familiar charge of critics of “churnalism” (Davies, 2008).

So the evidence seems clear: a combination of increasing council secrecy and tighter newsroom budgets means that fewer local papers are now covering routine council proceedings at all, and many of those that still are attending meetings no longer do so as frequently or as systematically as they once did.

Growth of proactive PR and council-run ‘newspapers’

As if financial cutbacks and declining openness in council policy-making weren’t enough of a barrier to the provincial press in fulfilling its fourth estate function, the adoption by many local authorities of increasingly aggressive media strategies, including their own ‘fake’ news publications, is having an even more deleterious effect. According to two 2009 surveys local authorities – one, by the Newspaper Society, of 436 across the UK (Newspaper Society, 25 April 2009), the other, by

the Local Government Association, of all 353 in England (LGA, April 2009) – anything between 95 and 98 per cent of councils publish regular newspapers, magazines, or newsletters. While many of these are bimonthly or less frequent, there are dozens of monthly titles, and seven or more are fortnightly (six in London alone). Three at least, *Greenwich Time*, published by the London borough of Greenwich, Tower Hamlets' *East End Life*, and *Inform*, an email newsletter sent out by Bath and North East Somerset Council, are weekly.

The Newspaper Society, the Society of Editors and a number of leading media commentators, including *Guardian* blogger and columnist and Professor of Journalism at City University Roy Greenslade, are among those who have criticised the rise of council papers. Their concerns are broadly threefold:

- That well-produced local authority publications – particularly those covering traditional newspaper stories, as well as those related to their own councils - are poaching readers who might otherwise buy a commercial paper for their local news and information
- That an increasing number of local authority publications are accepting paid advertising – including, in some cases, the councils' own statutory notices (which they have long been obliged by law to place in a local paper). This is depriving commercial titles of valuable revenue
- That council-run publications are increasingly being professionalised, with trained and experienced journalists recruited for generous salaries to staff them. Hiring staff with the advanced skills needed to produce convincingly journalistic content is making it easier for them to pass themselves off as genuine *newspapers*, as opposed to marketing or PR literature, while depriving commercial titles of the expertise of those journalists (some of whom will have been trained at the expense of those titles)

The combined effect of any two or more of these pressures, critics argue, is to reduce sales and profits for commercial titles, endanger jobs, and ultimately threaten the survival of an independent and plural local media.

Poaching readers

There is substantial evidence to indicate that council-run publications in some areas are making serious inroads into the circulations and readerships of their commercial rivals. Greenslade cites several specific examples of local authority newspapers and magazines being distributed to significantly higher numbers of customers than the paid-for or free commercial titles published in the same areas (Greenslade, 22 April 2009). The weekly *East End Life*, produced by the London borough of Tower Hamlets, is posted free through the letterboxes of 81,000 homes, while its independent competitor, the *East London Advertiser*, also published each week, struggles to sell more than 6,800 copies at a cover price of

50 pence. Between 1993 and 2010, its circulation fell from 20,000 to 7,500, while in the year from April 2008 to April 2009 alone it dropped by nearly a quarter. Hackney Council's *Hackney Today*, which boasts in media packs it sends to potential advertisers of having "the largest reach in the borough of any local paper", was distributing 108,000 copies a fortnight to local households in April 2009. Its commercial rival, the *Hackney Gazette*, was selling barely 8,000 copies a week (Greenslade, 6 August 2009). Malcolm Starbrook, editor of the *East London Advertiser*, blames "a large proportion" of his 144-year-old newspaper's sales decline on *East End Life*, citing its non-council coverage as a particular cause for concern. In January 2010, he told *the Guardian*:

"It carries court reports, seven-day TV listings, sports, has local advertising – all the things you would expect to find in a local newspaper. The difference being that it's all heavily subsidised." (Tryhorn, 25 January, 2010)

Accepting paid advertising

Recent surveys of the growing local authority newspaper and magazine market have highlighted the proliferation of paid-for advertising in some titles – and the potential threat this poses to commercial titles that have long depended on ad revenue for the lion's share of their profits (Newspaper Society, 25 April 2009; LGA, 2009). The fact that many council papers now actively seek advertisers is seen as only part of the problem: with many of these titles increasingly outstripping traditional ones in terms of distribution, it is hardly surprising that companies are keen to advertise in them. And during the recent recession, with marketing budgets for small and medium-sized businesses cut to a minimum, for most companies it will have become a question of one or the other – not both.

While the LGA states that six out of ten council titles in England devote 10 per cent or less of their space to advertising, and a quarter contain no adverts (LGA, 2009), figures from the Newspaper Society interpret things differently. Its survey found that 90 per cent of London authorities either already contained or would accept third-party advertising and a third of those outside the capital ran adverts (Newspaper Society, 25 April 2009). *H&F News*, published fortnightly by the London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, states in its media pack:

"H&F News is Hammersmith & Fulham's leading newspaper, with more readers, more news and more influence than any other paper. If you are looking for a way to reach homes in Fulham, Hammersmith and Shepherds Bush which is cost effective and reliable, then look no further. 87,000 copies of H&F News are delivered monthly to homes across the borough – more than any other local media." (Belam, 26 May 2009)

Meanwhile, *Hackney Today's* sales pitch boasts of offering advertisers "the largest reach in the borough of any local paper". It goes on to welcome "all sorts of advertisements including statutory notices and recruitment".

It is this latter point – as well as the increasingly competitive rates offered to advertisers by council-run publications – that most concerns many editors. Under existing law, councils are required to advertise all major planning applications, announcements, and other statutory notices in their local press. However, while the Government recently ruled that this condition should remain in place (defying lobbying from some local authorities) (Day, 22 December 2009), certain councils appear to be sidestepping customary practice by placing their notices not in commercial titles but in their own. The financial benefit of this, of course, is not only to deprive competing titles of valuable revenue: it can be to reduce the council's overall advertising spend by negotiating free or cheaper ad space than in a conventional paper. Ironically, it often also has the effect of more comprehensively meeting the council's publicity obligations - by advertising statutory notices in the most widely distributed (and, one assumes, read) title in an area, rather than an ailing paid-for title. *H&F News*, *Brent Magazine*, and *Living*, published by the borough of Havering, are just a handful of those taking internal as well as external adverts (Greenslade, 2009).

The council-run publications charge their advertisers are also eye-opening. Details of enquiries made by writer and *Guardian* Internet consultant Martin Belam, and published on his website in May 2009, showed that *Haringey People*, printed ten times a year by the borough of Haringey, was selling full-page adverts for £2,500, while its neighbouring local paper, the *Ham and High*, charged £2,000 for the same (Belam, 14 May, 2009). While on the face of it this made the latter's rates more competitive, it could only boast a circulation of 12,000 – compared to the 224,500 for *Haringey Life* which, unlike commercial titles, is not required by law in any case to certify its sales figures when promoting them to advertisers.

The rates charged by council newspapers, then, tend to be sufficiently on a par with those of their rivals that they are capable of providing a lucrative enough income to off-set (at least in part) the cost of publication to local council taxpayers. This is an argument that prominent defenders of the practice, such as Darlington councillor Nick Wallis, have used to justify the acceptance of paid advertising. In an entry on his blogspot on 25 August 2009, Mr Wallis wrote:

“...local councils can't win. They're damned if they have a council magazine with significant costs to the taxpayer, and damned if they try to offset those costs with advertising revenue.” (Wallis, 25 August 2009)

Nonetheless, the assiduousness with which some local authority publications have courted advertising – and the sums they have succeeded in attracting as a result, to the detriment of their commercial competitors – continues to alarm the newspaper industry. In a reply to a request under the Freedom of Information Act for this paper issued on 5 January 2010, Tower Hamlets Borough Council revealed that *East End Life*, long criticised for pursuing readers of existing local papers, had earned a total of £1.45 million in advertising in the financial year 2008-9 - £825,000 of which had been raised from external advertisers who would otherwise have had to buy space in a commercial publication. In addition to

running a large amount of recruitment advertising (another traditional selling-point of paid-for papers), the borough confirmed that *East End Life* also took ads from other public and voluntary/third sector bodies, including NHS primary care trusts, registered social landlords, and various charities. Significantly, its advertising sales team at the time numbered 6.6 people – between them earning £249,000 – and, due to the scale of its advertising take, it came in £231,000 under budget, only narrowly avoiding making a net profit.

Though more work needs to be done to establish this, the reported closure of some 60 local newspapers in 2008 alone (Toynbee, 24 March 2009) can arguably be attributed to loss of advertising revenue more than any other single factor. By way of illustration, in 2009 a collapse in advertising across the sector – exacerbated by the recession – saw Trinity Mirror make 1,700 redundancies and sell or close 30 titles; another regional newspaper group, Johnston Press, put two of its signature papers, the *Yorkshire Post* and *The Scotsman*, up for sale; and the Guardian Media Group axe 153 local paper jobs. In March 2009, Northcliffe Media, owned by the Daily Mail and General Trust, axed 1,000 local jobs after suffering a 37 per cent year-on-year drop in its advertising revenue (Toynbee, 24 March 2009; Greenslade, 11 March 2010). Even the LGA – unsurprisingly, a defender of council publications – noted in its 2009 survey that 60 per cent of London boroughs had reported local commercial titles closing or struggling in the previous year, with three-quarters of them attributing this decline to falling advertising revenue (LGA, April 2009).

Professionalization of council publications

The final major concern raised by the newspaper sector in relation to council-run publications relates to their increasing professionalism. Unlike the poorly photocopied A4 double-sided newsletters of old, today's local authority newspapers and magazines are glossy affairs, produced using industry-standard design and desktop publishing software. Many of them boast mastheads, headline styles and fonts which closely resemble those of commercial titles, meaning that "they are not easily distinguishable from independent press" (Newspaper Society, 25 April 2009). Titles like *East End Life*, *H&F News*, the *Mid-Suffolk Messenger*, *Hackney Today*, and *Horsham District News* all closely resemble standard local weekly newspapers in design and format.

Just as more and more local authority publications are starting to look like 'real' newspapers, so, too, is the content of some titles mimicking that of the traditional press. Set alongside professional-looking production values, this can add to the impression in the minds of less media-savvy consumers that they are reading a genuine newspaper, rather than a council PR bulletin. The 2009 Newspaper Society survey reported that 54 per cent of local authority publications outside London were running news related to non-council topics, such as court reports, charity events etc (Newspaper Society, 2009).

One reason for the increasingly close resemblance between commercial and council-run publications is that many of the people now working on the former once worked – or *would* be working now, if market conditions were

different – on the latter. The main journalism recruitment sites, among them www.journalism.co.uk and www.gorkana.com, regularly carry job ads for journalists posted by local authorities willing to offer upwards of £30,000 per annum, and we know from earlier Fol request to Tower Hamlets that *East End Life* was employing 7.6 editorial and production staff, including four reporters, on £379,000 between them as of January 2010 (www.whatdotheyknow.com). By contrast, as of September 2009, a typical starting salary for a local newspaper reporter was around £12,000 (www.prospects.ac.uk, September 2009). With many newspaper groups no longer recruiting anyway, and some cutting jobs, it's easy to understand why applying to work on a less frenetic council publication can be so attractive to recently trained journalists – particularly those saddled with thousands of pounds' in personal debt after self-financing a degree and the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) certificate which is widely regarded as the minimum requirement for entry-level jobs in the local press.

For some, the professionalization of council publications is merely the latest stage in a gradual shift in communications strategy for local authorities, which has seen them move away from the, largely reactive, press and PR officer approach of old to a more proactive form of Westminster-style “media management” (Harrison, 2006, p.180). An LGA survey of 236 local authority heads of communication in 2004 found that, by then, nearly 80 per cent of councils were treating communications as a “corporate priority” (as cited in Harrison, 2006, p.179). Kate Bond, corporate communications manager for Telford and Wrekin Council, is one of a number of council media chiefs who have argued that authorities are adopting such aggressive tactics because of their concerns that commercial papers place a disproportionate emphasis on negative stories, while failing to cover more positive ones, let alone bread and butter public information matters about which local residents need to be informed:

“In the past, local authority communications have been driven by the media, with councils reacting to the questions asked by the media. Perhaps this was seen as the easiest way to manage the media, but for those councils who have embraced communications, it is widely accepted that councils must manage the media by taking the good news to them.” (Bond, as cited in Harrison, 2006, p.180)

This is an argument which finds sympathy with many frustrated councillors, including Wallis, who, in his August 2009 blogspot, wrote:

“It’s a bum rap if whatever you do, no matter how well, the local paper slags you off as ‘loony left’ because of the general political bias of the media group. It’s precisely the one-eyed nature of a lot of the local press that generated the growth of council magazines, because councils wanted to talk directly to their residents, and avoid the hostile spin continually imposed by the media.” (Wallis, 25 August 2009)

Not all local politicians agree, however. When a budget report was shown to members of Tower Hamlets Borough Council in September 2009, in which it

emerged that *East End Life* would have to be subsidised by an extra £500,000 to offset a £396,000 shortfall in advertising revenue put down to the recession, Conservative councillor Tim Archer renewed his call for the “propaganda sheet” to be scrapped (Potter, 16 September 2009). He argued that, even if this meant the council having to pay to advertise council vacancies in the commercial *East London Advertiser*, by closing down production of *East End Life* it would still be saving itself £670,000 a year. In Doncaster, meanwhile, the mayor installed to replace Martin Winter, Peter Davies of the English Democrats, wasted little time in axing *Doncaster News*, which he dismissed as “council propaganda”. His action, in August 2009, came days after the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Ben Bradshaw, had declared of council-run publications:

“They remind me of (Soviet state newspaper) Pravda and papers I knew from my times in East Germany as a BBC correspondent. If the only information you’re getting is misleading propaganda put out by politicians from one particular party, I think that’s very dangerous.” (Moss, 8 August 2009)

Some new evidence

Cabinet government and the decline of traditional council reporting

Primary research conducted for this paper relevant to the issues of council secrecy and cutbacks in local government coverage by commercial newspapers consisted of two principal strands. The first was a qualitative questionnaire (Appendix 1) emailed to editors of 24 of the UK’s 1,270 local newspapers - approximately two per cent of the total. Titles were targeted to give a representative geographical spread. The second strand took the form of short, attributable, commentaries received from the group political editor of the Kent Messenger Group and the communications director of the Newspaper Society.

Questionnaire

Of the 24 newspapers approached for the questionnaire-based interview, 20 replied. Although their geographical spread was representative on the whole, with two Scottish titles and 18 from across all the English regions, no responses were received from Welsh newspapers.

While it is possible to extrapolate some quantifiable patterns from the replies received, this data broadly appears to reflect the trends already identified in the PA survey (Fowler, 2009) – focusing as it does on the extent of coverage newspapers are (or aren’t) continuing to give their councils. Of greater interest is the anecdotal substance of the comments made by respondents – in some cases editors, in others news editors or political reporters themselves.

The following comment from a political reporter on a Devon evening paper reflects many of those received in response to a question asking about the impact the LGA 2000 had had on their ability to keep tabs on council decisions:

“The Cabinet makes its decisions at a public meeting, but meets in private before that. The public meetings are usually very quick, with little useful comment and no opposition from Cabinet members. Decisions are clearly agreed in advance.”

Like many other respondents, this reporter insists that most commercial newspapers were savvy enough to overcome barriers to scrutinising the workings of their council – in his case, by attending scrutiny meetings at which the biggest issues are examined by backbench councillors. However, while a Hampshire-based weekly paper also robustly defends its reporters’ ability to distinguish between real news and council propaganda, it offers a more downbeat perspective on the procedural changes introduced by the LGA 2000:

“There is less council news today as there is little debate because of the 2001 changes to council meetings which did away with most committees and replaced them with a cabinet and leader system. The changes have been bad for coverage of councils, which councils have tried to overcome by trebling their number of PR staff who pump out rubbish ‘puff stories’ about their council.”

A more exasperated response comes from a Yorkshire-based morning paper:

“We have experience of cabinets meeting both in public and privately. Our experience has been that the LGA has made councils more secretive and less open. The idea of cabinet responsibility has made it harder to question decisions and we have to rely on FOI more than I would like. For instance, ten years ago only the largest councils had press offices to field questions. Smaller district councils gave direct access to senior officers. This is no longer the case.”

A respondent from a daily paper based in Wiltshire adds:

“The Local Government Act 2000? How long have you got? Clearly, the abolition of the old committee structures has impacted on accountability and scrutiny in that it concentrates decision-making into fewer hands. Elected mayors? Hilary Armstrong MP [a former Local Government Minister under Tony Blair] was the champion of this based on the US model. You might find that in the US there was a retreat from elected mayors as it was perceived as licensing local bigwigs/celebrities/populists and prone to corruption.”

Even where cabinets/executives are meeting in public, at least nominally, there is a sense that items have often been agreed in advance – perhaps in a prior meeting to which the press, public, and backbench councillors were not privy. The editor of a Surrey weekly paper, who admitted that its council coverage had fallen by around 10 per cent compared to a decade ago, says:

“Although the cabinet meets in public there is definitely a sense that all the key discussions and decisions are agreed in advance in private. The protracted debates that used to exist at full council have largely been curtailed. Even though

a lot of what happened at full council was grandstanding, and decisions were always made more swiftly when no press were present, there is a real sense of a loss of public scrutiny and open government. And, inevitably it means that our reporting of political debate on important issues is reduced. Although there are scrutiny committees there is an impression that they are largely toothless and rarely force the cabinet to actually re-think its decisions.”

On a positive note, the less ‘ready-made’ nature of council stories in an era of truncated debates and behind-closed-doors policy deals appears to be encouraging a more imaginative approach to sourcing news stories. A respondent from a daily newspaper in Kent says:

“The cabinet system takes a lot of the drama out of council meeting stories as, at all the scrutiny committee meetings, no actual decisions are made. Increasingly we are using the meetings as a reference point to get an idea for a story, rather than doing a straightforward report of what was said.”

An evening paper in the North East takes a similarly disinterested view on the decline of open council meetings, arguing:

“We have enough contacts gained over many years to ensure we hear about even those discussions held in private. Any good journalist should be able to develop contacts to ensure this is the case.”

Additional commentaries/interviews

The attributable comments provided by both the communications director of the Newspaper Society and the veteran regional political reporter broadly reflected the concerns identified by many individual questionnaire respondents, re the perceived diminution in local authority accountability signalled by the LGA 2000.

Asked about difficulties presented by the LGA 2000 changes, Lynne Anderson, communications director of the Newspaper Society, responded:

“It can be harder these days for the local paper to get the information they need from the council, either because the important decisions are made behind closed doors or because everything is routed through the press office with less direct access to councillors and officials.”

Paul Francis, group political editor of the Kent Messenger Group, broadly concurred, stressing that opposition parties in particular were finding it increasingly difficult to “get their voice heard”. But he pointed out that the use of procedure of one kind or other to limit scrutiny of council business is nothing new:

“We are where we are. In one sense, councils are probably doing what they always did but the concept of council chambers being arenas for meaningful democratic debate has all but vanished.”

Growth of proactive PR and council-run ‘newspapers’

Primary research relevant to this issue took three forms. The first was the questionnaire described above. The second was the commentaries received from the Newspaper Society and Kent Messenger Group, as well as, in this case, a one-to-one interview with the media manager for a local authority operating under post-LGA 2000 executive arrangements and with its own local authority publication (Surrey County Council). The third strand comprised two sets of Freedom of Information requests relating to the issues of local authority transparency and accountability. One was a two-part request emailed to 24 local authorities in England and Wales (approximately five per cent of the total), asking about the councils’ executive arrangements, the staffing and production costs of its publication(s), and the costs of any political assistants or other special advisors employed by the councils following the changes introduced by the LGA 2000 (Appendix 2). The other was a targeted request focusing on employment of political assistants, sent specifically to all 11 local authorities currently operating under directly elected mayors - excluding the Mayor of London (Appendix 3).

Questionnaire

Respondents to the local newspaper questionnaire were generally unfazed by the threat of council-run publications, particularly from a journalistic point of view – with many arguing that the public was intelligent enough to distinguish between local authority spin and genuine council-related stories covered by commercial papers. A typical comment from a Lancashire-based paper is the following:

“At the moment, there is a quarterly council magazine. I would say its impact is minimal because, from a news point of view, the council-related stories have a positive spin or are mainly information-based, as opposed to recording thrusting debates in the council chamber!”

As a deliberate decision was taken to elicit responses from newspapers around the UK, rather than concentrating on London (where the biggest financial impact of local authority papers has been felt), this was perhaps to be expected. Moreover, the nature of the respondents targeted – journalists, rather than advertising sales executives or proprietors – meant their comments were inevitably going to focus on editorial, rather than financial, concerns.

The respondent from one East Midlands newspaper, though dismissive of its current council-run competitor, adds an ominous note towards the end:

“Our county council and police are presently looking at joining together to produce a monthly newsletter. That may have an impact on sales.”

Additional commentaries/interviews

Francis was similarly bullish about the prospect of his newspaper group falling foul of aggressively marketed council media, describing their impact as “negligible”. He dismissed Kent County Council’s broadband television station, Kent TV!, and pointing out that *Yes!*, its twice-yearly magazine, had been closed.

Anderson sounded a more concerned note:

“The industry has no complaint with the traditional council newsletter, published two or three times a year and offering helpful information to residents about services such as refuse collection. But this new breed of council-run ‘newspaper’ or magazine, often monthly or more frequent, is nothing more than propaganda in the guise of independent news reporting. Many of these titles compete head to head with independent local papers for readers and advertising. The worst cases threaten the existence of the only voices which can hold local authorities to account and for that reason they should be banned.”

By way of a contrasting perspective, Paul Marinko, media manager of Surrey County Council, offered an insight into the working practices and editorial ambitions of his authority’s publication, *Surrey Matters*.

Marinko confirmed that the magazine, which is distributed free of charge four times a year to households across the county, has a policy of only hiring journalists with NCTJ qualifications. Although it is staffed by just two people – an editor and a writer, both of whom work on other aspects of the council’s communications strategy between issues – the salary scale for the former is £32,169-£36,912, while that for the latter is £36,615-£41,592.

Although Marinko (a former journalist) says he is against *Surrey Matters* directly competing with other local media in editorial terms, and has no intention of covering non-council stories, he argues that local authorities have a responsibility to council taxpayers to give them value for money – and branching out into more commercial activities, including their own publications, can be part of that:

“In Surrey, 80 per cent of the services we provide come from local taxation because we get a very small grant settlement. This means there’s a real pressure on our council tax. If you want to keep council tax down, there’s lots of pressure on our services. Therefore the council is focused on being much more commercially minded and getting the best possible deal for local taxpayers.

“There are certain things we have to communicate to local residents, and there are certain things we think local residents benefit from. It’s not for us to just tell people how great Surrey County Council is, but at the same time we need to

make sure we get certain information out to them, and in doing so give them the best value for money. So we are taking advertising revenue.”

Freedom of Information Act request results

Replies received from the councils who were sent Fol requests presented a mixed picture in relation to the costs of their publication operations (Appendix 2). However, it was quickly confirmed that average starting salaries for journalists employed to write them are in the range of £30,000. Tower Hamlets Borough Council revealed that reporters' starting salaries as of March 2010 were £31,152. Average starting salaries on the *H&F News*, depending on the levels at which journalists are employed, are even higher, at £33,994. Hammersmith and Fulham's reply to its Fol request added that the paper's advertising income had risen fivefold between 2006-7 and 2008-9 – soaring from £86,681 to £431,711.

At time of writing, the Fol request sent to councils with elected mayors had produced only a handful of replies, but all but one respondents confirmed that they were employing political assistants under the terms of the LGA2000. Approaches appear to differ widely, though. Middlesbrough Council has adopted the egalitarian approach of allowing each of the main political groupings – Labour, Conservative, and the Middlesbrough Independent Members Association – to employ a single assistant at a cost of between £27,052 and £28,636. In contrast, Watford Borough Council employs just a single political assistant to represent the authority as a whole – on a salary of £51,793.

Conclusion: towards some positive developments

This paper has argued that local authority accountability in England and Wales is being jeopardised – primarily because of a succession of recent changes to the ways in which councils conduct their business. It has cited both primary and secondary evidence to support the argument that council decision-making in many areas – notably those operating under post-2000 and post-2007 executive arrangements - is more secretive today than in the past, and to demonstrate the genuine threat some commercial newspapers are facing as a result of the competitive recruitment, advertising, and editorial policies adopted by a new generation of professionally produced, council-funded publications.

However, it would be wrong to suggest there is no cause for optimism for the provincial press as it emerges, battered, from the deepest post-war recession. All manner of new initiatives are currently under way to ensure that thorough and objective reporting of council-related matters continues into the future. These include everything from hyper-local news sites - some staffed by enthusiastic amateurs, others by professional freelancers – to PA's impending launch with Trinity Mirror of a new local authority reporting scheme, initially in two pilot areas. Meanwhile, the National Union of Journalists passed a motion in November 2009 calling on its national executive committee to lobby for an amendment to the LGA2000 enabling councils to help fund independent news organisations (Oliver, 7 July 2009). And some local newspaper executives –

including one surveyed for this paper – are trying other strategies, including distributing their local authority’s free-sheets inside their own paid-for titles.

In the meantime, faced with ever tighter editorial budgets, some papers have already been finding imaginative ways of covering council meetings without the need to send a reporter to them in person. As Anderson explains:

“Live webcams of council meetings, Twitter and blogging are also changing the way council news is reported. So local papers continue to cover council news and scrutinise council decisions but not necessarily in the same way as before.”

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Additional research: Sarah Fitzmaurice and Daniel Macadam

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire for local newspapers

1. Does your newspaper employ a dedicated local government reporter/correspondent? If so, please outline the role of this reporter. If not, has the paper ever had a local government reporter/correspondent, and if so when and why did it cease to have one?
2. Does your newspaper still routinely staff full council meetings of your main local authority/authorities? If not, why not?
3. Does your newspaper still routinely staff meetings of your local authority's/authorities' main committees (planning, social services, etc)? If not, why not?
4. What other forms of coverage do you give to the business of your local authority/authorities? How much space, on average, in a given week do you give over to council-related stories – and how does this compare to, say, five or ten years ago?
5. What has been the impact of the changes introduced since the Local Government Act 2000 (e.g. introduction of cabinets/executives, directly elected mayors, reduced role of full council meetings) on your coverage of local authority affairs/your interest in local government meetings?
6. Do you have any opinion on the impact of the LGA2000 and its effect on transparency/media coverage on local democracy? Please explain.

Appendix 2 – Freedom of Information Act request 1 (for all local authorities)

1. Does your local authority publish its own newspaper or magazine, and if so how much does it spend annually on producing this publication?
2. How many members of staff are employed to write and edit the newspaper/magazine?
3. What is the range of annual salaries for employees who write/edit your newspaper/magazine, and what is the average starting salary?
4. Does your authority hold its Executive/Cabinet meetings in public?

Appendix 3 – Freedom of Information Act request 2 (for mayoral councils)

1. Does your local authority employ political assistants/special advisors? If so, how many are currently on its staff (for 2009-10)?
2. If political assistants are employed, how many of them are employed directly by the authority itself?
3. How many (if any) are political appointees employed by particular parties or councillors? How many are employed by each party present on the authority? Please specify numbers for each.
4. What is the annual cost of employing any political assistants on the authority's staff (as of 2009-10)?
5. For how long has the authority employed political assistants?

