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The Passive Journalist: how sources dominate local news

Introduction

Sources, as Leon Sigal has stated (1986), make the news. “Who the sources are bear a close relationship to who is news.” (Sigal, 1986: 25).

“The effects of the way the reporter gathers information and the dynamics of the reporter-source relationship may be unintended, often unperceived, and sometimes unpredictable. Nevertheless they are real and a part of the power and influence of the press.” (Strentz, 1989: 22)

This article seeks to find out what primary sources are defining or ‘making’ local news and if sufficient secondary sources are being used to validate a story or provide alternative views. It provides an empirical record of which sources are dominating news coverage, and from which future trends in local journalism can be measured.

Exploring sources

Ask any journalist, and they would probably agree that sources are everywhere. Harcup (2004: 46) lists 72 common sources of news. Sources – the people, places and organisations from whom stories originate and to whom a journalist turns to verify stories - are at the heart of news selection and production. But Bell (1991) notes that research shows that in practice journalists use a relatively narrow range of sources, favouring authoritative sources and marginalising alternative sources such as the socially disadvantaged. Journalists cannot be in all places at all times and in his study of the routinization of news, Gans (1980) recognised that, with deadlines to meet, journalists’ over-riding concern is to assess the *efficiency* of news sources. Thus, the journalists will assess the past suitability, productivity, reliability, trustworthiness, authoritative nature and articulateness of possible sources in making source choices, increasing the likelihood that “journalists are repeatedly brought into contact with a limited number of the same sources” (Gans, 1980: 144).

Newspapers have a paradoxical role in that they exist to make profit, yet the information they provide is central to the notion of democracy. “In the ideal model of the modern capitalist liberal democracy, ‘free’ and ‘independent’ news media are usually regarded as playing an important part in maintaining the flow of ideas and information upon which choices are made” (Manning, 2001:1).

Therefore research into sources can shed light on the quality of information, the diversity of perspectives and the interpretative frameworks on offer to the news consumer. Which sources are favoured and how they are used goes to the heart of the debate about power relationships in society, since sources given news access have an opportunity to set the news agenda, define the parameters of debate, and shape ideology. For Hall, certain sources become primary definers in media narratives, permitting them to establish a primary interpretation of events, setting the terms of reference and providing a “systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions” (Hall *et al*, 1978: 58).

For Gans (1980), the journalism-source relationship is a “tug of war”, with sources attempting to manage the news in order to receive favourable coverage, and journalists seeking to manage sources, in order to obtain relevant information. But it is nevertheless true that this seemingly adversarial relationship is far more cosy than many journalists would like to admit.

Sources need reporters and reporters need sources in what could be described as a symbiotic relationship. A 1964 study by Walter Gieber into local news found that journalists, despite believing themselves to be freely acting agents, finding and investigating their own stories, rarely behaved independently of their sources; instead they obtained stories from sources who stood to benefit from the transaction as much as the journalist.

The potentially mutual benefits of this journalism-source relationship is not problematic if it does not affect the journalist’s ability to act in the public interest. The degree to which a journalist can discharge this duty, however, will involve going beyond initial source information – routine, official, authoritative or otherwise - to verify and check facts by using other sources. This may necessarily entail adversarial, independent and investigative journalism, which Sigal (1973) termed enterprise methods, and which require time and resources.

When these are at a premium, commonsense dictates that journalists will turn to those sources which are eager to provide information and that these, in turn, will become regular sources (Gans, 1980). Efficient sources can take this a step further: studies of news values have identified the production of ready-made copy as significantly increasing the chance of a story being selected by journalists (Bell, 1991; Allern, 2002). Thus journalism has entered into an unholy alliance with the public relations industry.

As a profession, public relations has been developing throughout the 20th century but has rapidly expanded in the last 20 years (Davis, 2003: 28). Many books and academic studies have charted its rise in the field of political communication – in particular, how news is packaged and spun to journalists (Franklin, 1994; Jones, 1995, 1999; Barnett and Gaber, 2001). The number of information officers employed by the Central Office of Information increased from 36 in 1979 to 160 in 1996, while employment of information officers in many Whitehall departments has more than doubled (Davis, 2003: 28).

But to concentrate on political communication is to ignore the wider use of public relations by a huge range of corporations, institutions and special interest groups; it has become the norm for businesses, charities and public institutions, such as the police or health service, to use PR.

“Journalists face a vast world of parajournalists – public relations firms, public information officers, political spin doctors, and the publicity staffs of a wide variety of institutions, both corporate and nonprofit.”

(Schudson, 2003: 3)

Writing in the *Independent*, Brian Appleyard has described the elevation of the public relations professional in the hierarchy of credibility of sources.

“They [PR professionals] establish their position as powerful middle-men, brokers of stories. What they tell the journalist may not be true or it may be so tendentious as to be untrue in effect and, either way, it will be known to be serving a cause. Yet it will probably not be checked because of the strange authority of the source – an authority that arises not from truth but from his known centrality within the system.”

(Appleyard, 11 February 1993)

Some studies have concluded that PR has a role to play in the democratic process, providing journalists with a professional service that can explain complex issues, provide a constant flow of vital information (McNair, 2000) or provide a platform for alternative voices, such as trade unions or environmental groups (Anderson, 1997; Davis, 1998, 2002; Manning 1998, 2001; Palmer, 2000) – though a more recent study of a union’s media relations and press coverage casts some doubt on this (O’Neill, 2007). But however one views the role of PR and its relationship with journalism, it remains the case that journalists and public relations professionals “are working to different agendas” (Harcup, 2004: 25). As George Pitcher has pointed out, the professional communications industry “lacks the public interest imperative” (Pitcher, 2003: 205).

In the same way that national news and the national public sphere is influenced by sources, regional press sources can shape the local news agenda and local public sphere. Local newspapers have traditionally played a significant role in recording local public life and promoting local democracy. “Local newspapers should offer independent and critical commentary on local issues, make local elites accountable [and] provide a forum for the expression of local views on issues of community concern” (Franklin, 2006, xix). To what extent are they discharging these duties? One approach is to examine the sources used in local papers. Research into which sources are routinely used can help shed light on the diversity of voices and perspectives that are contributing to the public sphere.

In one study of news sources in the local press in the Midlands, Karen Ross found that elite male sources dominated in terms of the absolute numbers of female and male sources in a ratio of 1:2, similar findings to findings in national newspapers (Ross, 2006: 242). A more detailed analysis found that female sources were over-represented in education and as spokespeople for the charitable and voluntary sector, while male voices dominated in business and the police and as councillors, to a degree that did not correspond to the numbers of men and women working in these areas. Thus, an examination of sources is a reflection of whose interpretations of society news consumers receive.

But a study of news sources needs some discussion about wider trends in regional papers, particularly managerial strategies, since these have a “critical impact” on newsgathering and reporting processes (Franklin, 2006: 10). As Jerry Palmer noted, “Source behaviour is subject to the filtering norms of journalistic selection and interpretation.” (Palmer, 2000: 10). But journalists can carry out their professional duties to a high standard only insofar as they have sufficient resources and time.

Changes in local journalism

In recent years, local newspapers have had to face the challenges of changing patterns of newspaper consumption and changing communities whose inhabitants may be more transitory than in the past (Aldridge, 2003). Yet the number of titles in circulation have risen and regional newspapers have maintained high levels of profitability (Franklin, 2006: 3), profit margins which are higher than comparable industries (William and Franklin, 2007). Despite operating in a highly competitive marketplace driven by new technological changes, conglomeration, deregulation, competition from freesheets and declining numbers of readers (Curran and Seaton, 1997; Davis 2003; Franklin, 1997; Tunstall, 1996, Williams and Franklin, 2007), newspapers' managements have squared the circle by lowering wages, shedding staff, while simultaneously increasing output, including online content (Murphy, 1998; Williams and Franklin, 2007). Softer, lifestyle journalism has been promoted (Franklin, 1997) at the expense of costly investigative, hard news, which attracts less advertising, and is therefore less appealing an investment for news organisations. Local papers have emulated the style of national papers, with more national news, features and celebrity content (Glover, 1998, Franklin, 2006). Trends in ownership are towards monopoly (Murphy, 1998, Williams and Franklin, 2007), with three major media groups – Trinity Mirror, Newsquest Media Group and Johnston Press - dominating the local newspaper sector, removed from local communities and responsible to shareholders. Despite technology savings, journalists' workloads have increased (Davis, 2003; Pilling, 1998; William and Franklin, 2007); the time to speak to contacts, nurture sources, become familiar with a 'patch' and uncover and follow up leads has become a luxury (Pecke, 2004: 30).

Now largely a graduate profession with a mobile workforce, local journalists are less likely to be from the locality, rooted in local communities. With newspapers having abandoned sufficient investment in training, many new reporters will have paid for their own training, so that, combined with low salaries, journalism is increasingly an industry that only the well-off, not necessarily the best, can afford to enter. The upshot is less loyalty to a paper or an area, and a high turnover of staff, all of which militate against journalists really getting to know a locality and its community.

Editing is becoming centralised, particularly on weeklies, with editors and subs largely based at the parent offices in a different town, bringing deadlines forward and removing these staff further from contact with the communities and readers they are supposed to serve, including the possibilities of the 'exclusive' stories that readers often bring in (Franklin, 2006: 11).

Questioned about falling standards, trainee journalists "pointed to the age-old problems of low pay, poor working conditions, the complete absence of training, long hours, understaffed newsrooms, and a managerial emphasis on quantity not quality". (Pecke, 2004: 27). And Pilling (1998: 184) has likened local papers' newsrooms to "sweatshops". In such a pressurised and demoralised working environment it is all too easy for journalists to become dependent on the pre-fabricated, pre-packaged 'news' from resource-rich public relations organisations or the familiar and easily accessed routine source or re-writes of news agency copy - what BBC journalist

Waseem Zakir coined as 'churnalism' (Harcup, 2004: 3-4). As staffing levels fall, news agencies, particularly the Press Association, fill a substantial gap, and with large news agencies such as Reuters and PA dominating the supply of news, concerns have been raised about the uniformity of news (Aspinall, 2005). While Hamer (2006) believes that news agencies can serve the democratic process, particularly in providing coverage of the courts when many papers can no longer spare a full-time journalist for this patch, journalists with a unique knowledge of their papers' communities and readerships are no longer in the driving seat, with an inevitable effect on the quality and uniqueness of what is reported. All these trends mean that "local newspapers are increasingly a business success but a journalistic failure" (Franklin, 2006: 4).

The passive journalist?

In her study of gender bias in local news sources, Ross concluded, "This bias in source selection makes clear the news media's considerable gatekeeping function in determining both content and perspective of news stories" (Ross, 2006: 243). Within the parameters of her study it hard to disagree with this, but set within a wider context of a media bombarded with public relations copy and an under-resourced local newspaper industry (Williams and Franklin, 2007), questions can be raised about the degree to which local journalists can be held accountable for this gatekeeping function and subsequent news agenda.

In this study, we set out to examine the types of primary and secondary sources used in a sample of local newspapers, as well the percentage of articles using secondary sources to provide an additional or alternative viewpoint. In other words, we wished to know the extent to which *sources* were influencing the selection and production of news and rendering as passive the role of the local journalist, with the subsequent implications for the quality of local reporting, and the public interest.

Methodology

The type and number of sources used in news stories in four daily West Yorkshire papers, representing the three main proprietors of local newspapers in the UK, have been examined and recorded over a period of a month (February 2007). These are the *Halifax Courier*, owned by Johnston Press, the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, owned by Trinity Mirror, the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, owned by Newsquest, and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, also owned by Johnston Press.

In particular, we recorded primary sources, from which the main substance of an article was sourced. Thus, we were not categorising those quoted, but what we judged to be the main source of a story. This proved relatively easy to judge in most instances, though we must include a 'health warning' that any decisions about categorisation necessitates some degree of subjectivity. Any stories where the source was unclear we categorised as 'other'. We also recorded which stories used one source and which used secondary sources.

Features, opinion pieces, and News in Briefs (which due to their very brevity tend to have to rely on one source), sports and business news were not included in the study,

nor pages devoted entirely to photos of people involved in staged events (though these were when they appeared among other news reports on the news pages).

Findings

Table 1

Main sources used in news stories in local papers (rounded up to nearest whole %)* (2979 articles)	Halifax Courier %	Huddersfield Examiner %	Bradford Telegraph and Argus %	Yorkshire Evening Post %	TOTAL %
1. Police	12	<11	<11	< 10	11
2. Court	>14	<7	>12	>11	>11
3. Local government	>10	>10	>10	>9	<9
4. Organisers of/participants in staged Events**	>3	<6	<11	>13	>9
5. Charity	<6	<5	7	>4	>7
6. Education	>13	<4	>4	>7	>6
7. Commercial	>6	10	<2	5	>6
8. Culture (arts, music, exhibitions, museums)	5	<4	>5	>7	<5
9. Public bodies	<3	>7	<5	>4	<5
10. Readers	>3	3	<6	>7	>5
11. Action groups	>4	>4	>2	>3	>3
12. Fire service	3	>4	<2	>1	<2
13. Councillors	<1	3	<2	>1	<2
14. Health service	<1	<1	<2	>2	>2
15. MPs	<1	>2	<2	<1	>2
16. National government	>1	2	<2	<1	>2
OTHER**					13

*excluding News in Briefs, features, opinion pieces, sports and business pages.

**‘Other’ sources include unions, armed forces, religious organisations, accountancy firms (where companies had gone into receivership), public meetings (non-council), stories emanating from the newspaper itself (such as new online services or the launch of a campaign), follow-ups to national stories, professional bodies – all of which were less than 1% of total sources used - and articles where the source was not apparent.

Table 2

% articles from each source category using Secondary Sources:	Halifax Courier %	Huddersfield Examiner %	Bradford Telegraph and Argus %	Yorkshire Evening Post %	TOTAL %
1. Police	21	11	27	22	20
2. Court	12	15	9	14	<12
3. Local government	36	9	46	26	29
4. Organisers of/participants in staged Events***	14	2	16	21	15
5. Charity	>6	<4	20	>25	13
6. Education	>12	10	55	45	>28
7. Commercial	23	8	25	21	<15
8. Culture (arts, music, exhibitions, museums)	7	>12	<12	>12	11
9. Public bodies	<29	9	>28	<17	19
10. Readers	47	54	51	70	>59
11. Action groups	30	33	50	45	<38
12. Fire service	<8	>1	14	0	<8
13. Councillors	38	25	44	17	>33
14. Health service	25	10	42	50	29
15. MPs	43	27	33	20	30
16. National government	0	19	81	50	50

Table 3

	Halifax Courier	Huddersfield Examiner	Bradford Telegraph and Argus	Yorkshire Evening Post	Total
% Use of Secondary Sources	21	>14	31	<27	>24
% Use of ONE source	79	<86	69	>73	<76

Events***

These are, in effect, pseudo-events. They have not occurred spontaneously, but have been ‘staged’ in some way. Some are rather inconsequential, little more than a photo opportunity (for example, ‘Keen gardeners learn tricks of the trade’, *Halifax Courier* 28 February 2007), while others may have a more serious public interest role EXAMPLE. The vast majority were of the former type and were sourced from one person or organisation (85%, see *Table 2*). Note that some other categories include staged events, such as school events and charity events. The main ‘Event’ category denotes events that cannot be easily categorised into these other sources. However, when all pre-planned, staged ‘events’ are added together (whether from education, charity, arts or other sources), 22% - more than one fifth – of all articles are sourced from notices or reports about these, and overwhelmingly rely on **one** source (89%).

Discussion of Results

Local journalism is about producing papers of record, so one would expect routine sources such as the council or courts to have a strong presence within any local paper (*Table 1*), despite an overall decline in such coverage in recent years (Glover, 1998; Pilling, 1998), or that the police account for most articles, since local crime is a real concern for local readers.. The issue here, however, is how far the balance has tipped in favour of sources, and, with the findings revealing a high proportion of articles (76%) relying on just *one* source, sources would appear to be in a relatively strong position to influence the subsequent framing of articles in most of the news.

“People who are routine sources for the press are also more likely to be favourably portrayed in the news.” (Sigal, 1986: 28). A number of factors no doubt play a role in this. Journalists, particularly on a local patch, cannot afford to offend or annoy a major and regular source of news without risk of losing access to that source or advertising revenue. Close working relationships and friendships with regular contacts may also cloud a journalist’s judgment.

However, our findings suggest a more prosaic reason: that a reliance on single sources for stories, probably due to a shortage of time and resources – sources now adept in the skills of presenting a positive public image - is probably the greatest contributory factor to uncritical reporting. The 76% of stories using single sources were rarely contentious (at least in the way they were written) or critical of the source providing the story. “When there is only one source of information...that the media want, then the potential to manage that information is absolute.” (Hitchens [1997] in Harrison, 1998: 166). This seriously undermines the *trust* that the public can place in information from local papers.

Of the 24% of articles with a secondary source, most were still framed by a primary source, with a brief alternative quote added at the end. What this means in practice is a formulaic style, superficially giving the appearance of ‘objective news’, but which fails to get to the heart of the issue, or misses the real story. There was little evidence of the sifting of conflicting information or contextualising that assists readers’ understanding and makes for good journalism (Williams, 2007).

In addition, ‘events’, charity, commerce and culture sources – hardly the stuff of hard news - were in the top ten categories (*Table 1*), forming stories with the lowest rates of secondary sources (*Table 2*).

Differences between papers

The number of news pages to fill and staffing levels *did* appear to have an effect on the number of secondary sources used, and thus on subsequent standards. The *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, with x pages and x journalists, did tend to explore certain stories in more detail and avoid this formulaic style more often than, for instance, the *Huddersfield Examiner*, with an average of 17 pages and 11 newsroom staff. Overall, the *Huddersfield Examiner*, owned by Trinity Mirror, had the lowest percentage of articles with secondary sources (>14%, *Table 3*). The percentage of secondary sources in the *Courier* would have been higher but for the fact that it had a tendency to fill news pages with photos and captions of school events, with limited news value and, by their bland and banal nature, not requiring secondary sources. The *Examiner* also provided many of these fillers, but did not put them within the main news pages, instead having a round-up on two separate pages, dedicated to photos and captions, meaning that they were not counted as ‘news’, since the paper was not passing them off as news. The T&A consistently used more sources, and the reasons could be [*T&A and YEP?- T&A the highest use of sec. sources. Reasons???*]

Local Government Reporting

This study found that almost two thirds (61%) of local government sourced stories (one of the main routine source categories) had *no* secondary sources. When

compared with a 1988 study of local papers where ‘information subsidies’ from government information officers did *not* [our emphasis] constitute the main source of information in resulting coverage (Franklin and Van Slyke Turk [1988] in Harrison, 1998: 157), the situation would appear to have deteriorated, leading to a democratic deficit in local government reporting. This has a profound impact on the public interest and the fourth estate role of the regional press. A story such as ‘Council as good as any in West Yorkshire’ (*Halifax Courier*, 22 February 2007) simply cries out for more investigation using alternative sources and views, either within the story, or as a follow-up story, but this was singularly lacking.

While it formed one of the main source categories, given the potential effects of local government on local communities, it is surprising that only 9% of articles were sourced by the council. The decline in local government reporting has often been laid at the door of readers, who, editors argue, are not very interested in public life (Pilling, 1998). However, it could be argued that, rather than ignoring many of the stories that emanate from local government due to a perceived lack of audience interest, more investigative journalism and engagement with readers would uncover interesting and highly relevant stories relating to local political decisions and local services. The shift in power from local government to central government or to unelected public bodies may play a part in this trend, but, nevertheless, it is still important to report about the effects of policies and plans on local communities, whoever is responsible. Indeed, with more unelected bodies taking over such decisions, it could be argued that the need for the local media’s watchdog role has never been greater. Glover has identified decreasing coverage of local issues, particularly local government, as central to accelerating sales decline. “[Local] newspapers seemed to have forgotten what they do well and diverted limited resources into what they do less well.” (1998: 119).

This state of affairs has been compounded by the fact that local government has become adept at media relations. By 1994, 90% of metropolitan local authorities had established PR departments, employing 2,000 full-time staff (Franklin, 1994: 7). By 2005, all local authorities had some professional media relations function (Harrison, 2006: 177). Today’s journalists are far more likely to have deal with press or communications officers than senior council staff. These PR professional are not merely benign conduits of information – they are employed to put a positive spin on the information they provide and attract publicity for those issues the council want highlighting, while downplaying those the council do not. “It is widely accepted that councils must manage the media by taking the good news to them” (Communications officer cited in Harrison, 2006: 180). Some may, in effect, act as barriers to information and the truth. Information emanating from such sources will have already been through a selection and treatment stage within the internal confines of the organisation before being passed to journalists. According to Franklin, local government public relations professionals are crucial in setting the local media agenda and their influence constitutes a “fifth estate”. (Franklin, 1994: 116). Writing about local government reporting in 1988, Shirley Harrison has said:

‘Local newspapers are ceasing to fulfil their former role as guardians of the truth, and keepers of the public record. Their journalists, in many cases hard pressed, de-unionised, demoralised and poorly paid, are increasingly reliant on

press releases and promotional material provided for them by vested interests.’ (Harrison, 1998: 167).

In her updated study of this issue, Harrison (2006) concluded that the information subsidy is great but that communications or press officers believed that credibility of council information was enhanced by its communication through a third party such as the local media. But our findings suggest that with nearly two thirds of local government related stories using a single primary council source, and with most of these articles being positive or neutral, that the credibility of local newspapers as an independent commentator must be questioned.

Crime Reporting

Two of the other main sources for stories were the police (11%) and courts (11%), in keeping with the key role of the regional press in reporting crime. But overall this, too, has been decreasing in recent years (Glover, 1998; Pilling, 1998). Many newspapers no longer employ specialist court reporters to cover the courts directly. The *Huddersfield Examiner*, for example, with the lowest amount of court reporting (<7%), employs an agency to provide this coverage. “...the financial imperatives of corporate ownership are limiting papers’ capacity even to pursue reliable news sources like court proceedings” (Aldridge, 2003: 499). Just 12% of articles sourced from the courts provided secondary sources.

In line with other major institutions, the police also now have highly developed media relations. For example, between 1979 and 2001, the number of information officers employed by the Metropolitan Police increased by 983%, (from 6 to 65) (Davis, 2003: 30). Journalists can now expect to interview a media relations professional when covering crime, losing out on the opportunity to directly question relevant senior investigating officers who can provide essential background details. And stories sourced by the police used secondary sources in only 20% of cases, indicating news from this source is primarily being shaped by this source. “We’re not going out and challenging people like the police and local council.” (Editor quoted in Williams and Franklin, 2007: 17).

Commerce

Commercial sources are also regularly used. The business and commercial life of a local community is highly relevant to readers in terms of the local economy and jobs. However, most of the stories that appeared as a result of commercial sources referred to *no* secondary source (85%) and the stories included were banal, non-contentious, and provided free publicity for commercial enterprises. A typical story would be based on a ‘survey’ such as ‘Workers at milestone after seven months’ (*Huddersfield Examiner*, 28 February 2007), a survey of office workers of little consequence but which fills a gap and obtains free advertising for recruitment firm Office Angels. Or the Aire Group’s ‘Pubshelta’ which will be sold to ‘help pubs survive the smoking ban’ (‘Firm’s special shelter for smokers’, *Huddersfield Examiner*, 26 February 2007). Or the page lead and accompanying large photo about a hypnotherapist in the run-up to Valentine’s Day who was handing out roses to promote his confidence boosting services (‘Help at hand for the town’s shy and lonely’, *Huddersfield Examiner*, 2 February 2007) who was receiving his own free helping hand from the paper.

And Catherine's example – farm.

Health service

Surprisingly, given the problems it has been experiencing lately, just 49 articles out of 2979 appeared to be directly sourced from the health service itself, (though the number of stories about the health service was higher, though likely to be sourced from the public who were victims of or complainants about the standard of care). It is worth noting that only 15 of these 49 stories had a secondary source (29%) and this was as low as 10% for the *Huddersfield Examiner*.

Education

Education sources were dominated by schools, and were primarily from organisers of school 'events', such as a healthy eating day, or story-telling session, usually accompanied by appealing photos of primary school children, with the 'story' little more than a caption. Most articles were positive. In-depth articles about the education service were singularly lacking. Only 28% of articles had secondary sources, and often these were merely another voice involved in the organisation of the event or congratulating the school. University and college stories were similar in style, usually publicising success or a new course or partnership. While these types of articles no doubt have a place in the local paper, it was hard to believe that national debates and policies such as concerns about city academies, the Building Schools for the Future initiative, PFI, the shortage of head teachers, education standards and the testing of young children were not impacting on local communities. It is true that the press has sometimes been criticised for dwelling on the negative and amplifying fears and problems, but the other extreme presents just as false an impression and doesn't engage with the very real concerns of parents, young people, and those working in education.

Events and charities

Nearly a quarter of reports (22%) stem from Events of some sort (general events, listed in *Table 1*, school events, charity events, arts events - included in education, charity and culture categories but noted by us separately) and the vast majority of these had no secondary source (89%), indicating a reliance on the information provided in full. While we would not expect many of these types of stories to have secondary sources, the point is that these stories are helping fill up a quarter of the news space at the expense of what may well be more important stories. Many of these 'articles' would not have been elevated to news in the past, merely appearing in 'What's On' listings.

Ross's study of Midlands papers in 2005 found 5% of stories emanating from charity sources. We found that this figure nearly 7% and the fifth main source category.

The voice of the local public?

Readers were sources in just 5% of articles. This compares unfavourably with Ross's findings in 2005 of 12%, indicating that journalists appear to be increasingly out of touch with their readers. 'If the local press is to continue to call itself 'local' in any meaningful way, it probably needs to work a bit harder to more genuinely reflect the views and interests of local communities back to themselves.'" (Ross, 2006: 243).

This was also the main primary source category followed up by secondary sources (59%) followed by Action Groups (38%). This begs the question: What is it about other sources that mean they do not warrant the same treatment by journalists? Are these other sources, such as the police or commerce, often with vested interests, really so credible, or providing the fullest possible picture?

Newsworthy stories?

Aldridge has argued that “regional newspapers should have little difficulty in addressing multiple dimensions of readers’ and potential readers’ lives: for most people, their home, employment, at least some of their kin network, their friendships, their consumption of essential and optional goods and services, and their leisure are largely geographically co-terminous.” (Aldridge, 2003: 497). With a little imagination and some curiosity, journalists should be able to mine a rich seam of stories relevant to local communities. It was ironic, then, that in this study we found page after page of stories that were bland and banal. Tired and easily sourced stories were repeatedly given prominence, such as charity events and school pictures with captions (for example, a third of a broadsheet page devoted to schoolchildren who were given tips on keeping germs at bay: ‘Happy Hands beat germs!’, *Halifax Courier*, 1 February 2007).

While most of these ‘soft’ stories have a place in a local paper, the issue is the frequency with which they are included and their elevation beyond their newsworthiness in terms of prominence and space. Whether ‘the war on chewing gum...being taken into the classroom’ merits taking up most of a tabloid-size page (*Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 21 February 2007) or a whole page (also in the *Examiner*) devoted to a couple getting married after meeting in a local pub (despite it being 14 February) is highly debatable.

The ‘tabloid’ agenda was also prominent in articles such as ‘Hot stuff Shahid now officially fanciable’ (*Huddersfield Examiner*, 17 February 2007), reporting a Sky News poll that named Dewsbury MP Shahid Malik as the second most fanciable male MP, a lead story taking up most of a page. Other examples of this include a page lead in the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* on a shoe exhibition (date) and a spread in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* detailing a Barbara Hepworth exhibition in the House of Commons (date), despite the fact that most *YEP* readers live 200 miles away.

These examples and our findings in general reveal a ‘never-mind-the-quality, feel-the-width’ approach to filling news pages. Questions must be raised about what perspectives, what views, what facts, what *real* stories are being missed.

Within the context of a sustained lack of investment, the blame cannot be laid at the door of journalists, but on management short-termism. But whatever the reasons, the end result is a journalistic passivity that allows for the domination of sources’ agendas, a lack of investigative journalism and the elevation of weak, ‘soft’ stories that squeeze out those of real worth. Put bluntly, local newspaper readers are being short-changed when it comes to lively, informative and engaging stories about issues that may profoundly affect them and their local communities. “Even if UK regional newspapers have tended to exaggerate their ‘fourth estate’ function, they still occupy a unique place in the local public sphere, with a real capacity to influence the terms of popular debate.” (Aldridge, 2003: 506). This passivity is leading to the erosion of

journalistic standards and the local public sphere, and an abdication of the public interest role of journalism. “Contemporary low-paid journalists working on short-staffed and under-resourced local newspapers are less likely to be ‘attacking’ than ‘supping with the devil’.” (Franklin, 2006: 13).

Conclusion

The combination of the pressures on journalists and increased expertise in organisations’ media relations that has brought about these findings has a number of implications for journalists, readers and the public. First, journalists are becoming more passive, often merely passing on information to the public that they have been given. The local journalist’s role as the gatekeeper in the news selection and production process (White 1950, Gandy Jr, 1980) is diminishing and shifting towards the source, often a public relations professional, who selects and packages news within the internal confines of their organisations before external presentation to journalists. Much news production must therefore be re-conceptualised as undergoing two gatekeeping stages, first by the source and then by the journalist. If at this first stage, gatekeeping decisions are likely to be based on finding positive stories, at the second stage, a guiding principle appears to be ease of use rather than intrinsic newsworthiness.

As a passive recipient of information rather than an active investigator, the journalist is not keeping their ear to the ground and interacting with the local community. Journalists are relying less on their readers for news (less than 5% of all primary sources were readers), and are consequently less in touch with a broad cross-section of their readers on a regular basis. “[Journalists are] not actually out there connecting with the community” (Editor quoted in Williams and Franklin, 2007: 17). This passivity also leads to an over-reliance on single sources, excluding certain views and issues relevant to the readership, and allowing routine sources to dominate the news agenda and frame subsequent stories.

While many of the news stories sourced in this study probably do have a place in a local paper, stories which have little weight are being elevated to significant positions, or are filling up news pages at the expense of more important stories that, put simply, are being missed. The result is often bland, banal copy at best, and free advertising and propaganda at worst. All these trends are a serious threat to local democracy, the public interest, public trust, the local public sphere, and standards of journalism.

By wringing out every last drop of profit, the owners of regional papers are producing newspapers that reveal contempt for their readers. Declining sales, a threat to the long-term health and survival of the local press, can only be blamed on new media competition and changing readerships up to a point. While editors preach the virtues of interactivity with communities, parent companies pursue policies and profits that serve to undermine contact with the public and journalistic endeavour and enterprise. The real reason readers are deserting their local papers is likely to be because there is precious little in it that is engaging, trustworthy, or that reflects the genuine concerns of local communities and gives local people a voice. Unless the local press improves standards of journalism, the health of local papers will continue to decline.

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