THE PRESS AND ENGLISH LOCAL AUTHORITIES.

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CHAPTER 1.

THE NEWSPAPERS' CAMPAIGN FOR RIGHTS.

For over a century the Press has been engaged on a battle for certain rights and facilities which it considers necessary to the reporting of local government. Some of these rights, like that of attending council meetings, secure for the journalist opportunities to obtain news and information: others, like the defence of qualified privilege in libel actions, secure a right to print and publish it. In both aspects of the problem the Press still feels that it has a grievance, and the controversy persists.

The attendance of newspaper reporters at meetings of local councils in the nineteenth century was widespread, and reports of such meetings were a basic constituent of the provincial press. (1) Indeed, a general right of reporters to attend council meetings was understood by legal

1. The Banbury Guardian was founded in 1838 as the Poor Law Guardian specifically to report the meetings of the Boards of Guardians.

authorities of the time.(1) So far as the Statutes were concerned, however, such a right of the public was only admitted in the case of the Parish Councils created in 1894(2); the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1902,(3) prohibited Irish local authorities from excluding the press without the sanction of the Local Government Board. There was therefore some surprise when in 1907 a High Court judgment(4) revealed that reporters had no right to attend the meetings of local authorities in England and Wales. The Corporation of the Borough of Tenby obtained a declaration that they were entitled to exclude from their meetings all or any persons who were not members of the

1. cf J.R.Fisher and J.A.Strahan, The Law of the Press, (2nd edition, 1898), p.78:

> 'The reporters of newspapers have the right, as members of the public, to attend all meetings of Town and County Councils and other bodies to which the public are admitted. There is no obligation on the authorities in charge to give facilities for reporting, but they cannot prevent any one doing so who wishes. Such bodies usually have standing orders enabling them to exclude the public during the whole or some portion of a meeting, but this gives them no authority for the partial exclusion of the public - for the admission of some and the exclusion of others, although attempts have been made under it to exclude reporters, or some individual reporters, while admitting others of the public ... ...forcibly to exclude or expel any reporter or reporters while admitting the rest of the public constitutes an assault.'

2. Local Government Act, 1894, First Schedule, Part 2 (13).

3. Section 15.

4. Tenby Corporation v Mason. The Times, 23rd. November 1907 and 22nd. January 1908.

Council. The defendant, Mason, was proprietor of the Tenby Observer, for which he also acted as a reporter. It was the council's practice to admit newspaper representatives to its meetings, but in consequence of a report of one in the Tenby Observer a resolution was passed that Mason "be informed that he will not be permitted to attend again personally as a reporter to his own paper until he proves himself to the satisfaction of the council to be a competent shorthand writer". In January 1908 the Court of Appeal upheld the judgement, the Master of the Rolls pointing out that the Municipal Corporations Act of 1882 did not confer a right of admission to meetings On either the (1) public or the burgesses.

There was an immediate reaction in the newspaper world, and the Institute of Journalists intimated that a Bill would be introduced into Parliament to enact for England and Wales the appropriate provisions of the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1902.(2) However, a rival body only established in 1907, the National Union of Journalists, acted more quickly, and began drafting a bill which the Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Mr. Arthur Henderson, agreed to sponsor.(3)

1. The Times, 22 January 1908.
2. The Times, 23 January 1908.
3. National Union of Journalists: Minutes of Executive Committee, 29 January 1908.

From then on it was the Institute of Journalists rather than the local government organisations which most strongly opposed the measure, which became a battleground between it and the National Union of Journalists. The Institute had hoped to include in its bill a definition of "journalist" based on its Charter of Incorporation, perhaps to the exclusion of non-members and at least without recognition of the infant N.U.J. The eventual passing of the bill was a serious blow to the Institute's prestige.(1)

In the Commons the support of the Liberal government guaranteed the Bill's success, although a number of amendments to it were accepted. Its most loquacious opponent was a Conservative, Sir Frederick Banbury, who, on his own confession, was "not much enamoured of local self-government",(2) and, according to his biographer held the view that there was "too much legislation" and "generally opposed bills proposed by private members".(3)

1. See remarks of Lord Courtney of Penwith (Parl.Deb. 4th. series Vol.192 col.423); Report of Annual Conference of Institute of Journalists (The Times, 3rd. September 1908); letter of W.N.Watts (ibid). Although the Institute had other objections to the Bill, these did not feature largely either in its public campaign or in the speeches of its parliamentary supporters.

2. Parl.Deb. (4th. series) Vol. 191, Col. 255.

3. E.I.Carlyle, in Dictionary of National Biography 1931-40 Supplement, p.38. Banbury, a railway director, was alleged to have obstructed an early local government superannuation bill in order to prevent discussion of the next business of the day, a bill to increase the liability for damage caused by sparks emitted from locomotives. (Spoor, White Collar Union: Sixty years of NALGO.)

Most of his amendments were of a trivial character, but he did secure that a simple rather than a two-thirds majority would suffice for a resolution to exclude the press,(1) and obtain the removal of a provision which was to feature in later legislation, that the clerk should send advance notice of meetings to newspapers.(2) One of his amendments which failed might have defeated the purpose of the bill by allowing local authorities to exclude individual reporters whose newspapers had published "offensive material" while continuing to admit representatives of rival papers:(3) it was discrimination, with its possibilities as a political weapon, which had most incensed the N.U.J. leaders. In the division lobby a combination of Liberals, Labour and Irish together with a longstanding friend of journalists from the Conservative benches, Lord Robert Cecil,(4) had a majority of 106.(5)

1. Section 1.

2. Parl.Deb. (4th. series) Vol.191 Col.265.

3. ibid col. 252.

4. Lord Robert Cecil was later the N.U.J. - sponsored leading counsel for the young Linton Andrews in the famous Sheffield "radius agreement" case.

5. Parl.Deb. (4th. series) Vol.191 Col.135 & Division List 139.

Although the Institute was vocally represented in the Lords by one of its honorary fellows, Lord Courtney of Penwith, it fared no better there. Lord Belper supported the Bill on behalf of the County Councils Association and the Marquess of Lansdowne spoke for the N.U.J.[1] The Duke of Northumberland, Chairman of Northumberland County Council, provided some acid opposition, holding that "discussions by local authorities are not generally of wide interest...until somebody forgets himself and says something that he ought not to say. That never happens in County councils, but sometimes in municipal borough councils one of the hon. members calls another hon. member a liar and there is a row. That is reported at the greatest length and that is the value of publicity." His view was that official reporters should prepare a 'Hansard' of the proceedings of local authorities.[2]

The Bill received the Royal Assent on 21 December 1908. The Press had secured, for the time being at least, the right to attend local authority meetings and a protection from discrimination. All the arguments which were to recur in later controversy on the same subject found a place in the debates. Admission of the press, it was said, would serve to

1. ibid Vol.192 Cols. 403-423.
2. ibid Col. 21.

emphasise the trivial rather than the important aspects of local government in the public mind; the public was in any case not interested in local government.(1) The reports would be inaccurate and unreliable. Certain responsibilities could not be discharged in public, like land purchase and the discipline of employees.(2) Experience had shown that the presence of reporters encouraged members to neglect the business for party speeches and political recriminations.(3) On the other side it was argued that the public had a right to know what the elected bodies were doing with the rates they collected, that newspapers were the best channel of this knowledge, and that their work was made impossible by local councils who could exclude reporters. The press was trustworthy, and the libel laws provided all necessary safeguards. The introduction of the press might improve rather than detract from the conduct of business, and where secrecy was necessary for the public interest the Bill made it possible. In any case, the Bill was only a restoring a situation which had been presumed to exist before the Tenby v Mason judgment and which had been expressly provided for in Ireland and in the Parish Councils already.

1. Ibid Col. 31.

2. cf Mr. Godfrey Baring, Ibid Vol.187. Col.237.

3. cf Viscount Morpeth, Ibid Col.245.

The year 1930 saw the first concerted attempt to extend the scope of the 1908 legislation: to this end Bills were introduced in the Commons (1) by Mr.J.Chuter Ede, an ex-journalist and a Surrey County Councillor, and in the Lords by Lord Askwith. (2) They sought to take account of the increasing use of the power of delegation to committees, as a result of which decisions could be taken which need not be considered in open council, as well as of the 1908 loophole by which councils could obtain secrecy by resolving themselves "into committee". Under Mr. Ede's Bill the press would be admitted to a committee meeting at which delegation powers were being exercised, while a meeting of committee consisting of all the members of an authority would be "deemed to be a meeting of the authority". Other important provisions sought to extend the 1908 provisions to Education committees set up under the 1921 Education Act, (3) the public assistance committees which had replaced

1. Session 1930-31 Bill 8.
In the previous session Mr. Ede had introduced a shorter Bill affecting public assistance committees and other committees exercising delegated powers (Session 1929-30 Bill 137); it failed to get a second reading.

2. With the support of the Newspaper Society (H.L.Deb (5th. series) Vol.79 Col.422)

3. 11 & 12 Geo. 5, c. 51.

the Boards of Guardians (1) (the latter had been open to the press under the 1908 Act, and the numerous joint committees which had come into existence in local government. Opposition to these moves was fierce, both in Parliament and out of it, and when Lord Strachie, a Vice-President of the County Council Association, rose in the House of Lords (2) to move that Lord Askwith's Bill be read for a second time "this day three months", he claimed to do so "on behalf of all the local authorities of England". In support of this claim he was able to quote a letter published by The Times, (3) and signed by the secretaries of the County Councils Association, the Association of Municipal Corporations, and the Urban and Rural District Councils Associations, who declared themselves firmly opposed to the Bill. The now familiar arguments were brought forward in the debates, the opposition (largely Conservative) pointing out that the work of the public assistance committees was particularly unsuited to publicity. There was, moreover, a spate of more specious arguments from some opponents of the Bills: in the letter to The Times it was suggested that the calculation of a two-thirds majority would be burdensome imposition on

1. Under the Local Government Act,1929 (19 & 20 Geo.5, c.17, sect.6.).

2. H.L.Deb. (Fifth series) Vol.79. Col.426.

3. The Times. 3 December 1930

chairmen and clerks, and F.E.Fremantle, a County Medical Officer, suggested in the Commons (1) that reporters, "hard enough worked already, during day and night" should not have this "extra work" imposed upon them. Neither Bill passed to the Statute Book, since the Lords accepted Lord Strachie's motion and in the Commons the economic and political crisis of 1931 ended the Bill's limited chance of success.

After the end of the war in 1945 the campaign to open committees to the press was renewed, and the protagonists sought to gain the support of two bodies set up at that time, the Ministry of Health Consultative Committee on Publicity for Local Government (1946-50) and the Royal Commission on the Press (1947-9). The Consultative Committee, which consisted largely of representatives of the local authority associations, made inquiries into the practice of local authorities with regard to the matter. (2) In its Interim Report it followed closely a statement issued by the Association of Municipal Corporations (which was quoted in full) to the effect that the 1908 Act was "adequate if it is observed in spirit as well as in letter." Practices like the taking of all discussion in committee with only a formal ratification

1. H.C.Deb. (Fifth series) Vol.245, Col.2624.

2. Ministry of Health Consultative Committee on Publicity for local Government, Interim Report, HMSO 1947.

in council were to be discouraged: council minutes and agenda should be made available to the press for comment before the meeting and no embargo imposed. Committees with delegated powers ought to be open to the press, and as much business should be taken in full Council as possible. The Committee felt that these steps ought to be undertaken voluntarily by local authorities rather than through legislation: the committee suggested that the local authority Associations should make recommendations to their members accordingly.(1)

Questions in Parliament taking up the Committee's Report received replies from Mr. Aneurin Bevan (Minister of Health) to the effect that the Government would take no action beyond publishing it: ".. the attention of local authorities will no doubt have been drawn to the report by the publicity it received and by their associations, who are represented on the committee."

The Royal Commission on the Press established in 1947 provided press and journalistic bodies with opportunities to ventilate their grievances about admission to meetings: the National Union of Journalists, the Institute of Journalists, the Guild of British Newspaper Editors, the Newspaper Society and the Newcastle Journal did so. The

1. The Committee's Final Report (HMSO, 1950) added nothing of substance to the interim conclusions on local authorities and the press.

Institute recorded that it had received "many complaints" about the behaviour of local councils,(1) and the newspaper Society alleged that some local authorities had "gone out of their way to find a means of defeating the intent" of the 1908 Act, taking "the whole of their operative business in general committee". Although there was a noticeable "hardening against the Press in a sprinkling of councils... conducted by a Labour majority" there were "complaints against local authorities of every political complexion or none".(2) The Guild of British Newspaper Editors presented to the Commission a survey of local authorities' practice together with numerous detailed examples of procedures to which they objected. They argued that the press should be admitted to all committees comprising the whole membership of the council and provided with full and unrestricted minutes of other committees for advance comment.

> "In a limited number of cases no minutes at all are supplied to the Press, and the result is that in reporting the meeting of some local authority reporters do not even know what is being discussed. The chairman will get up and say: "I move section so-and-so, sub-section so-and-so, page 5", and someone says: "I second". Then the chairman says "Carried", and that is that. ... The Chigwell Council even went to the length of circularising the Press with minutes which were different from those which were circulated to members."(3)

1. Royal Commission on the Press 1947-9, Minutes of Evidence, q.976. HMSO.

2. ibid qq. 2377-9.

3. ibid q. 997.

In their Report[1] the Commission drew attention to the evidence heard on the subject of local authority secrecy; with the Consultative Committee considering the subject the Commission did not consider itself obliged to deal in detail with the matter but thought it right "to draw attention to difficulties which may, in extreme cases, be a serious hindrance to the accurate presentation of news of local importance and free expression of opinion on local affairs".

In 1949 Mr. R. V. (later Sir Robert) Grimston introduced into the Commons a Public Bodies (Admission of the Press) Bill,[2] which had supporters from all three parties. It was intended to open to the Press committees of the whole council together with numerous committees produced by legislation after 1908 such as education committees, (under the 1944 Education Act,[3]) Hospital boards and Hospital management committees, river authorities and consultative committees of the various nationalised industries. It also included all committees or sub-committees of local authorities insofar as they exercised delegated powers. Mr. Ede, now Home Secretary, opposed it, from the government front bench, arguing (incorrectly) that its scope was much greater than

1. Report of Royal Commission on the Press paras. 544-67, Cmd. 7700, 1949.

2. 12 & 13 Geo. 6 (Bill60). The Bill was introduced under the ten-minute rule.

3. 7 & 8 Geo. 6, c.31.

that of his own Bill of 30 years earlier.[1] It failed to get a second reading.

Meanwhile, increasing interest in publicity for local government was causing some authorities to take the side of open committees. Nelson Borough Council wrote to the A.M.C.[2] at that effect.

In 1956 another all-party group of M.P.'s attempted to obtain legislative enactment of similar lines to those of Mr. Grimston's Bill.[3] Mr. J.S.Simon[4] introduced it, and was bitterly opposed by Mr. Charles Pannell, who asked: "does the Press deserve to go into public meetings? Read the average local newspaper.....it is sometimes a good thing for us that the tripe that goes into the Press today wraps up the fish and chips tomorrow." He thought the bill"an expression of intolerance towards local government". "Because I want local government to be an equal partner with Parliament, because I fundamentally believe that private activities of companies should be equally open to scrutiny with public activities and so should the accounts of the Tory party, I ask my Hon. Friends to reject the Bill",[5] he added. The Bill failed to complete a second reading.

1. 465 H.C.Deb. Col. 799.
2. Minutes of Association of Municipal Corporations GP Cttee. 1/1949 p.20 r.18
3. Session 1955-6 Bill 172.
4. Later Sir Jocelyn Simon.
5. 465 H.C.Deb. Cols. 1412-14.

While the secretive local authorities provided a source of annoyance to journalists in many parts of the country, one particular set of circumstances brought dramatically to public notice weaknesses in the 1908 Act, and at the same time added political force to the controversy by rekindling both traditional Labour suspicions of the press and Conservative dislike of the Labour councils of many of the county boroughs. In the summer of 1959 a strike in the printing industry affected the publication of most national and provincial daily papers. Many papers, however, continued to print emergency editions by employing office and other staff on printing work: certain Labour-controlled city councils sought to deny these newspapers facilities which they had hitherto enjoyed for the reporting of council affairs. In Birmingham and Leeds the city councils withheld documents and information from newspapers published during the strike: (under the 1908 Act they were under no obligation to provide supplementary information to the newspapers). In Liverpool, however, the Council conducted its business in secret after reporters from the Liverpool Daily Post and Liverpool Echo had refused to leave a council meeting, and in Nottingham reporters from local newspapers were excluded while a B.B.C. reporter was allowed to remain, the Town Clerk ruling that he, unlike other reporters, was a member of the public, and that only

(1)

1. Keesing's Contemporary Archives December 1959 p.17154

the press was being excluded.(1) There was a political storm both inside and outside the council chamber: the Conservative members walked out of the meeting when the Leader of the Council, Alderman George Wigman, accused reporters of "black-legging". At a later meeting he admitted to having been guilty of an error of judgment, but said that as a lifelong trade unionist he made no apology for seeking to "prohibit blackleg labour from coming into the council chamber".(2) There were questions in Parliament and in a written answer on 6 July(3) the Minister of Housing and Local Government, Mr. Henry Brooke, took a stronger line than he had done in earlier debates. In 1956 he had said(4) that he had "great sympathy for local newspapers which complain that they can never get any information out of the council"; now he revealed that discussions on the subject had been in progress for some time between his department and the local authority associations. The Government "would not hesitate to advise an amendment to the law if necessary", but he would "prefer a proper sense of responsibility to the local electors to prevail". An even stronger line was taken in a

1. ibid. This, in the writer's opinion, was a breach of the 1908 Act, a view to which the Minister clearly inclined (vide infra).

2. Keesing's ibid.

3. H.C.Deb.Vol.608 written answers Col.100.

4. 553 H.C.Deb. Col. 1566.

letter to the Town Clerk of Nottingham from the Ministry and signed by Dame Evelyn Sharp, the permanent secretary. It included the following:

> "The rights of Press representatives to be present at meetings of local authorities are secured by the Local Authorities (Admission of the Press to Meetings) Act, 1908. There is provision in the Act for the temporary exclusion of the Press when, in the opinion of the majority of members present at the meetings, the nature of the business to be discussed makes this advisable in the public interest, but the Press cannot lawfully be excluded for any other reason.
> "It has been represented to the Minister that it was quite clear from the proceedings that the reasons which moved the majority of the council to take steps to exclude the Press representatives from the recent meetings were not connected with the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, but were solely concerned with the present printing dispute.." The Minister "has no jurisdiction to pronounce on the legality of the council's action. He feels sure, however, that this is an aspect of the matter to which the council will wish to give earnest consideration. "Whether or not the action taken by the council...offends the letter of the Act of 1908, he has no doubt that it is wholly contrary to the spirit of the Act and to the principals which local authorities should observe in their relations with the Press. The Minister has felt bound to say in reply to representatives, that he is wholly out of sympathy with any council which deprives the local electors of the opportunity to inform themselves from Press reports about council business..."
> "...because he believes that the great majority of local authorities recognize their responsibility to keep the public fully informed at all times, it has been his hope that all could be brought to observe a proper code in this matter without the need for new legislation.
> "The Minister is therefore gravely concerned to see that some local authorities have taken action during the present dispute in the printing industry which suggests that they attach little importance to keeping the electorate informed. He may be forced to conclude that the object he has in view, can be secured only by imposing new statutory obligations and a new procedure for enforcement on all local authorities."

authorities."(1) Thus it seemed the Conservative government was going to take the matter seriously, even if they would prefer voluntary co-operation under threat to actual legislation. The party's Manifesto for 1959 General Election contained the words "We mean to make it quite sure that the Press have proper facilities for reporting the proceedings of local authorities."(2) Later that year, however, Mr. Brooke returned to the view that voluntary action could be relied upon to secure this end, and that a "code of conduct" worked out with the local authority associations would provide a basis.(3)

A case for new legislation could be rested on two principles, the first of which commanded wider support than the second. It could be argued that circumstances, some statutory, had changed to such an extent that the 1908 Act no longer sufficed to carry out the purposes for which it was passed. For one thing, many bodies which had come into existence since 1908 but had functions analgous to or even broadly identical to those named in the Act were beyond its scope: this applied, for instance, to Education Committees.

1. The Times, 19 July 1959.

2. The Next Five Years (Conservative party election manifesto for 1959) paragraph 6.(Reprinted in The Times House of Commons 1959 p. 245).

3. 616 H.C.Deb Col. 1432.

Moreover, the practice of working from a detailed printed agenda in council meetings - widespread since the war but unusual in 1908-could make it impossible for reporters not in possession of the documents to follow the business at all, since resolutions could be moved by number without verbal reference to their contents: if the press were to be allowed to report meetings under modern practice, then they must have the right to obtain agenda and committee minutes. Most obviously of all, the loophole in the 1908 Act enabling any council to conduct the substance of all its business in secret by the expedient of calling itself a committee made the statute of little use. With these contentions there was considerable agreement, although some doubt as to whether further legislation was worthwhile for the first or practicable for the second and third points. The A.M.C. was at least prepared to advocate to its member boroughs (17) practices which, if followed universally, would make legislation unnecessary. But a second factor was to be found among journalists and others that the press should be given rights to probe further into local government than the 1908 Act had allowed, and in particular to be admitted to committees exercising delegated powers according to which their resolutions would not need approval in open

17. in, for example, its memorandum "Local Authorities and the Press" which was quoted extensively in the 1947 Interim Report of the Consultative Committee, and was still being distributed to M.P.'s during the debates on the 1958 Bill.

council. Any proposal to open to the press a large part of the committee structure of local government was sure to meet fierce opposition from the local government pressure groups, and their reluctance to consider even legislation aimed solely at "committees of the whole council" can in part be traced to a fear that the principle would quickly be extended to other committees. Moreover, in the circumstances of 1960 it was important that the Conservative government, although sympathetic to reforms intended to make the 1908 Act more effected and operative, was opposed to the idea of opening committees to the press in general. As Mr. Brooke had said in 1956: "...my sympathy ends when they wish to have every committee meeting open to the press. It is wholly right that our proceedings here in this Chamber should be open to the Press and the public, but we know that sometimes it is necessary to repair upstairs and to express ourselves with a candour, using words which perhaps should not be known throughout the world. ...I think local authorities are entitled to take the same view."[1]

In the ballot for private members' bills at the beginning of the new session in 1959 one of the successful members was a newly-elected Conservative, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher. Mrs. Thatcher had no bill of her own in mind at the time, and

1. 553 H.C.Deb. Col. 1566.

from the many pressed upon her she elected to adopt a bill for the admission of the press to meetings of local authorities: Mr. F.V. Corfield,(Conservative member for South Gloucestershire)encouraged her to do so, and Mr. Peter Kirk, another Conservative and a member of the National Union of Journalists, admitted to having helped persuade her.(1) The title was hastily entered as the 'Public Bodies (Admission of the Press to Meetings) Bill'. The Government was generally favourable although the Minister remained sceptical about some features of the Bill.(2) The main provisions of the Bill as it was introduced were as follows:(3)

(A). The meetings of all local authorities as well as such public bodies as Regional Hospital Boards, National Health Service Executive Councils, and probation committees would be open to the press, except when the nature of the business made this inadvisable in the public interest (in which case a specific excluding resolution would have to be passed by the body).

1. 619 H.C.Deb. Col. 1067.

2. vide, e.g., his remarks in committee, H.C. Standing Committee Reports 1959-60 Vol II, Public Bodies (Admission of the Press Bill) Cols. 42-4.

3. Session 1959/60 Bill 18

(B). Resolution "into committee" would not exempt a body from this provision.

(C). Committees whose "normal functions" consisted "to a substantial extent of discharging functions of the body" under delegated powers would also be open to the press on the same basis, except that where the "normal functions" of the committee were such that constant specific exclusions meant that it would be closed to the press "during the greater part of its proceedings" it would be open to the council to pass an annual resolution excepting it from this provision.

(D). Bodies would be obliged to keep and publish a schedule of their committees and their status under the Bill.

(E). Public notice was to be given of meetings of the body and its committees; the press to be provided with the agenda and "such further statements or particulars, if any, as are necessary to indicate the nature of the items included" to be dealt with in secret, and was to be given facilities for reporting and telephoning.

(F). Qualified privilege under the Defamation Act, 1952, would extend to reports of meetings made open under the Act.

(G). Various Ministers empowered to add to the Schedule of Bodies to which the Act would apply. [Thus the Bill sought to deal with the journalists' major N.P.

grievances, namely "resolution into committee" and the conduct of council meetings from documents not available to them, as well as making important extensions of the rights of the press to include committees with delegated powers and some central government bodies in the health and welfare fields. Its qualifications provided two concessions to the bodies concerned, allowing them to exclude the press to discuss specified business where it was in the public interest to do so, and allowing them to except from the Act for the whole of their meetings committees most of whose business came into this category.

Mrs, Thatcher's speech moving the second reading of the Bill on 5 February 1960 (1) was her maiden speech in the House: in it she argued the necessity of bringing up to date the 1908 Act by extending it to bodies created or reconstituted since it was passed, and of ensuring that the device of going "into committee" no longer made it possible for local authorities to dispense with its requirements. She also acknowledged the help of the Minister of Housing and Local Government and his department, which, she understood, had been "as great as any Government Department could give to a private member". The Bill's seconder, Mr. F.V.Corfield, admitted what had been discovered to be a weakness in the Bill, that it was confined in its

1. 616 H.C.Deb. Col. 1350

application to the Press and conferred no rights on the general public, indicating that it was hoped to alter this in Committee. The existence of a determined opposition to the Bill was clear when Mr. G.W.Reynolds, an Acton borough councillor and Local Government officer of the Labour Party rose to oppose the bill through an amendment. (1) He argued the familar case that:

(a). the local authorities, far from being sinister organisations in need of exposure, were bodies elected by the local ratepayers;

(b). it would be administratively difficult to admit the press to committees where business was despatched under delegated powers precisely to speed the process of decision;

(c). it would be embarrassing to the parties concerned if the press were able to obtain and publish information about employees, welfare patients, council house tenants and negotiations involving private companies. (2)

(d). Publicity would bring the party whip into committee meetings and inhibit frank discussion.

Mr. Reynolds conceded that council meetings could be and

1. Ibid Col. 1366

2. It appears that the Ministry of Health, under pressure from the National Joint Council for Local Authority Administrative, Professional, Technical and Clerical Services, recommended a model standing order which would require questions of appointments, promotional, dismissal and salary of officers to be considered 'in committee.' (v. Oxfordshire County Council minutes, 28 July 1950 p.187.

sometimes were "turned into a mockery" if preceded by an all-member "committee meeting" in which all the debate took place, but maintained that those who practised this would find means of continuing to do so even if the Bill were passed.

Among several spokesman for the AMC, the CCA and members of local authorities was, once again, Mr. Charles Pannell (an AMC vice-president) who argued (1) that "reticence is a fine and decent quality, far more desirable than the garish desire for publicity which seems to oppress our civilisation to-day." The promoters of the bill, however, ended the day victorious, gaining the second reading by 152 votes to 39. The opposition lobby consisted almost entirely of Labour members actively engaged in local government in urban areas (especially London), and included AMC vice-presidents (like Mr. Chuter Ede, now in the opposition lobby from 1930) and the Chairman of the Parliamentary and General Purpose Committee of the County Councils Association. In the predominantly Conservative majority there were, as well as Michael Stewart, a Labour spokesman on local government, many Labour N.U.J. members such as Mrs. Barbara Castle, Mr. Maurice Edelman, Mr. Emrys Hughes, and Mr. Zilliacus. (2)

1. ibid. Col 420.

2. ibid. Division List No. 35. (Col 1451). (for N.U.J. membership see The Journalist Vol.42 No.9. November 1959.

The Bill was remitted to Standing Committee C, then under the Chairmanship of Sir Norman Hulbert, while the interest groups began to brief their spokesmen, who included: (p.14)

Association of Municipal Corporations: Mr. Robert Jenkins.
County Councils Association: Mr. G.A. Pargiter.
Urban District Councils Association: Sir Robert Grimston. (President).
London Boroughs Committee: Mr. G.W. Reynolds.
Rural District Councils Association: Lord Balniel (president)
National Union of Journalists: Mr. Dudley Smith.

The A.M.C. wrote to the Minister pointing out that although it could not contest the principle of the Bill, many of its detailed provisions would be an administrative burden on the local authorities; it therefore sought of the Minister that he should "take the necessary steps in Standing Committee and in the House to ensure that the Bill would not hinder local authorities in the performance of their many functions". The Minister, who was keeping open the possibility of a "code of conduct" negotiated with the associations perhaps as a supplement rather than as an

1. Mr. David Renton, a vice-president of the R.D.C.A., was a member of the committee, but also had responsibility as a Home Office junior minister.
Sir Robert Grimston, a sponsor of the Bill and mover of the 1949 Bill, was in a difficult position as president of the U.D.C.A., which was strongly opposed. In Committee he voted for the Bill but expressed some of the U.D.C.A.'s reservations.

alternative to the Bill, replied that he was willing to do so.(1) The County Councils Association, like the Urban District Councils Association, remained wholly opposed to the Bill, and its sub-committee which briefed ~~her~~ Mr. G.A. Pargiter reported that the Code of Conduct principle ought to be written into the Bill to replace almost all its existing clauses.(2) The Rural District Councils Association was sympathetic to some aims of the Bill concerning committees of the whole council, although opposed to the provisions concerning committees with delegated powers.(3) Mr.Roper Mead, of the Executive Committee of the N.U.J., acted for the Union, supplying information, background material and the Union's views to members of the Committee, and helped through Mr. Henry Bate to secure the moral support of the Press Council for the measure.(4) Mrs. Thatcher, meanwhile, was benefitting from advice and help from Mr. Brooke, his department, and its parliamentary counsel, although she was soon to find that this help was as much directed towards

1. A.M.C. Minutes of C.P.Committee 5/1961 Appendix A Part I (Supplement to Municipal Review, September 1961).

2. Minutes of C.C.A. Parliamentary & G.P. Committee 9 March 1960. Para.12 and Appendix B.(Supplement to County Councils Gazette March 1960, pp 79 & 81).

3. Rural District Review, March 1960 p. 53.

4. vide, inter alia, The Journalist, February 1960.

drafting substantial amendments as towards codification.(1)
The Committees five long meetings resulted in a bill scarcely recognizable as that which had left the 2nd reading. At the first meetings(2) the C.C.A.'s proposal to substitute a code of conduct for the main clauses was discussed as an amendment, and so numerous were the quotations from C.C.A. and A.M.C. memoranda and briefs that one supporter of the Bill, Mr. F.V.Corfield, sardonically inquired whether or not it was "the function of the House of Commons to consider the views of the public, and not merely the views of representatives of local authority associations".(3) Mr. Brooke, although he was still engaged on discussions with the associations about a possible code of conduct, opposed the amendment as "delegating the content of an Act of Parliament to the Minister".(4) The Amendment was lost, the division list reading just as it was to throughout the committee's considerations of the Bill: on the one side the Associations' and urban authorities' members except for the two from the Rural District Councils (lord Balniel and Mr. Renton) and Sir Robert Grimston, who were to be found on the other side with Mrs. Thatcher,

1. vide (e.g.) Mrs. Thatcher, 623 H.C.Deb. Col.836 and Park in Modern Law Review Vol.25 No.2,March 1962,p.204.
2. H.C.Standing Committee Reports 1959-60 Vol II.
3. ibid Col. 44.
4. ibid Col. 53.

Mr. Brooke, the journalists and the Liberal, Mr.Roderic Bowen. Mr. Michael Stewart was the one member of the Committee with a substantially varied record. The Committee went on to accept Mrs. Thatcher's proposal to widen the scope of the Bill so that the public would be included in the right of admission: leave from the House was obtained for this change which required an alteration in the title. Mr. Wilkins (1) failed to carry an amendment which would bring the Act into abeyance during any "interruption in the normal production of newspapers", so as to make legal the exclusion of blackleg reporters during strikes as had happened at Nottingham in 1959; he supported his arguments by quotation from what he called "that impeccable journal and neutral observer", the Municipal Review, which is in fact the official organ of the A.M.C. An acrid dispute over the Liverpool incident between Mr. Wilkins, Mr.Charles Pannell and Mr.Norman Pannell (a supporter of the Bill), occupied most of one session.

The greatest change in the Bill, however, came in the form of an amendment put forward by Mrs. Thatcher after consultation with the Government and readily accepted by most of the Bill's opponents: this restricted the application

1. Mr. Wilkins was a member of the Typographical Association (which had been the striking union in the printing dispute) and of the Bristol City Council.
Standing Committee ibid Col. 172.

of the bill to committees of a body "whose members consist of or include all members of the body". Mrs Thatcher had conceded much ground, largely in the knowledge that the Government's willingness to underwrite the more radical provisions of her bill could not be counted upon. From this point the fortunes of the Bill were assured. Those who, like Mr. Reynolds, had opposed it wholesale could no longer do so, since they had themselves admitted to the undesirability of local authorities going into "committee of the whole council".(1) The only reservations expressed were those of the small authorities, whose case was lukewarmly put by Lord Balniel and Sir Robert Grimston.(2) The remaining amendments, other than drafting improvements schedule of bodies to which the Act would apply. In the Lords, Lord Morrison, President of the A.M.C., secured the removal from the schedule of police authorities;(3) the Commons removed joint committees of an advisory nature at the report stage.(4) Mr. Reynolds attempted in committee to include in the schedule several non-local government bodies such as the hospital management committees and the (then proposed)

1. vide A.M.C.Memorandum (p.14 supra and note 50); also Mr. Reynolds, Standing Committee ibid Col. 246.

2. ibid Col. 246-9.

3. 224 H.L.Deb. Col. 676

4. 623 H.C.Deb. Cols. 782-5.

Commission for the New Towns.(1)

Thus the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act which received the Royal Assent on 27 October 1960(2) and came into force on 1 June 1961 was very much less radical than Mrs. Thatcher's original Public Bodies (Admission of the Press) Bill. Essentially, the third provision listed in the summary of the bill (above) had been deleted, as had several bodies in the schedule. It guaranteed the journalist (and the public) the right of entry to council meetings, education committees, divisional education executives, parish meetings, the meetings of bodies other than police authorities entitled to raise a rate, and those of certain non-local government bodies. This right could, however, be limited by the authority by resolution to exclude the press and public "whenever publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted or for other special reasons stated in the resolution and arising from the nature of the business or of the proceedings";(3) the terms of this clause (my underlining) offered some safeguard against exclusion of the press for unspecified

1. Standing Committee ibid Cols 257-268.

2. 8 & 9 Eliz. 2 c. 67.

3. Section 1 (2). Section 1 (3) allows a body to take advice from its officers in private "without regard to the subject or purport of the recommendations or advice".

political reasons. The Act also provided the journalist with a right to the agenda and at least some of the documentary information "necessary to indicate the nature of the items included", which were expressly to be covered by the defence of qualified privilege.[1] But since the only committees to which the Act applied were committees of the whole council and education committees, there was no great extension of the journalists' access to local authority proceedings other than in local authorities all of whose members served on the key committees like the General Purposes Committee. The Minister of Housing and Local Government Circular published following the Act recognised that there was an obvious escape route for those local authorities who wished to retain large committees, who had only to remove one member from these committees in order to exempt them from the Act. The Minister could only discourage the practice and hope that local authorities would observe the Act in spirit as well as in letter.

In its effects, the Act necessarily depended upon the attitude of the local authorities themselves, who took one of four possible courses:

(1). Some authorities, especially small urban and

1. ibid (4) (b) and (5).

rural district councils like Brownhills U.D.C. and Macclesfield R.D.C., removed one or two (often the oldest) members from its committees of the whole council, and continued in this way to operate a system in which only a tiny fraction of council business was discussed in public. In some of these councils, like Macclesfield, it was often possible to complete the open council meeting in less than twenty minutes and unusual for it to last more than an hour.(1)

(2). Most authorities were largely unaffected: their committee meetings remained secret and their council meetings remained open, as they had been before the Act: they were obliged only to use a specific resolution instead of a form of words when they wished to exclude public and press from certain items in the discussion. In some cases the change was hardly noticeable. The Chairman of Oxfordshire County Council, the Earl of Macclesfield, after moving a resolution framed in accordance with the Act, added "that means that we're going into committee", and in the offical record of the proceedings the items so discussed appear under the heading "The Council in Committee".(2)

1. for Brownhills U.D.C. see The Times, 27 December 1962. One authority, Barnoldswick U.D.C., had been in the practice of admitting the press to all its committees (which consisted of the whole council): soon after the Act it reduced the membership of all committees in order to exclude the Press. (Craven Herald & Pioneer, 28 May, 1965)

2. vide (e.g.) Minutes of Quarterly Meeting of Oxfordshire County Council, 20 July 1962, p.9.

(3). Some authorities having committees of the whole council, like Chipping Norton Borough Council, made no changes and adhered to the Act by admitting the Press and Public to these committees.

(4). Some authorities, especially those with a Liberal majority or strong minority, took the Act as an encouragement to open all or most of their committees to the press and public regardless of their size: in this category are Hazel Grove & Bramhall U.D.C. (Cheshire) and the former Orpington U.D.C.

In 1967 the Committee on Management in Local Government (Maud Committee) reported that, out of its sample of 715 authorities of all types, 10% admitted the press to all main committees, 40% to some committees, and 50% to none.(1)

The limited extent of the Act has meant that agitation has continued since 1960, sometimes in an attempt to secure that the intentions of the Act were honoured but often to secure admission of the Press to more of or all of the Council's committees. Some of this pressure has been for new and more stringent legislation. Liberal party spokesman have taken this view,(2) as has the Local Government Reform Society, a body set up by the ex-clerk of Bognor Regis

1. Report of the Committee on Management in Local Government, para.452.see also Research Report,Vol.5, Ch.17. para.62.

2. A pamphlet entitled The Liberal Challenge, issued by the L.P. Publication department in 1965 declared that "A Liberal Government would pass an Act to stop up the loopholes" in the 1960 Act.

Council at the time of the Bognor dispute and dedicated to the elimination of corruption in local government.(1) Many of those who campaigned for open committees were, however, convinced by the fate of the 1960 Act that secrecy could not be removed by legislation. The former editor of the Essex County Standard declared that

> "The relationship between the local press and the local authority will never be settled on a basis of rights, as the well-intentioned but largely ineffective Admission of the Press Bill has shown. Either local government wants the maximum communication with the public or it does not. At present it does not....This attitude will only break down when councillors finally realize...that they are getting out of touch [and]...that the frustrations and exasperations of putting over policies that are not understood are worse than those associated with getting such policies understood as they are conceived."(2)

At the same time there have been innumerable attempts at the local level to persuade local authorities to open some or all of their committees voluntarily. This agitation can be traced to several sources:

(1). The press is the common factor in all; sometimes the local newspaper will, like the Reading Evening Post publish articles in strong terms demanding admission; sometimes it is sufficient for the newspaper to support and give prominence to demands voiced by other groups.(3)

1. The Times, 27 & 30 June 1965.

2. Hervey Benham, Two Cheers for the Town Hall, p.262.

3. see(e.g.)Reading Evening Post 6 November 1965; Thanet Times 30 June & 7 July 1964; Banbury Guardian 11 June 1964; Western Daily Press 19 February 1966; Wells Journal 25 February 1966; U.K.Press Gazette No.14 (1965).

(2). The Liberal Party and Liberal Councillors have agitated locally in many places for open committees, and the subject has featured extensively in their local government campaign literature. Liberal majorities on councils have almost invariably opened at least some committees to public and press.(1)

(3). Other parties and independants in the minority on local authorities have taken up the issue. The Labour group on Berkshire County Council, led by Mr. R.L.Spiller, sought to secure the admission of press and public to the County Planning Committee. Mr. Spiller, himself a member of the Committee, felt that this could contribute to a more informed public discussion of the planning problems of the South-East. His motion, put before the Council in March 1965, had the support of the Liberals and two Conservatives, was defeated by Conservatives and Independents.(2) In 1967 Councillor Spiller carried a motion admitting the press to a number of major committees but was again defeated over the planning committee. In Edinburgh in 1965 a Labour councillor, J.Kerr, narrowly lost a motion to open meetings

1. The Liberal Challenge quotes the case of Finchley, Potters Bar, Orpington and Pudsey. In the Barnoldswick case (see above page 33) it was the one Liberal on the council who wanted the committee to remain open.

2. Reading & Berkshire Chronicle, 5 March 1965; Reading Standard, 5 March 1965; Reading Mercury, 6 March 1965; Minutes of Meeting of Berkshire C.C., 1 March 1965.

of the Lord Provost's committee to the press, and threatened to resign from the council on the issue of committee secrecy. In Sunderland, however, it was the Conservative group which advocated open committees until 1966, when the Labour majority came round to the same opinion.

(4). Ratepayers' and Residents' associations and bodies dedicated to local government reform have also joined in the fight.(1)

(5). The Minister of Housing and Local Government in the 1964 Labour Government, Mr. Crossman, showed himself interested in the issue and tried to persuade local authorities of the importance of the press: "without vigorous local journalism", he argued, "local democracy is doomed to failure."(2) Addressing the Association of Municipal Corporations Annual Meeting in October 1965 he said:

> "I was one of those who welcomed Mrs. Thatcher's Bill, but I must say that I did not overestimate the amount it would achieve, especially after the amendments with which it was watered down during its passage through the House - thanks, I gather to your activities. ...Her Bill is a very modest Bill, minimal in its requirements, and any progressive council would be shocked and ashamed if it did only that. ...I have never heard of a council, which once it had the courage to

1. see above p.34.

2. Introduction to magazine Your Council, published by Bexley Borough Council, No.1., 1965.

> co-operate fully with the Press in presenting the council to the electorate, has ever rescinded the charter to Press freedom in the town hall. ..Your job, surely, is not to stop the press prying, but to get more coverage from the Press, and better coverage."(1)

Co-operation with the Press, Mr. Crossman thought, was "one of those acts of modernisation, like installing a fridge or putting central heating in the bedroom". In the same month Mr. Alfred Morris, a Manchester Labour M.P., asked the Minister if he would issue a circular urging local authorities to admit the Press to committee meetings: he was referred to the earlier circular and to the speech quoted above, which Mr. Crossman hoped "all those concerned with local government" would read.(2)

(6). The local government officer, except where, like Mr. Paul Smith at Bognor, he finds himself irreconcilably opposed to the council's policy, has rarely been a public advocate of open committees.(3) However, the Principal City Officer of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, Mr. Frank Harris, has advocated for that authority a committee system in

1. County Councils Gazette and Municipal Review, November 1965.

2. H.C.Deb.Vol.718.Written answers,Col.140.(2 November 1965)

3. The National and Local Government Officers' Association representing the largest body of local government officers (but not generally chief officers) had officially supported Mrs. Thatcher's Bill.

which more detail would be delegated to officers than at present, and in which, therefore, the committee discussions would be on policy and not administration. He proposed that the major committees under this system, Municipal Relations, Resources Planning and Public Safety, should be open to Press and Public for the major part of their business.(1)

(7). Joint committees have brought together local authorities of different practice, and this has produced problems. When Sunderland's police force, whose Watch Committee had formerly admitted the press to its meetings, was absorbed into the Durham force, the new joint committee met in secret. Alderman Joseph Hoy, a member of the former Sunderland Watch Committee and Chairman of the Police Committee of the Association of Municipal Corporations, expressed the opion that 'Secret meetings could be a step in the direction of a police state'.(2)

During 1965 there was a number of incidents of allegations of corruption in local government, and this intensified the demands for open committees in a number of places. Although the Bognor Regis Urban District Council's conduct had been vindicated by an inquiry conducted by

1. Local Government Chronicle, 26 February 1966 p. 354.
2. Newcastle Journal, 22 May 1967.

Mr. J. Ramsey Willis, Q.C.,[1] the council afterwards decided that it would be in the interests of the town and the health of local government if the committees were made open, and this was done.[2] Similarly, Exeter, which had been the source of much press speculation afterwards dismissed by the permanent secretary to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Dame Evelyn Sharp, who conducted a one-day inquiry in the City, had its clerk prepare a memorandum on the practice of local authorities with regard to committee admission. The City council decided to admit the press and public to the Planning, Streets, Industrial Development, Health Services, Library and Allotments Committees for a trial period.[3] Cases concerning planning, property and declaration of interest continued to arouse attacks on 'secret sessions', which, the newspapers alleged, could conceal misconduct from the public.[4]

1. The Report of the Bognor Regis Inquiry, Presented to the Minister of Housing and Local Government and the Chairman and Members of the Bognor Regis Urban District Council by Mr.J.Ramsay Willis,Q.C. London,H.M.S.O.1965.

2. The Times, 24 November 1965.

3. Memorandum on the Admission of the Public and Press to Committee Meetings submitted to the City Council by the Town Clerk of Exeter (1965).

4. Report of the Committee on Management in Local Government paras. 454 - 461.

The argument continues in many towns and rural areas. Journalists and their supporters argue that:

(1). Decisions on matters of public interest are being made behind locked doors in committee when they should be public knowledge through the columns of the press;

(2). Even the earlier stages of policy formation ought to be conducted in public so that public opinion can be informed and participate in the process;

(3). The public has a right to know which way its representatives vote and speak on all issues. The opponents still argue that open committees would be administratively impossible and against the public interest because confidences of employees, contractors, tenants and welfare patients could no longer be discussed without regular resort to the exclusion clauses available for these contingencies; some claim that open committees would inhibit discussion because political factors and "playing to the gallery" would dominate the proceedings as they already do the council meeting. Some authorities object to the fact that committee reports appearing in the Press before the full council meeting give the impression that a decision has been taken when in fact it has not.

The Report of the Committee on Management in Local Government (Maud Committee) in 1967 revealed that evidence in favour of open committees had been presented to it by the Society for Individual Freedom and others, and against

by local authorities. In its recommendations the Maud Committee favoured open committees, but these committees were to be of a very different kind, i.e. non-executive committees devoted to criticism and discussion of policy. The heart of the suggested administrative system was to be the management board, to which the Maud Committee did not favour admission of the press. The report adds: 'We accept that it may be necessary for small committees to be set up to assist principal officers in taking of certain decisions; in these cases the subject matter may well make it desirable that the press should not be admitted. This is a matter for the local authority to decide for itself. The arguement has become such a perennial preoccpation of local politics that it has featured in fiction: in John Braine's novel 'Life at the Top' a questioner at a meeting in the (imaginary and Northern) town of Warley asks the hero, Councillor Joe Lampton:

> '"How do you explain that Council meetings have been closed to the public and to the Press on no less than three occasions during the last twelve months? And always when a certain matter had to be discussed, I may add."'

This admitted Councillor Lampton, was '"a very good question indeed...which needed to be asked and, frankly, a question which I hoped I wouldn't be asked. Because I find it very difficult to answer..."'(1)

1. John Braine, Life at the Top (first published 1962) Penguin Books 1965, p. 118.

The obtaining of documentary information necessary to the understanding of meetings has been the area of a small battle in itself. Most council meetings are based on a duplicated or printed set of committee reports, which set out the decisions of the Committees and the resolutions recommended for the Council's adoption. In the meetings the resolutions may be taken by number, so that unless there was a debate on the topic the newspaper reporter without the documents (which are often the size of a large paper-back book) would be at a loss to follow the proceedings. Most local authorities have always sent these documents in advance of the meeting to newspapers which normally attend. However, some councils took exception to the fact that newspapers published items from the reports before the council meeting took place. The newspapers argued that this enabled members of the public to consider the issues and inform their councillors if they wished an opinion to be expressed; local authorities argued that public alarm was created by this practice since, in the words of a Corby (Leicestershire) officer, "People read these items in the newspapers, and although they are only recommended to the council they come to the conclusion that everything has been settled."(1) Some authorities sought to prevent the practice

1. The Times, 27 December 1962.

by placing an embargo on the contents of committee minutes supplied to the Press. In the survey of local authority practices presented to the 1947 Royal Commission by the Guild of British Newspaper Editors it was claimed that of authorities which provided these documents to the press nearly half did so on condition that no part of them should be published before the council meeting.(1) Woking U.D.C. attached this notice in red to the minutes issued to the press:

> "These minutes and reports are supplied to the press on the distinct understanding that nothing contained, mentioned or referred to therein shall be disclosed, made public or available for public inspection, discussion or criticism until after the Council Meeting had taken place and then only after proprietors, editors, persons responsible for or accredited representatives of the publication have satisfied themselves that no amendments, alterations, additions or deletions have been made thereto. Failure to comply with these conditions will upon the first breach thereof result in withdrawal of the facilities."(2)

The 1960 Act, in requiring local authorities to provide the press (on payment of transmission costs) with a copy of the agenda "together with such further statements or particulars, if any, as are necessary to indicate the nature of" business to be taken in secret,(3) would seem

1. Royal Commission on the Press 1947-9 Minutes of Evidence (4th. Day), Appendix.
2. Ibid, q.998.
3. section 1 (4) (b).

at first sight to have removed the only sanction with which this embargo could be enforced. However, the same clause states that "copies of any reports or other documents supplied to members" need only be supplied "if thought fit": even this appears to leave discretion in the hands of the local authorities. In any event, there have been further "embargo" controversies since the Act, and Corby U.D.C., Abingdon R.D.C. and the Kesteven Water Board have maintained a strict embargo, while some other authorities (such as Staffordshire County Council and the (former) Brierley Hill U.D.C.) have ruled that newspapers may quote but not comment on committee reports before council meetings. The Maud Report sample survey found that 37% of authorities still sought to prohibit the press from commenting on minutes before the council meeting. Almost one in six of the authorities in the sample appeared not to make the agendas available at least one clear day before the council meeting (a means, whether intentional or not, of achieving the same end).(1) Many of these embargoes have been openly defied by newspapers, but despite the Act "non-cooperation" or a "work to rule" on the part of a local authority can put a newspaper at a disadvantage in relation to its rivals. Local authorities sometimes go to great lengths in reprimanding newspapers which have often failed to accord

1. Report, Vol. 5, Table L I (p.587).

with their rules: there are instances of newspapers being banned from the authority's public libraries, and for a period Salford City Council refused to place any advertisements in the Salford City Reporter except those it was compelled by statute to insert in the local press.(1) On the other hand, some authorities have abandoned earlier restrictions in favour of informal agreements with newspapers designed to secure that reports published before the full council meeting do not give the impression of finality, that subsequent rejections of recommendations are given prominance, and that care is taken not to embarrass individuals whose business may be under discussion.(2)

The Libel Law.

Newspapers are constantly exposed to the risk of actions against them for defamation, not only in respect of comment or disclosures about individuals which they make as a result of their reporting, but also in their direct rep reports of meetings and proceedings. Some protection is afforded to the newspapers by the rules of privilege. Absolute privilege, which covers fair and accurate reports of proceedings in public in Parliament and the courts of law, affords complete protection to the newspaper.(3) This degree of privilege does not, however, extend to the local authorities (and other bodies) which are open by law to those documents of local authorities

1. Daily Dispatch, 2 November 1950.

2. see, e.g. The Times, 27 December 1962, and Oxford Times, 4 December 1964.

public inspection are subject to 'qualified privilege'; newspaper reports of these documents are similarly protected unless the newspaper is proved to have been activated by malice in publishing the matter in question. A less extensive form of qualified privilege applies to reports of meetings of local authorities, local government and public inquiries, and statements issued for public information by or on behalf of local authorities. In these cases the protection is lost if there is proof of malice, or if the newspaper has failed (after being requested by the defendant to do so) to publish a reasonable letter or statement by way of explanation, or has done so inadequately.[1] Beyond these fairly circumscribed areas of protection, the newspaper is exposed to the full force of the law of defamation.

A series of cases concluded adversely to the newspapers has led to regular criticism of the substance and of the administration of the law both from journalists and from lawyers; these criticisms were not met by the extensions of privilege and general codification in the Defamation Act of 1952.[2] The critics have included Lord Shawcross and Lord Devlin,[3] chairman of the Press Council; their

1. Defamation Act, 1952, sect. 7 and Schedule II, para.10; Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act,1960, sect. 1, para. 5.

2. The Times, 6 December 1965.

3. ibid., 4 October 1965.

criticisms were embodied in the report of a working party set up jointly by 'Justice' and the International Press Institute, published in 1965.(1) The main features at issue in the present law which are relevant to local political reporting concern the roles of juries, proving the truth of the matter published, and the concept that publication may be in the public interest.

(1). Juries can be responsible for deciding a number of important issues in libel actions, including damages. In several recent cases, it is argued, juries have shown prejudice against the newspapers and awarded damages against them on a scale clearly intended to punish and make an example of the offending newspaper rather than merely to compensate the plaintiff. Awards of over £100,000 are indicative of this trend.(2) However, a House of Lords judgement in Rookes v Barnard(3) (given by Lord Devlin) set clear limits to exemplary damages, confining them principally to cases where the defendant's conduct had been

1. The Law and the Press: The Report of a Joint Working Party of Justice and the British Committee of the International Press Institute. (Chairman: The Right Hon. Lord Shawcross, Q.C.) London, 1965. ('Justice' is an all-party group of lawyers interested in the protection of civil liberties and the rule of the law; the International Press Institute is a body of newspaper editors seeking to safeguard the freedom of the press.)

2. e.g. Lewis v Associated Newspapers Ltd. and Lewis v Daily Telegraph Ltd. (1964) A.C. 234.

3. Rookes v Barnard and others (1964) A.C.1129.

calculated by him to make a profit for himself which might well exceed the compensation payable to the plaintiff. Although this may have largely solved the problem of jury damages, it remains the case that the Court of Appeal is unable to vary jury awards, unlike damages awarded by a judge.

Another questioned area of jury responsibility concerns the proof of malice against a newspaper resorting to the defence of qualified privilege. Here juries, it is claimed, tend to accept the existence of malice on evidence which a judge would dismiss. It is also the task of the jury to determine whether or not the words at issue have a defamatory meaning, after the judge has ruled whether or not they are capable of a defamatory meaning.(1) It is alleged that juries, again predisposed towards the plaintiff, tend to regard the judge's ruling that words are capable of such meaning as an indication that they have such meaning. In these various ways, it is argued, the roles of the judge and jury have been confused, and juries are involved in tasks to which they are unsuited and in which they display unreasonable hostility towards newspapers.

(2). The Defamation Act, 1952,(2) leaves it open to the plaintiff to select from a newspaper article those

1. This procedure derives from common law, not from the 1952 Act. (see Justice report, Appendix II.)

2. sect. 5.

allegations, however slight, which he can prove to be untrue and bring an action in respect of these words alone. The newspaper is unable to plead in defence the truth of the remaining matter, even where the untrue matter was of relatively small significance and not materially injurious to the reputation of the plaintiff. This has proved a major obstacle to newspapers seeking to expose corrupt conduct since any minor inaccuracy renders a report liable to action regardless of its substantial accuracy.

(3). Some, including the Justice working party, have sought to extend the protection of qualified privilege, which, as already indicated, is restricted by the possibility of proof of malice, by including within its terms the defence that publication was in the public interest and of public importance. The law acknowledges that qualified privilege attaches to the publication of a defamatory matter by one who has a duty to do so to one who has a legitimate interest in the matter; but the law acknowledges no comparable duty on the part of newspapers or interest on the part of the public as such. A defence that publication was in the public interest might assist newspapers seeking to expose corrupt conduct.

The 'Justice' Report upheld these and other criticisms, and recommended (<u>inter alia</u>):

(a). that the Court of Appeal should be entitled to vary jury damages;

(b). that judges' rulings on whether the words in question are capable of a defamatory meaning should not be given in the presence of the jury;

(c). that judges, not juries, should decide whether malice can be attributed to publication where a defence of qualified privilege is involved;

(d). that a defence of justification should not fail merely because every allegation in it is not proved to be true, where the untrue allegations do not materially affect the plaintiff's reputation taking the publication as a whole.

(e). that there should be a defence of qualified privilege for publication of matters of public interest in good faith, without malice, on evidence which might reasonably be believed to be true.

Pressure to bring about changes on these lines has continued without success. The history of the law of defamation is one of resistance to change, which has generally occurred only at intervals of fifty years.[1]

CHAPTER 2.

THE PRESS AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY.

The campaign undertaken by the newspapers and others for greater rights to report local government was based on certain assumptions about the role and responsibility of the press in local democracy which merit further examination. In its crudest form, the basic argument is that the press is the "watch-dog of democracy". The 1947-9 Royal Commission on the Press provided a fuller statement:

> "The democratic form of society demands of its members an active and intelligent participation in the affairs of their community, whether local or national. It assumed that they are sufficiently well informed about the issues of the day to be able to form the broad judgments required by an election and to maintain between elections the vigilance necessary in those whose governors are their servants and not their masters. More and more it demands also an alert and informed participation not only in purely political processes but also in the efforts of the community to adjust its social and economic life to increasingly complex circumstances. Democratic society, therefore, needs a clear and truthful account of events, of their background and their causes; a forum for discussion and informed criticism; and a means whereby individuals and groups can express a point of view or advocate a cause.
>
> The responsibility for fulfilling these needs unavoidably rests in large measure on the Press, that is on the newspapers and periodicals, which are the main source from which information, discussion, and advocacy reach the public." (1)

1. Royal Commission on the Press 1947-9. Report, paras.362-3.

There is abundant evidence that newspaper editors and reporters alike see at least a significant part of their responsibility and <u>raison d'être</u> in this way, and see this argument as applicable to the reporting of local government. In demonstrating this it is convenient to separate the argument into its less and more controversial parts. The less controversial and universally accepted argument is that it is part of the objects of a local weekly paper to provide information about the dealings and activities of public bodies, especially local government, so that the elector shall be in a position to make an informed choice as to whom he supports at the polls, shall be in a position to know how the money which is collected from him in rates is being spent, and shall be sufficiently informed about local issues to be in a position to make use if he wishes of the other forms of political participation open to him. (The demand by journalists for a right to publish committee recommendations in advance of the council meeting[1] is justified in terms of the opportunities it provides for public lobbying before the final decision is taken.) More controversial is the argument, particularly when applied to local democracy, that the newspaper should be a vehicle of criticism leading public opinion with its own judgement.

1. see above, Chapter 1.

The acceptance of the duty of information in local democracy can be supported by reference to the evidence of press organisations to the Royal Commission. The Newspaper Society argued that "the proper function of a newspaper" was inter alia, "to report fairly, accurately and objectively local and/or national and/or international news, according to its particular field" and "to provide, when necessary, fair, accurate and objective background information to enable the public to understand news items".(1) The editor of the Sheffield Telegraph thought that it was not "always realised the extent to which, even though we are fighting competition, we are aware of our responsibilities to the local community (in the reporting of local government). We do not measure by news value alone."(2) The editor of the Bolton Evening News argued that "to some extent it lies in the hands of the Press to educate the public...We report town council meetings at greater length and with more prominence than their sheer news value would indicate, because we think it is good for the people to read about them; and we are in the happy position of being able to tell them so".(3) In an article on "The Press in Local Democracy" in Justice of the Peace & Local Government Review a

1. Ibid, 366.

2. Ibid, Minutes of Evidence, Question 3749.

3. Ibid, q. 9905.

"weekly newspaper journalist" stressed the importance of the local weekly newspaper in recording and publicising the "manner in which the laws passed at Westminster are being carried out in small and large places throughout the kingdom."(1) But the argument appears most trenchantly in recurrences of the perennial admission controversy. National and local newspapers give frequent voice to it: the following quotation from a leading article in the Daily Mirror is characteristic of hundreds of editorials in both types of papers.

> "The vital watch-dog of local affairs is the local newspaper, seeing and reporting the dispersal of public funds.
>
> Some councils still bar newspapers from significant meetings and decide the course of public spending in the secrecy of a locked committee room.
>
> If public confidence is to be reassured, councils must keep their doors open so that the spending of public money is always under a watchful eye."(2)

Interviews with editors and journalists confirmed that they regard the provision of information on local government as an obligation in these terms; this was indicated not merely by their recurrent specific references in conversation to the concept of the newspaper as a 'watch-dog of the public interest', but also by the frequency with which 'public duty'

1. Justice of the Peace and Local Government Review, Vol.CXV No. 49, p.777, 5 December 1951.

2. Daily Mirror, 22 November 1965. Observer, 21 November 1965. Sunday Telegraph, 30 January 1966, Hendon Times, 2 July 1965.

was used to justify the inclusion of more local government material than would normally be regarded as justified by its own 'news value'. Their occasionally voiced scepticism about both the degree of public interest in and the news-value of local government is subordinated to what they see as a basic responsibility of their work.

Among the participants in local government themselves can be found general support for the idea that the press has a responsibility to report local government affairs fully. Local authorities are, in fact, not averse to complaining when they feel that they have received less than adequate press coverage of their activities.(1) The records of the A.M.C. contain references to the need for greater publicity for local government, and one minute records a request from Wansted and Woodford Borough Council for the Association to "press for an increased allocation of newsprint for local newspapers in order to enable such newspapers to publish more fully the reports on the activities of local authorities".(2) When Ramsgate Borough Council opened its Committees to the press one councillor went as far as to say: "We are inviting these people to come to committee meetings. If they do not come we shall want to know the reason why they do not come".(3)

1. See (e.g.) County Councils Gazette July 1965 p.185; Sir Harold Banwell in Public Administration, Winter 1963.

2. A.M.C. Minutes (General Purpose Committee) 1/1951 (p.63); also Municipal Review, September 1951, p.157; Minutes, 1949, p.20.

3. Thanet Times, 7 July 1964.

This interest in getting local government into print can be traced partly to the desire of councillors to see their efforts and exertions recognised, and partly to the growing appreciation within the local government of the practical usefulness of good public relations, but there is also a feeling that it is necessary to democracy that the press should provide a service of information to the electorate. Not surprisingly, there is warmer support for this view among councillors in opposition than among those in the majority group at any given time: it is none the less true that hardly anyone in local government could be found to dissent from it. Successive Ministers of Housing and Local Government have also subscribed to it, as is evidenced by Mr. Brooke's attitude in the admission controversy and Mr. Crossman's remarks to the A.M.C. (1)

The idea that the local weekly newspaper can be a vehicle of criticism and comment as well as of information is not quite so widely held. The newspapers and journalists organisations do not hesitate to argue that "it is an important and proper function of the Press to comment on matters of public interest for the guidance of the public" (2) to "diagnose, express and lead public opinion and to give

1. For Mr. Brooke see 553 H.C.Deb.Col.1566; For Mr. Crossman see above, Chapter 1. pp.37-38 and footnotes

2. From the evidence of Odhams Press Ltd., Royal Commission on the Press 1947-9. Report para. 366.

expression to this in the form of letters to the editor"(1). The widespread existence of local monopoly is often held to weaken this argument: the Royal Commission thought that "Even the most virtuous local monopolist cannot give his readers the enlivening clash of argument on local affairs which two papers in different ownership can provide"(2). Fewer participants in local government can be found to support the notion of the newspaper "leading public opinion", and a minority of the weekly newspaper editors interviewed in the course of this study were not willing to take such a responsibility.

The extent to which newspapers voice opinions and criticism will inevitably be discussed in analysis of press treatment of local government, but the focus of this study is that part of the newspaper's work which concerns the furnishing of information, since it is on this role rather than the role of opinion-leader that press demands for greater facilities and rights of admission are based. Newspaper editors and reporters argue that they should be given rights and facilities to enable them to report local government because the reports they publish are an important part of the democratic process: they are the principal means by which the electorate can be enabled to make an informed

1. Evidence of the Newspaper Society, ibid.
2. ibid. para. 355.

judgment about the conduct of local government. Any elector or group of electors may, of course, choose between contending parties or candidates on grounds other than their record or policies, such as their national political attachment or social status, or may refrain from exercising the local franchise altogether. The press argument remains that such information as is necessary to the making of a considered voting choice should be available to the elector, whether he wishes to make use of it or not. The surveys carried out for the Maud Committee indicated that 68% of electors regarded local papers as their most recent source of news about their local council. (79% of informants read local papers regularly, and only in London was the figure lower than 75%). Moreover, 52% of the electors said that they would like to know more about local government.(1)

It can be argued that the journalist's characteristic assumptions about voting and his undeveloped theory of participation are misconcieved or naive, and even that they represent a kind of journalist's myth about politics, but the fact remains that the whole of the admission controversy is based, so far as the press is concerned, on assumptions of this nature. The whole case may well be open to question in its assumptions about participation, research into which

1. Maud Report, Vol.3 ('The Local Government Elector') pp. 28-30 and Tables 36-42 and Vol.2 ('The Local Government Councillor') p. 234.

is as yet at a very early stage in this country. The purpose of this study is to open the case to question in another area, namely the capacity of the newspapers themselves to carry out the role they define as theirs. Is the local press capable of providing the information necessary for those forms of participation which it sees itself as fostering? In so far as it does not provide adequate information, is it restricted by external factors (as it claims) or by internal factors? Are newspapers inhibited primarily by local authority secrecy or by their own limitations?

In order to pursue this question it is necessary to set out a working definition of what, in local government terms, the 'necessary information' would include. To inform the intending participant, whether lobbyist or merely voter, it would need the following characteristics:

(a). Comprehensiveness. It must be sufficient to give a picture of the exercise of power by all local authorities the area of which the newspaper in question purports to serve.

(b). Accuracy. It must be accurate and undistorted.

(c). Political depth. It must indicate the political process by which council decisions are reached so that the elector can perceive where the responsibility for policies lies.

(d). Analytical depth. It must be sufficient to give the elector the context and implications of any decision.

Certain practical implications of these criteria are immediately obvious. A newspaper in a non-county borough which failed to report the activities of its county council would obviously fail to fulfil (a) of the above criteria, for instance. A newspaper which failed to indicate the existence of political groups in a local authority where these were powerful would fail to fulfil (c); a newspaper which suppressed information in order to protect those responsible for an action from criticism would fail to fulfil (b).

The criteria of political and analytical depth can best be illustrated by reference to a hypothetical instance. A decision of a local authority would appear in minutes in the following form:

> "It was resolved to proceed with the preparation of plans for the building of an Art Gallery."

A newspaper reporting the decision would normally give more detail in the form of speeches made when the resolution was passed and extracts from the report of the committee submitting the resolution. But if the political picture is to be clear to the reader, then he must also be told who voted for the resolution, who opposed it, and what pressures were known to be at work. An account including these factors might run as follows:

> "...the decision was carried by the majority Labour group with the support of the two Liberal members, although one Labour member, Councillor Smith, voted with the Conservatives

against the resolution. It is understood that the Art Gallery issue was the subject of heated discussion in Tuesday's three-hour meeting of Labour group members, when it was pointed out that the party has been pledged to the new Art Gallery by their last election manifesto. The Conservatives have been critical of the cost of the project since it was first suggested by Labour members, and despite strong pleas from prominent Conservatives in the Arts Society, Conservative Councillors voted against it without exception."

Such a report, although certainly not a perfect representation of the events concerned, would give a clearer picture than the first of the political circumstances of the decision.

The analytical depth criterion would require another type of background information to be included with the same report to explain circumstances of which the reader might not be aware. It might be necessary to point out, for instance, that the Council were in a position to draw on a bequest or trust to finance part of the project, or that the cost of the building would leave only a very small amount of money for the acquisition of pictures. It might be helpful to point out whether or not neighbouring authorities were building Art Galleries which would be sufficient to fill local needs, or to discuss what alternatives were open to the Council. Clearly, a newspaper reporter is constantly to required to make his own judgment as to what "background information" is relevant and necessary to the clarification of the item of news he is reporting. The question here to

be answered is whether the "background" given to local government reporting is of a type and sufficient to make clear to the reader what has happened, who has taken part, and what choice is open to him to exercise his democratic privilege in the light of it. In the example given, the elector might properly require to know which groups had voted for and against the Gallery, why they had done so, what alternative possibilities were open to them, and what were the consequences of their decision.

These four criteria are an amplification of a responsibility in local government journalism which the press claims to undertake. They are also criteria which the national newspapers endeavour to fulfil in reporting national government, with varied success. It is one of the purposes of this study to decide whether these criteria are fulfilled in local government reporting by local newspapers, and to what limitations their attempts are subject.

The scope of the analysis.

The following two chapters constitute an attempt to establish the nature and range of local government reporting in the English weekly press and the extent to which this reporting conforms to the criteria already set out. Such an inquiry necessitates detailed analysis of newspaper content which must for practicability be limited to a small number of newspapers over a short period. It has, however, proved possible to reconcile the limitations imposed by the

necessity for detailed study with the desirability of establishing general patterns for the whole of the country. Two fairly characteristic newspapers in one town, namely Banbury, have been subjected to a content analysis for the whole of 1964, and the nature of their local government reporting is described below. Wider but less detailed study of the provincial weekly press has been undertaken with the object of discovering divergences from the Banbury picture: these divergences proved to be in the nature of isolated exceptions to a general pattern. This wider study adds the dimensions of general application to the principal characteristics of local government reporting by the Banbury papers.

CHAPTER 3.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPORTING IN BANBURY NEWSPAPERS.

Background.

Banbury is an important market town for a large rural area which has undergone rapid population expansion as a result of the importation of overspill from London and factories from the Midlands; in 1964 its population was about 23,000. It is a non-county borough with a charter dating from the 16th. century and a commission of the peace; it is in the administrative county of Oxfordshire, the headquarters of which is in Oxford. The Banbury authority was not possessed of extensive delegated powers, the county having delegated planning responsibilities not to the second-tier authorities but to area sub-committees, one of which comprised Banbury Borough and Banbury Rural District.(1)

Two weekly newspapers are published in the town, the Banbury Advertiser and the Banbury Guardian. The Advertiser

1. See further Potts, A History of Banbury; Stacey, Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury; Kelly's Directory of Banbury (1965).

is the smaller in size, establishment and circulation, and is owned by the editor and another Banbury businessman as a private company. The Guardian, which was founded in 1838 to defend the new Poor Law, was owned by the Potts family until recently and edited from 1838 until 1947 successively by William Potts the founder and William Potts his grandson.[1] In 1961 the Guardian was bought by a Labour M.P., Mr. Woodrow Wyatt, who has developed the paper's printing works into a centre for web offset colour printing. At the time Mr. Wyatt's other newspapers published in Birmingham, Devizes, Swindon, Marlborough and elsewhere were all printed in the Banbury works of his firm Papers and Publications Ltd, which also prints a large number of trade and other periodicals under contract arrangements. The web offset method enables more frequent and more satisfactory use of black and white photography in the Guardian, which also regularly contains one or more colour pictures.

Both the Advertiser and the Guardian circulate beyond the boundaries of Banbury, but while the vast majority of the Advertiser's circulation is within the borough, more than half the Guardian's is outside it. The Advertiser does, however, publish a Chipping Norton Advertiser which is in effect a localised edition of the Banbury paper; the Guardian does not publish separate editions, but devotes a separate

1. V. Potts, op. cit.

page in each issue to Chipping Norton. The circulation area of the Guardian and to a lesser extent of the Advertiser includes the following local authority areas, for which approximate population figures for 1964 are given. The last column in the table gives the Guardian's estimated household coverage for that area.

(1)

Table I

	Population.	Gdn. coverage of households.
Oxfordshire:		
Banbury Borough.	23,000	97%
Banbury Rural District.	16,000	80%
Chipping Norton Borough.	4,000	21%
Chipping Norton R.D.	16,000	not known
Northamptonshire:		
Brackley Borough.	3,500	76%
Brackley R.D.	11,500	64%
Warwickshire:		
Southam R.D.	17,000	20%

References are also found occasionally in the Banbury papers to some neighbouring authorities such as Ploughley R.D.C.(Oxon) Shipston-on-Stour R.D.C. and Stratford R.D.C.(Warwickshire).

1. The figures for household coverage are based on the audited net sale figures and were issued by the Guardian; the population figures are based on the Registrar General's estimate (to the nearest 500).

One daily (evening) paper, the Oxford Mail, is sold in the area, and provides a Banbury page each day. It has nothing like the readership in the area of the weekly papers, to which the detailed analysis is confined. It will, however, be referred to from time to time on account of its rather more ambitious local government reporting.

Explanation of Method.

The content of the Guardian and Advertiser for each week of 1964 was analysed and classified in several ways. The unit of measurement was throughout the column of print and tenths thereof: the more usual "column inch" measurement would have been unsatisfactory for comparative purposes because of differences in the column width and type size of the papers.(1) In the tabular analysis percentage figures are given. In all calculations certain items, listed below, have not been included.

(1). The Chipping Norton Advertiser was disregarded, with the result that virtually no references to Chipping Norton are recorded in the case of the Advertiser.

1. The Advertiser type area was 16" x 11"; there were six columns to a page and the paper was always sixteen pages in length. The Guardian type area was 19" x 14", with nine columns to a page. It had an average of 19 pages, fluctuating between 16 and 30. The paper was sometimes made up in two separate sections.

(2). The Banbury Advertiser's weekly column of "News from our Neighbours", which consisted entirely of extracts from other weekly newspapers beyond the Banbury circulation area, was ignored.

(3). References to the routine activities of the police, fire, ambulance and civil defence services have not been counted. References to the policy, administration, equipment, prospects and problems of these services were counted. Thus a description of a fire, although it referred to the attendance of emergency services, would not be counted; criticisms of fire brigade equipment or police policy and description of reorganisation plans would be counted.

Space given to local government.

The figures in Table II serve to bear out the argument that newspapers accept a responsibility to report local government. The figure of almost 10% /PTO

Table II

	Advertiser	Guardian
Columns devoted to local government.	210.3	406.2
Total columns	4992	9234
Average percentage of advertising matter.	54%	54%
Space devoted to local government as % of all editorial (i.e. non-advertising) space.	9.3%	10.0%

of total editorial space given to local government can be compared only with sport (13% in the Guardian, 15% in the Advertiser.) and even the same paper's widely renowned and extensive agricultural news and features fell well behind. Even more convincing is the allocation to local government of the main front page headline of the paper: in 48% of issues of the Advertiser local government was the headline story, and in the Guardian the figure as high as 62%

Distribution between local authorities.

The distribution of space between the different local authorities is shown in Table III.

Table III

Percentage of total local government space devoted to:	Advertiser.	Guardian.
Oxfordshire County Council.	16	15
Banbury Borough Council.	62	46
Banbury Rural District Council.	7	5
Chipping Norton B.C. (1)	1	7
Chipping Norton R.D.C. (1)	0	2
Northamptonshire C.C.	less than 1	1
Brackley B.C.	5	5
Brackley R.D.C.	4	3
Warwickshire C.C.	less than 1	1
Southam R.D.C.	less than 1	2
Shipston-on-Stour R.D.C.	less than 1	1
Parish Councils.	5	10
Other authorities.	0	1
Items of general application.	less than 1	1

1. see above. p. 66

A crude measurement of space alone is not, of course, sufficient to assess the degree to which the reader is informed of the activities of a local authority: the characteristics of expansiveness or conciseness could reduce the meaningfulness of such figures considerably. But it is still noteworthy that the authority which controlled almost all major and many minor local government services throughout all but a small part of the circulation areas of the papers, namely Oxfordshire County Council, was the subject of only 15 or 16% of the local government reporting. About three-quarters of the Banbury Guardian's sale was within the area of Oxfordshire, and the figure for the Advertiser was almost certainly higher, yet in both papers the county reporting was a relatively small proportion of the total. In the Advertiser it contrasted with the 62% of space devoted to the Borough Council.

The Guardian clearly gave more space to the smaller towns and the rural districts than the Advertiser (whose Chipping Norton paper is, it should be remembered, not being considered here), although the Advertiser did give slightly more space to Brackley Borough Council than the Guardian. It was striking that although the Guardian sold more than half as many papers in the Banbury Rural District as it did in the Borough the Rural District Council had only 5% of space as against the Borough's 46%. The Guardian also sold two-and-a-half times as many copies in the Brackley R.D. as in

Brackley itself, yet Brackley Borough Council still had 5% of space to the Rural District's 3%. Both of these Brackley authorities representing one-seventh of the Guardian's sale are second-tier authorities in Northamptonshire, the County Council of which had only 1% of the paper's local government space. The figure of 7% of space given by the Guardian to Chipping Norton Borough Council seems remarkably high when it is noted that the Guardian sold only 275 of its almost 17,000 weekly sale there.

The Guardian's larger coverage of rural authorities is illustrated also by its 10% of space given to parish councils, as opposed to 5% in the Advertiser. In both papers most of this space was given to a number of the larger parishes such as Kingham, Charlbury, and Hook Norton, and although the Guardian reported a larger number of parishes, most parish councils were unreported. One Northamptonshire parish, Woodford-cum-Membris, was extensively reported in the Guardian largely because the current proposal to close the Great Central Railway line and the Woodford Halse station and works threatened the employment of almost every member of the working population there.

Thus, to summarise,

(1). The Banbury Borough Council was given far more space than any other authority in both papers (nearly two-thirds of the local government space in the Advertiser).

(2). The Oxfordshire County Council, with 15% and 16% fell a long way behind the Borough in allocation of space. Similarly, Northamptonshire County Council received much less space than the Northamptonshire district councils.

(3). The Guardian gave more space than did the Advertiser to other borough councils and rural district councils, but the difference is not great if the allowance is made for the fact that the Advertiser left Chipping Norton to its sister paper there. The Guardian did, however, give more space than the Advertiser to Parish Councils.

(4). The Rural District Councils generally receive less space than the borough councils in the same area (enormously less in the case of Banbury R.D.).

(5). These differences do not, with certain exceptions, correspond to differences in the circulation of the newspapers between the areas concerned: the newspapers often give less attention to authorities in whose area their circulation is relatively higher. The exceptions are the greater predominance of Banbury Borough in the Advertiser, which has a town-based circulation, and the small amount of space given to fringe areas of circulation such as Shipston-on-Stour R.D., and outham R.D.

(6). The differences in space devoted to the various authorities do not correspond to the differences in powers and importance, since the county districts received vastly more attention than the counties.

Content.

In order to examine the characteristics of newspaper local government reporting it is necessary to analyse the structure of the content. Table IV is an analysis of the reporting of Banbury Borough Council in terms of the types of material represented. (The other authorities will be analysed separately). It will be seen from this that the principal component was the reporting of council meetings, which in the Advertiser comprised as much as 35% of the total. The monthly meeting of the council almost always claimed the front page headlines in the week concerned, and reports of it would occasionally be carried over into the following week's issue if there was a large amount of material.(1) These reports hardly ever took the old form of a continuous verbatim account of the proceedings, but were divided up so that each item discussed at the meeting became a separate story; sometimes the entire front page of the paper would be occupied by apparently different items all drawn from the same council meeting. Longer reports would quote several of the speakers, but usually in reported speeches rather than direct quotation, and seldom extensively. Where a vote was taken the numbers for and against were sometimes recorded, but usually without reference to names or to whether or not the division followed party lines. (It was

1. See (e.g.) Advertiser, 5 February, 2 December, 1964.

Table IV

Category of content (BANBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL only).	as % of local government material in Banbury Advertiser	in Banbury Guardian
A. Council meetings.	35	21
B. Committee reports & council press releases.	11	17
C. Committee Meetings.	0	0
D. Factual reporting of events, eg. appointments, ceremonies, election results, social occasions.	19	16
E. Meetings of political parties and pressure groups.	10	7
F. Statements & publications of parties and groups.	8	10
G. Letters.	3	1
H. Court and public inquiry reports.	1	2
I. 'Interview stories'.	5	18
J. Background and speculative material.	5	4
K. Editorial comment.	3	4

often, therefore, difficult to see why a debate which appeared to be tending to one conclusion ended in a vote recording the opposite.) Indeed, references to the parties were usually altogether absent from reports of council meetings (unless they were adverted to by councillors themselves) except during mayoral and aldermanic elections, at the times of council elections, and in discussion of council house management policy.(1) There was no marked difference between the two papers in this respect.

A second major constituent, larger in the Guardian than in the Advertiser, was material taken from the statements and committee minutes issued to the press by the council. On the Tuesday before each council meeting a press conference was held at which reporters were issued with the minutes of committees which were to be dealt with on the following Monday. The reporters were given about half an hour in which to study the documents, after which the Town Clerk, the Mayor and occasionally a committee chairman would make statements and answer questions. Material based on this meeting and these documents was then used extensively in that week's papers, both of which were on sale by the week-end before the council meeting. (The possibility that items for discussion by the council meeting could thus already have

1. See Advertiser, 4 March 1964, for unusual allegations of a 'filibuster'.

Table V

Category of content: CHIPPING NORTON BOROUGH COUNCIL	as % of local government material in Banbury Guardian.
A. Council meetings.	31
B. Committee reports and press releases.	0
C. Committee meetings.	51
D. Factual reports of events, appointments etc.	9
E. Meetings of parties and pressure groups.	2
F. Statements and publications of parties and groups.	3
G. Letters.	0
H. Court and public inquiry reports.	0
I. 'Interview stories'.	3
J. Background.	0
K. Editorial comment.	1

been the subject of public reaction and controversy and the lobbying of councillors was expressly envisaged when the press conference system was introduced.) Like Council reports, these committee reports were generally broken up into short items under separate headlines; those not referring to delegated powers had to be prefaced by such explanatory formulae as "If the council approves the recommendation of its housing committee..." The Advertiser's lower proportion of material from this source may be attributable to the fact that the paper went to press on the Tuesday afternoon, which left very little time for the preparation of copy and made it necessary for the allocation of space to be largely predetermined.

No Committees of the council were open to the press or public, and therefore no such reports were to be found in the papers. An instructive comparison can be made with the Guardian's reporting of Chipping Norton Borough Council, where almost all committees were open and committee reports (Table V) amounted to more than half the total space allocated. The fact that Chipping Norton Borough's Guardian space is so large when compared with other authorities and in the light of the paper's very small sale there may be a result of this ready availability of copy: the converse of this could be argued of Oxfordshire Council's few public meetings. (1)

1. see below p. 86

19% of the Advertiser and 16% of the Guardian space was given to straightforward factual accounts of social and ceremonial events, announcements of appointments, obituaries of local government figures and election results. Letters accounted for 3% and 1% respectively, and court and public inquiry reports concerning local government for 1% and 2%.

Despite the general absence of party politics from council reports, the subject was still to be found in the papers where the parties and pressure groups provided "copy" more directly. Statements issued by the parties and by such pressure groups as the Chamber of Commerce, the National Farmers' Union, the Banbury Historical Society,(1) and the Citizens' Organization for the Redevelopment of Banbury claimed 8% and 10%, and reports of their meetings 10% and 18% respectively in the Advertiser and Guardian. The Guardian's higher figure once again reflects its larger reporting staff, which enabled it to cover more meetings than the Advertiser.

The remaining three categories, which between them made up 13% in the Advertiser and 26% in the Guardian are in some ways the most interesting. In category I - here described as 'interview stories' - are grouped those stories for which the newspaper has set out to obtain by interviews a picture

1. The Banbury Historical Society successfully persuaded the Borough Council to buy at a London Sale for use in the town wooden panelling thought to have been that originally lost from Banbury's historic 'Globe Room'.

of public reaction to events or of the official line of spokesmen of various bodies. This must be distinguished from the use of interviews to explore the political or administrative background to a story, where the comments of those interviewed might not be so extensively quoted or attributed. In the cases in this category the newspapers were concerned to establish what had happened, not why, and to enliven the account with comment from those most concerned. There were, for instance, several reports of flooding of the town's sewers, extensively quoting the angry complaints of the residents affected. An attempt to discover and explain how the sewers come to be in this state would not have been so classified. Similarly, an interview with an evicted council tenant giving his reactions to the decision [1] was classified in this category; an investigation of council eviction policy attempting to explain why the decision was taken would not have been done. In this category the Guardian's superior resources are again illustrated: it had 18% of material of this kind as against 5% in the Advertiser.

In the small category of "Background and speculative material" - 5% and 4% in the Advertiser and Guardian respectively come the few attempts of the newspapers to go beyond reports of meetings, documents and attributable quotations to give some background information not otherwise

10. e.g. Guardian, 6 August.

evident or to speculate as to what might be the political factors to be considered. On one occasion[1] the Guardian pointed out that, unusually, the public gallery was full at the council meeting, mostly with members of the Chamber of Commerce: it further alleged that advance lobbying by the same people had been the reason for the passing at the meeting of an amendment altering references to rentals in the Development area in a committee report. On another occasion[2] a signed (syndicated) article in the Guardian discussed the arguments for and against municipal subsidies of the arts (concluding favourably); in another[3] the state and use of the town library was discussed. A most untypical article in the Advertiser[4] speculated fairly accurately about which councillors would be elected alderman on the basis of the relative vulnerability of the seats in which by-elections would thereby be caused. On one occasion[5] the Advertiser assessed briefly but helpfully the problems and feasibility of the Development plan on which the council had decided, reviewing among other things the likelihood of Ministry permission and approval being granted: such things were not evident from a report of the meeting alone. But these cases were exceptional, as the percentage figures show.

1. ibid 25 March.
2. ibid 3 December.
3. ibid 23 December.
4. Advertiser 13 May.
5. ibid 1 April.

Editorial comment was a small category - 3% in the Advertiser and 4% in the Guardian. There was, in fact, no "leader" in the strict sense in the Advertiser, and the percentage figure refers to those items in the front page diary column "Around and About" (written by the editor) which were comment rather than news. The Guardian leading articles were invariably short - usually less than 150 words. In both papers comment tended to be in the most general terms, moderate in tone, and hardly ever involving commitment on one side or other in party politics. Exhortations to "come out and vote" (regardless of party) were a favourite theme, as were "looking after the old folks" and keeping down the rates. There was occasional criticism of the conduct of council meetings, which brought forth an unusually biting attack in the Guardian[1] on the "sad travesty of a debate" and "public pantomime of party politics" which took place over council house rents.

The small amount of background, speculative material and perceptive comment in the papers meant that the provision of an informative account of municipal government depended in all but a few cases entirely on the extent to which the received material - meetings, documents and statements - was sufficiently informative. Clearly, if all the ramifications of local politics and administration were self-evident from

1. Guardian 27 February.

the regular reports of meetings and committees and the statements of the parties and groups, then there would be no need for newspapers to supplement this information. If the alternatives to and implications of a committee decision were clear from the minutes and meetings and from the public controversy of the pressure groups, then these factual reports could stand alone as an account of what had taken place; if the nature of party caucus activity and the responsibility for decisions were evident from the remarks of the party spokesman in the council chamber or public meetings, there would be need to go further. But this was not generally the case. Such an account of local government would be as deficient as an account of national government which was confined to extracts from Hansard and party press statements.

The picture which the newspapers painted of Banbury local government was one of a system in which party politics was of little significance except at election time, during the election of mayor and aldermen, and in certain discussions concerning council houses. For the rest of the year it was not clear what were the groupings when votes were taken in council, which party the speakers belonged to, or why on some occasions debate and vote seemed to tend in opposite directions. There was no suggestion that either party's councillors met in advance of the meeting to discuss the agenda and agree on which way to vote, still less of which members of the party might have the most influence in such

decisions. No latent or actual divisions within the parties were reported to exist, nor was it clear whether particular members or groups of members exercised decisive influence on any subject. Indeed, the reader might well be left with the impression that the most powerful councillor was the mayor, together with the handful of members who spoke most often at the meetings.

All this was far from reality. To establish a determinative picture of the events of 1964 in defiance of the newspapers and without their contacts and resources is very difficult even with the aid of hindsight, but some clear indications emerge even from limited investigation. Most obviously, the activities of the political parties were of paramount importance throughout the year, not merely at election time. After May the Council had a tiny Labour majority, the aldermen and councillors numbering:

Labour.	13
Conservative.	12
Independent Socialist.	1 (an ex-Labour councillor)

With his casting vote the Mayor, a Conservative, could in effect veto the proposals of the Labour Group whenever Councillor Ryan (Independent Socialist) did not vote with them. Votes in the council chamber generally followed these party lines, and both parties held caucus or group meetings regularly before council meetings to discuss the agenda for the next meeting and to decide which way to vote on the items to be dealt with. (This was done less formally in the

Conservative than in the Labour party.) It is not merely probable but admitted that tensions existed between various groups in the parties and affected the course of these meetings: of this the newspapers told nothing. Moreover, the parties and particular groups within the parties were subject to a great deal of lobbying by particular interests; on only one occasion was this phenomenon acknowledged to exist, and then only by the Guardian.(1) Even when the newspaper took pride in having unearthed a 'good story', the same limitations were evident. The issue of whether or not a road passing through the Waterworks should be open to the public provided such a story, and featured particularly prominently in the Guardian. But the fact that this controversy was fought and decided on a rigidly partisan basis, Labour and Conservative members taking strictly opposite views, was absent from the report, in which no party labels were mentioned.(2)

Very little was done to explain the background or context to council decisions. The exception to this was the biggest issue of all, the redevelopment of the town. Here much of the controversy was provided ready made by the various pressure groups and the parties, whose meetings, statements and open disputes provided good copy for the papers. In addition each tried to assess the practicability of the scheme and its likelihood of execution.(3) But even

1. see above p. 81

2. Banbury Guardian 1 July 1965.

3. see Advertiser 1 July 1964.

in this case many areas remained undiscussed, particularly the activities of the planning authority, Oxfordshire County Council and of the Joint County and Banbury Borough Developement Sub-Committee. It appears from the newspaper accounts that the Redevelopment issue involved simply a two-sided argument between the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the Borough Council, whereas in fact the County, as the planning authority, was no passive partner but rather sought to persuade the Borough Council to accept the Ministry view at one stage.(1)

In general, the papers' treatment of Oxfordshire County Council was even less realistic than that of the Borough. It must be remembered that the amount of space devoted to the County was only 16% in the Advertiser and 15% in the Guardian; an analysis of this space is given in Table VI. The percentage of reports of meetings seems low until it is recalled that the County meetings numbered only four per year (in February, May, July and November). Apart from one unique and brief reference to "Labour group" in the Guardian (1st May) and the citing of party labels at elections there was no mention of party or group politics on the County Council. In fact, there was a consistent Labour group

1. see (e.g.) Report of County planning Committee (Appendix IV) presented to Quarterly Meeting of the Council, 24 July 1964.

Table VI

Category of content (OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL)	as % of local government material in Banbury Advertiser.	in Banbury Guardian.
A. Council meetings.	25	11
B. Committee reports & press releases.	14	20
C. Committee meetings.	4	0
D. Factual reports of events, appointments etc.	11	4
E. Meetings of parties & pressure groups.	2	5
F. Statements & publications of parties & groups.	17	20
G. Letters.	1	less than 1
H. Court & public inquiry reports.	9	10
I. 'Interview stories'.	12	20
J. Background.	4	5
K. Editorial comment.	1	4

on the County Council at this period in which Banbury members were particularly active. There was also a large although less cohesive Conservative group who exercised considerable influence over voting especially to committee seats and chairmanships. Many councillors, were however, independent in attitude and more inclined to be loyal to their locality than to a party. Throughout the period it is obvious that over most issues the council followed the lead of the small group of committee chairman closest to the officers and led by the Earl of Macclesfield, who had been chairman for over a quarter of a century. Although a complex situation, it was hardly one that the newspapers would be expected to ignore, as they did. It is surely remarkable for instance that the Guardian could have reported a proposal to limit the period of office of the chairman of the County Council without mentioning the fact that the Earl of Macclesfield was occupying the chair for the 27th. successive year and that the proposal originated from and was supported only by the Labour group.(1)

There was no attempt at any time in the year to examine the effects of and reasons for the County Council's policies in its major services, Education, Planning, Fire, Police, Highways and Child Care. Only the Ambulance service was at all exposed to newspaper examination, and that because the ambulance drivers' Trade Union issued a report objecting strongly to the proposed reorganisation of ambulance work in

1. 30 July 1964.

the County; The Union's criticisms were extensively reported in the Guardian on two occasions.(1) It is this which accounts for the higher figure of 20% for statements and publications of parties and groups in the Guardian - the rest were almost entirely short summaries of each party's policies published at election time. The County's education policy only gained the attention of the papers when a press conference was held in Banbury by the Committee Chairman to advertise and explain the proposed reorganisation of secondary education in the area, and the material which appeared was entirely derived from this official source. The small amount and limited scope of reporting of the County Council failed, therefore, to give any impression of the extent and importance to Banbury of the County's powers and services. Many of these services were only mentioned in the papers when they were referred to in the Borough Council meeting, when some petition was got up for (e.g.) road improvements, on the occasion of the four meetings of the County Council itself, or on the publication prior to the meeting of the Agenda (a document of some 250 pages).

Analysis of the other authorities served on the same principle is too lengthy to reproduce here. Broadly speaking the reporting of the out-of-town authorities shows an even greater - almost complete - dependence on meetings and agendas, without the supplementary activity of the parties and pressure groups. Organised parties and groups were less in

1. 30 July 1964; 27 August 1964.

evidence in the politics of the rural areas and small towns, and various informal groupings of independents usually controlled the councils. The borough of Brackley was at this time passing through a phase of turbulent politics, however, and much of this came out openly in the papers. Allegations and counter allegations, demands for resignation, the refusal of some councillors to remain in the Council chamber while another councillor was present, all provided good copy. But the papers never explored beyond the public statements the reasons for these violent controversies, or for the lack of progress on the Brackley Industrial Estate and the council's astonished discovery that the Developer under contract with them was receiving bankruptcy orders. Only the waves on the surface of Brackley's troubled government were evident from the local press.

Banbury Rural District, an important sales area particularly for the Guardian, was one of the least well served authorities. Its meetings were regularly reported, but from these reports it was impossible to discover much about the activities or the politics of the council.

Revealing explanations of council decisions of any of these authorities were exceptional. One of the few such examples concerned a dispute between Shipston-on-Stour Parish Council, the Ministry of Transport and the Royal Fine Arts Commission over the size and type of lamp-posts on the main road through the town. In this case the issues and

machinations involved were clearly explained in a brief article in the Guardian of 4 June. There were very few other examples of this kind to be found in either paper.

Distortion.

There was virtually no evidence of distortion of news by the Banbury papers for political or commercial benefit. (The broader question of whether commercial or political interests limited the field which the newspapers were prepared to cover or caused them to adopt a less than critical attitude to some matters is dealt with in chapter 6). Deliberate distortion or suppression of news did not appear to have been a feature of Banbury journalism. In political matters, it might be expected that the Advertiser would follow, if any, the Conservative interest: such had been its tradition, and the editor's own political convictions were generally Conservative. The Guardian, on the other hand, owned by a Labour M.P., might be expected to behave in the opposite way. Neither did so. The Advertiser did not support either party in comment, and gave no perceptible "slant" to political stories.(1) The Guardian's only deference to its owner's party was its mild recommendation to vote Labour at the time of the General Election: in the local elections it took no stand. Stories were not slanted

1. There was only one apparent exception to this, an Advertiser report of tenants adverse reaction to the Labour councils suspension of sales of council houses, which, it could be argued gave prominence to anti-Labour comment without giving the case for the council's action. (Advertiser 1 July 1964).

to benefit Labour, nor were Labour activities given more prominence than in the Advertiser. Several of the Labour party officials interviewed expressed disapproval of the Guardian's failure to give them the "backing" in local affairs which they thought was due from a Labour-owned paper. The Conservatives occasionally alleged that both papers worked against them, but mostly on the grounds that in photographs of social occasions more prominence was given to Mr. R.H.S.Crossman, who lived near Banbury, than to their member or other Conservatives.(1)

The only incident approaching suppression of news which it was possible to discover in 1964 can probably be ascribed to humanitarian considerations. One of the Borough Council's chief officers was dismissed in the course of the year under section 8 of the Local Government Superannuation Act, 1937, as being "incapable of discharging the duties of his employment by reason ~~by reason of his employment by reason~~ of permanent ill-health or infirmity of body or mind".(2)

1. The newspapers' reply was that Mr. Crossman was of more interest to their readers than Mr. Marten, the member, or local Conservative or Labour politicians; a national Conservative figure would probably have received the same treatment if he had lived locally. (The Advertiser later turned Mr. Crossman's proximity to advantage; when he was appointed Minister of Housing and Local Government they immediately interviewed him to discover his views on local government and Banbury problems in particular; see Advertiser, 4 November.)

2. 1 Edw 8 & 1 Geo 6, c 68 s 8.

His duties were taken over by his deputy, and he was given substantial pension rights; The Council issued a statement recognising that he had over a long period given loyal service,[1] to the borough. The papers published only a brief note emphasising the statement about loyal service. That neither paper mentioned or discussed the curious circumstances which had led up to the dismissal was probably due to concern for the man, who was well known and continued to live in the town.

Inaccuracy.

Distortion apart, inaccuracy in the reporting of local government is more difficult to detect if it concerns the substance rather than the structure, since detection presupposes a detailed knowledge of the events themselves. In the 1964 period no major inaccuracies were observable in the local government reporting, which was clearly done with an adequate knowledge of the basic structure and operations of local government. Minor inaccuracies were, however, more frequent. Names were mis-spelt, remarks attributed to the wrong person, speeches misquoted, offices confused and decisions misunderstood. Almost everybody interviewed, councillors, officers, party officials and private individuals, had some criticism to make of the reliability and accuracy of the newspaper reports, and the Town Clerk

1. Minutes of Finance Committee 388/64.

pointed out that at Press Conferences he was obliged to go to painstaking lengths in explanation in the hope of avoiding misunderstanding and misrepresentation. The newspapers' conduct did not differ markedly; the general picture is not one of hopeless and repeated misrepresentation but of regular minor but annoying inaccuracies.

Thus, to summarise, the Banbury newspapers in their reporting of local government were not guilty of distortion, for political or other reasons, nor were their accounts wildly inaccurate. They were, however, heavily dependent on the "received" material, whether the official "line" of the council as expressed in documents or statements, the expressed views of councillors, or the public statements of the parties and pressure groups. Where, as was often the case, these public utterances were not sufficient to convey the actual political process or to make clear the problems and implications of an argument or decision, the newspapers rarely went further to fill in the gaps. This was bound to mean that the activities of the political parties and the pressure groups and even the basic structure of political responsibility went undescribed, and that the reader was often uninformed of background to decisions which taken at face value might be unintelligible. Even where the newspapers did exercise journalistic initiative in going out to interview people, it was often merely in order to give a more vivid account of the public reaction to an event

rather than to explore the circumstances. These things applied not only to reporting of the Borough Council, but even more conspicuously to the other councils.

CHAPTER 4

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPORTING: THE NATIONAL PATTERN.

How far are the characteristic limitations of local government reporting in Banbury typical of provincial newspapers? The main characteristics to which attention has been drawn can be summarised as follows:

(1). Local government is accorded a substantial proportion of space in the papers, of the order of 10%.

(2). Despite this extensive space allowance, county councils and other authorities outside the place of publication but within the circulation area get very limited coverage.

(3). Reporting gives very little indication of the overt political structure and pattern of local government, and virtually no inkling of the political background to events.

(4). Newspapers very rarely provide background material necessary to assessing the significance, implications or advisability of council decisions.

Any attempt to establish the general applicability of points (1) and (2) requires measurement, which could be undertaken only on a limited scale. Three newspapers from

areas wholly different from Banbury were subjected to content analysis over a 12-month period for this purpose.

To test (3) and (4), however, it was possible to search a much wider range of newspapers for instances of reporting which appeared to depart from the pattern, such as speculative articles, background stories, description of the political and lobbying processes and so on. In addition to the 5 newspapers subjected to content analysis, which were also read for this purpose, the bibliography lists 20 *newspapers of which 26 or more issues were read,*
28 newspapers of which 13 or more issues were read in the period of 1964-1967, and 102 newspapers of which fewer than 13 issues were read. These newspapers provided a wide sample of the total number of newspapers. (see Table VII).

Table VII

Category.	Total No.+	Analysed	26 or More Issues read	13 or More Issues read	1-13 Issues. read.
Provincial Morning.	13	0	2	10	1
Provincial Evening.	64	0	3	9	11
Provincial Sunday.	3	0	0	0	2
Provincial Weekly.	950 approx.	5	15	9	88

+ Figures based on Press Council Report The Press and the People No. 12,1965, Table I. (Not including Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man).

The analysed newspapers.

These three were drawn from areas different from Banbury and from each other. They were:

(1). The Ashton-under-Lyne Reporter, published in the town of that name, which forms part of the Eastern side of the Manchester conurbation, standing on the borders of Lancashire and Cheshire. Ashton-under-Lyne itself, an industrial town, (population 50,000 in 1960), is a non-county borough in the administrative county of Lancashire. Those of its neighbours also reported in the Ashton paper were Audenshaw and Denton Urban Districts (also in Lancashire) and Stalybridge and Dukinfield non-county boroughs (both in Cheshire). The Reporter was one of a group of newspapers of that name circulating in South-East Lancashire, North-East Cheshire and the High Peak. The 10 newspapers had in 1964 a combined circulation of 94,603.(2) The Ashton Reporter, a full-size paper generally of 16 pages, of which on average almost 9 consisted of advertising. There was no other weekly paper serving Ashton but the Manchester and Oldham evening papers circulated in the area.

(2). The Gateshead Post,(3) published in the County Borough of Gateshead, which stands across the river from Newcastle upon Tyne and is part of the Tyneside conurbation. It has much heavy and light industry and a population of 110,000 (1960). The neighbouring urban district of Felling in

1. Analysed for January-December 1966.
2. Audit Bureau of Circulations figure, January-June 1964.
3. Analysed for January-December 1964. Circulation at that time approximately 14,000.

County Durham, a suburb of Gateshead with a population of 30,000, was often reported in the paper. The Gateshead Post, which is not part of a group, dates in its present form from as recently as 1946. It was of tabloid size, usually 16 pages in length; 52% of its space was taken up by advertising.

(3). The Hendon Times. At the beginning of the year studied (January-December 1965), Hendon was a non-county borough in Middlesex; in April of that year it joined with several of its neighbours to form the London borough of Barnet, within the area of the Greater London Council. The Hendon Times was one of a series of papers and of a group circulating over a wide area of the North London suburbs. The papers with which it was most closely connected, the Edgware Times and the Finchley Times had with it a combined A.B.C. circulation of 38,424 in 1964. There was no other weekly paper in Hendon although on the fringes of the area (in Finchley for instance), another series of papers was represented. The London evening newspapers are read in the area and give coverage to the Greater London Council.

The amount of space devoted to local government in each of these three papers was calculated in the same way as it was for the Banbury papers,[1] and the occasions on which local government provided the front main headlines were counted.

1. see above Chapter 3, pp 68-69

These figures are given in the table below:

Table VIII

	% of space other than advertising space given to local government.	% of issues in which local government was main headline.
1. Ashton-under-Lyne Reporter.	13.0	32.0
2. Gateshead Post.	15.0	40.4
3. Hendon Times.	8.4	41.5

These figures support the claim that newspapers generally devote a considerable amount of space and prominence to local government. In Ashton and Gateshead the figure for local government content was considerably higher than in Banbury (where it was 9.3% and 10%), and the Hendon figure of over 8% in a newspaper which carried extensive features. The high Gateshead figure clearly reflects the additional opportunities for reporting provided by the admission of the press to almost all committees of the Gateshead County Borough Council;(1) the relatively low figure for Hendon appears to reflect the very limited opportunities presented by the Barnet Council, which had no open Committees, met in open council only once every six or seven weeks, and did not make committee minutes available in sufficient time for them to be published the week before the council meeting.

1. cf Chipping Norton: Chapter 3, p.78.

Although the figures for front-page headline prominence were higher in Banbury (48% and 62%), figures of over 40% in Hendon and Gateshead suggest that this attention to local government is not merely a feature of small country towns.

Each of the three newspapers covered other authorities within their circulation area, but in almost no case did they do so with the regularity necessary to be informative: in many cases only an occasional meeting would be reported. The Gateshead Post's reporting of Felling urban district council meetings was the most extensive coverage of another authority in any of the three papers, and in this case only five meetings were reported in the course of twelve months. (Some of these were sufficiently lively, owing to the vigorous opposition of the Rent and Ratepayers group, to provide headline stories.) The fact that in the Ashton paper a large number of neighbouring authorities were spasmodically reported was clearly a result of complication in the arrangements by which papers in the group shared whole pages on which features of common interest were placed. The Hendon Times' coverage of authorities other than Hendon was slight, but it would be unsatisfactory to base a judgement on the three months (January to March) in which there were several other authorities on the fringe of the circulation area. After April 1 the only neighbouring authority which came close to the Hendon paper's area was

Brent, to which there were occasional references; on one occasion the paper carried a full report of a Brent council meeting.

In fact this low level of coverage of authorities other than that of the town of publication is more rapidly understood in these essentially urban areas than in rural areas like Banbury. In the three urban areas, neighbouring authorities were on the fringe of the newspapers' circulation areas and would be served by other newspapers (in many cases members of the same group as the newspaper studied). In Banbury and other country towns, authorities other than the town's own authority - such as the rural district council centred on that town - may well account for a major part of the paper's circulation and be served by no other newspapers: in areas of this kind the lack of coverage is of much greater importance.

A much more striking and significant feature of the three papers - again corroborating the Banbury findings - was the absence of reporting of county authorities. This applies with the least force to the Gateshead Post, since Gateshead is a county borough, but its coverage of the neighbouring Felling urban district, which it reckoned to serve, would give the reader no indication at all that most major functions in that area were exercised by Durham County Council. In Ashton-under-Lyne major powers were exercised by Lancashire County Council, but in the course of twelve

months the Reporter had only four items on it, two of them editorial comment of a mildly critical kind of published proposals for traffic and educational reorganisations. No meetings of the County Council were reported, although there was one report of a meeting of the Divisional Educational Executive. Except for the publication of the comprehensive education proposals, the extent of the county council's power and responsibilities in Ashton was not apparent from the Reporter, nor was the political complexion of the council (which had a long history of rivalry between organised Conservative and Labour groups).

Middlesex County Council was the major authority in Hendon for only the first three months of the year in which the Hendon Times was studied. In that fairly short time the only coverage it received was in the form of an 'obituary' on its years of existence published when the Greater London Council took its place. Under the new structure established in April 1965, the new London Borough of Barnet, in which Hendon was included, took over some major powers including education, but the Greater London Council took over responsibility for such important matters as the development plan, main roads, fire and ambulance services and overspill housing. Apart from a reference to ite establishment in a supplement published in April to mark the setting up of the new Barnet Borough Council, the G.L.C. received no coverage whatsoever. No G.L.C. meetings were reported, and apart

from criticisms of it voiced by councillors at Barnet and Brent council meetings (which testify to the importance of the G.L.C.'s activities for the area) its existence was scarcely apparent. As in Banbury, the newspapers in the three areas almost ignored above the borough level, however great or important their powers in the area.

The three papers strongly supported the third and fourth conclusions of the Banbury study, in that they showed a similar absence of political information and background material. The three authorities involved were controlled by organised political groups: in both Ashton and Gateshead the Labour party had a substantial majority in the years studied, while Hendon was controlled by the Conservatives. Opposition groups of Conservatives in Ashton, Conservative-supported Rent and Ratepayers in Gateshead and Labour and Liberals in Hendon also existed. Both between and within these groups there were conflicts and tensions significant for the running of the towns. In the Ashton Reporter the activities of the parties in local government were rarely mentioned (except in listing election candidates and results), and, as in Banbury reports of controversial council debates rarely indicated whether the final vote followed party lines or not, still less whether a 'whip' system operated. As has been mentioned county council politics (apart from election results) were completely absent from the paper.

1. In the Gateshead Post, despite the strong hold of party

politics in the council, there was very little attempt to describe its effects. Debates on many major controversies were reported without reference to the extent to which party or inter-committee politics were involved. A stormy debate over demands for cuts in the estimates was extensively reported in one issue, but speeches were attributed to individuals, and no clue was given as to whether this was a purely personal dispute, an inter-party battle, or a contest between committees of the council.(1) There were, however, a few more exceptions to this pattern in the Gateshead Post than in the other two papers. In one report of a debate on wired television for council estates attention was drawn (in a sub-heading) to the fact that Labour councillors disagreed among themselves on the issue; on rare occasions the fact that the Labour group was using its majority to override opposition was apparent. But these were exceptions and are hardly surprising in view of the fact that Gateshead had what was probably the most strongly established and formalized party politics of the three areas.

The Gateshead Post's reporting of the council's open committees did provide a degree of information on municipal politics and government greater than was available in the other towns in some respects. Surprisingly, even the appointment of headmasters was carried out in public, an

1. Gateshead Post, 31 January 1964.

arrangement which not even the most ardent advocates of open committees have suggested. The debates at interviewing committees occasionally revealed animosity between the Labour group and the Leader of the Rent and Ratepayers Group. On one occasion the latter criticised the mayor for taking part in the voting on the appointment of a headmaster without having attended the interviews, at which the Mayor described his critic as "a proper little horror".(1)

The Hendon Times went, if anything, slightly further than the other two papers in avoiding references to the politics of local government. Party labels were sometimes given with the names of speakers in council debates, but the extent to which voting followed (or did not follow) party lines was never indicated. Neither the open nor the concealed aspects of local politics were subject of the newspaper's attention. Only one item was a significant exception to this: in October 1965 the Hendon Times published under its main headline a report that some members of the council, who could not at this stage be named, felt strongly that the chairman of the planning committee should resign because he owned property in town. The criticism, it later appeared, came from Liberal and Labour members.(2)

1. Gateshead Post, 17 April 1964.
2. Hendon Times, 15 October 1965.

However, what the Hendon Times' reporting lacked was sometimes supplied in its lively correspondence columns, usually as a result of the letter-writing exertions of the Liberal councillors and candidates, and those who replied to their generally provocative letters. In the issue of 2 July 1965 there appeared a letter from a Liberal councillor setting out in detail the procedure at meetings of the Conservative group on the council, and the rules under which group members were expected to vote according to group decisions. No reader of the paper over the rest of the year (before and after the publication of this letter) could have been made aware that the Conservative councillors had a group and met in advance of the council meetings to decide which (1) way members should vote.

Thus the three papers followed the pattern of the Banbury papers in making little reference to the politics of council decisions; even though there was a slightly greater political consciousness where the most firmly established pattern of party politics existed (i.e. in Gateshead), this difference was small. Nothing has been said about the political opinions of the three papers expressed in their leading articles, largely because these opinions were so diffuse and moderate that they did not suggest strong

1. Letters from readers in the other two papers were not as numerous as in the Hendon Times and not generally as controversial.

political commitment of a kind which might influence reporting. The Gateshead Post carried no column of editorial comment. In the Ashton-under-Lyne Reporter there was a leading article each week, always moderate in tone and often expressed in general terms without specific reference to Ashton, probably because the articles were syndicated to all papers in the group. Their general attitude could be decribed as progressive, and characteristic subjects were local government reorganisation (in general terms), old peoples welfare, the youth employment service, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, and the desiribility of tree planting in public places. On one occasion slight misgivings were expressed about the County's comprehensive education plans.(1) The Hendon Times editorials were generally shorter and more popular in tone than those of the Ashton paper, although almost as moderate; they usually applied specifically to Hendon. They could not readily be identified with one political standpoint. Admission of the press to committee meetings became an issue in the town as a result of Liberal demands, and on this subject the Times was strident in its support for the Liberals. In all, six editorials discussed the subject, one of them very strongly critical of the council for its continued refusal to open its committees.

1. 7 August 1964.

None of the three papers could be said to have explored the background of decisions or proposals. There was little sign of initiative being used to question or go beyond the statements in the council chamber or committee minutes or the publicity material prepared by the officers. Indeed, all the papers showed a marked willingness to reprint verbatim Town Hall 'handouts'. The Hendon Times ran a series on the new Barnet departments under the title 'Know Your Borough' which showed every indication of having been written or virtually dictated by officials of the departments concerned. The Gateshead Post published numerous 'hand-outs' from the council, on newly opened schools or blocks of flats or on the public library. This willingness to use received material is clearly a symptom of the same approach which led the papers to make such unquestioning use of the committee minutes and council speeches.

Thus, study of three newspapers in other areas tended to support with only very slight variations the four conclusions drawn from the Banbury papers.

Weekly papers: the national picture.

The Bibliography of Newspapers (page ix) lists the weekly newspapers which have been read in the course of this study, in addition to the five which were the subject of analysis. This general investigation was not assisted by measurement, and therefore cannot be a source of evidence on the proportion of space devoted to local government and the extent of coverage of county and other authorities. However,

general investigation does provide a means of testing the observations made about the nature of political reporting and the provision of background information. Both of these are conspicuous when present, and instances of either were carefully noted. To the extent that they were absent, then weekly newspapers generally can be regarded as following the pattern illustrated in Banbury, Ashton, Hendon and Gateshead newspapers.

The newspapers listed differed widely in presentation, style and size (the last reflecting the prosperity of the area as well as the efficiency of the management in the amount of advertising space sold). Differences in style - both of writing and of layout - characterised newspapers as conservative or progressive in their approach to what used to be described in the national press as the 'Northcliffe revolution'. Many stages of this gradual change which has taken place in provincial journalism most noticeably since the war are represented in the list of newspapers. At one extreme the Hampshire Chronicle provided an example of a newspaper conservative in style, with the Royal Arms in its mast-head, classified advertisements on the front page, and full broadsheet size.(1) Reports were generally long, in small type with few sub-headings. The headings themselves were mostly only 1/10th. of an inch deep, and the largest

1. 17½ inches by 25 inches page size; i.e. 2 inches wider and one inch longer than The Times.

headings in the paper were only 1/5th. of an inch. Reports of council meetings and court proceedings were not usually broken up into separate items, but published as one continuous account. All these features would have been common in local weekly papers before 1939 and universal before 1914. Other newspapers at the conservative end of the scale (although perhaps less studiously traditional than the Hampshire Chronicle) were the Cornish Times, the Craven Herald & Pioneer, the Northumberland Gazette, and the Merionethshire Express (even though the last-named went so far as to carry news on its front page). At the opposite end of the scale were papers like the Essex County Standard: this was printed (as was the Banbury Guardian) by the web-offset method, and carried many photographs. The front page was given over to news with prominent headlines; the smallest headlines in the paper were 2/5th. of an inch deep, and the larger ones 4/5th. or ½ inch. Local council reports were generally broken up into shorter items by subject and distributed through the paper, and long verbatim passages of debate (the basic constituents of reports in the traditional papers) were absent. Paragraphs were not more than two sentences long, and particular paragraphs were singled out by the use of heavier type and indentation. Among the other papers at this end of the scale were the Kent Messenger, the Windsor Express, the Crewe Chronicle, the Leamington Spa Courier and the Banbury Guardian itself.

In addition to this traditional/modern scale it is possible to distinguish a quality/popular spectrum, with some papers clearly aiming towards one or the other of these images of the national papers in their style. Some clearly followed the Daily Mirror, with tabloid size, one-inch headlines, much use of display techniques, great simplification and emphasis on specific points in reporting, and a preference for 'human interest' items. The Swindon Echo, the Birmingham Planet,[1] and the Essex Chronicle fall into this category. On the other hand, papers like the Wells Journal or the Oxford Times, although not thoroughly traditional in presentation, preserved a stylistic and typographical restraint which clearly associated them with the 'quality' type of national newspapers. Most papers occupy positions between the extremes of these two scales.[2]

It might be supposed that the extent to which newspapers yielded examples either of politically realistic reporting or of the provision of background material would correspond to their place on their traditional/modern scale, the most progressive papers being those most able to satisfy these demands.

1. Both the Swindon Echo and the Birmingham Planet (a short lived venture which ceased publication in 1967) were owned by Mr. Woodrow Wyatt and printed at the Banbury works.

2. Even a parallel with the News of the World is suggested by one paper, the Kensington Post, which in its issue of 5 March 1965, had long court reports under such titles as 'Landlord peeped at his girl tenants', 'Neighbour saw nude girl clinging to drainpipe' and 'What the P.C. saw'.

This was by no means apparent. Although it was true that the newspapers at the extremes of the scale suggested such a correspondence, the remainder did not. Many of the papers most self-consciously progressive had larger resources at their disposal but, like the Banbury Guardian, did not succeed in providing a higher standard of information. Some of the least informative papers were those which, in the process of 'modernisation', had discarded the traditional verbatim reports and long editorials, but had replaced them with a level of reporting which although livelier in style discovered and conveyed very much less.

The least informative kind of conservative paper (so far as local politics is concerned) was the type which relied almost exclusively on local spare-time correspondents and secretaries of organisations to supply reports. Some papers consisted entirely of single-paragraph items of this nature, grouped under the name of the locality to which they referred (with usually one or two signed features to make up the whole); apart from the occasional court report, there was no use for the skills and judgement of the reporter. Wales had many newspapers of this type, such as the Caernarvon Herald, Y Clorianydd and the Merionethshire Express. In the last-named paper the language in which an item appeared depended entirely on that in which the local organisation secretary supplied it, with the result that a single column of text would often consist of alternate

paragraphs in Welsh and English. English newspapers which appeared to have been run on the same basis - although without the linguistic complication - were the Isle of Wight Times[1] and the Thame Gazette. Newspapers making little use of professional reporters are clearly unlikely to fulfil the criteria under discussion.

However, the hundreds of papers more characteristic of the modern than the traditional end of the scale, despite their greater use of journalistic resources and their greater willingness to seek out stories and conduct interviews, show a general lack of basic information. The attribution of inter-party and intra-party conflict and the provision of background information, were, as in the five papers studied in detail, exceptions to the general pattern. In the most enterprising papers the occasional item in a diary column or the reporting of proposals for a new major development would provide this kind of information, but these instances were uncharacteristic of the newspapers in which they appeared and these newspapers themselves uncharacteristic of the general mass. The Essex County Standard, was progressive and lively in presentation, and was edited for many years by Mr. Hervey Benham[2], whose book, Two Cheers for the Town Hall

1. In its local government reporting the Thame Gazette clearly encourages councillors to supply copies of their speeches for reprinting in the paper. In the issue of 10 March 1964, the long speech of the Chairman of the U.D.C. Finance Committee on the new rates was reproduced verbatim (1st. person throughout).

2. London 1964.

shows a keen awareness of the need for better local government reporting. In over 20 issues of the paper read for this study, although there was a certain amount of background information on the administrative issues of council proposals, there was only the one report which threw any great light on the politics of Colchester Borough Council. This was an interesting account of a successful attempt by a Liberal candidate to secure the backing of a residents' association in his election campaign.

> "...many people in the audience attended the meeting under the impression that they were going there for a purpose of choosing their own, non-political candidate to represent them.
> "There was no doubt it was Mr. Burgess's [the Liberal candidate] evening. He began his evening sitting modestly among the audience, but he finished it dominating the platform....Not only was Mr. Burgess picked out as the chosen candidate by the association, but he managed to get in a plug for the three other Liberals standing for election in other wards. He also had his supporters standing outside the door to hand Liberal leaflets to people as they left.
> ...The fascinating part about how all this came about is the behind-the-scene bit. It seems the association's committee invited each candidate to meet them, one candidate at a time, and put him through a close cross-examination on his views about St. Mary's area proposals.
> Mr. Burgess received his summons just after he arrived home at 9.30pm. and was about to start his supper. He went straight to the interview.
> It was just like the examination of a candidate for a Parliamentary nomination. 'You could go to 200 Liberal adoption meetings all over the country and not go through a gruelling like that,' he afterwards said. However, he came through with flying colours, for the committee voted ten to four in favour of supporting him,"(1)

1. Essex County Standard, 10 April 1965.

The few papers which produced even occasional examples of this kind of reporting generally employed a regular municipal correspondent to specialise in council work, who had comparative freedom of a 'diary' column in addition to his reports of meetings. The Stockport County Express had such a column called 'Town Talk' written over the pseudonym 'Atticus', which occasionally provided background information or insights into political disputes. One such instance occured when the Town Council was considering the purchase of Stockport County Football ground:

> "....apart from a ten page dossier giving counsel's opinion, which now lies on the Town Clerk's desk, the Council is no further forward than it was five months ago.
> Most people are aware that there are certain differences of opinion on this question in the Council chamber, particularly among the Labour Group, and it seems obvious that the advent of municipal elections have [sic] brought about the 'dithering' on this highly controversial subject." (1)

One paper, the Alderley and Wilmslow and Knutsford Advertiser seemed to have been overcome with enthusiasm for a concept rare in local papers which is discussed in the next two chapters, that of a municipal correspondent comparable to the political correspondent of the national newspapers. In a most interesting and unusual speculative passage about the council chairmanship, the following passage occured:

> "The Advertiser understands that a private meeting of Wilmslow councillors on Wednesday evening recommended Councillor Mrs.Mabel Evans, M.B.E., J.P., as chairman of the council for the

1. 16 May 1964.

forthcoming conciliar year. The recommendation is subject to ratification at a meeting of the full council on Wednesday next.
.....It is not a foregone conclusion (writes a parliamentary reporter) that Wednesday's recommendation will go unchallenged, for it is known that a minority of councillors have ideas differing from those of the majority as to the tenure of the chairmanship at this important juncture in Wilmslow's history."(1)

A good example of the inclusion of essential background information in a report was provided by the Windsor Express of 5 November 1966, under the heading, 'COUNTY LEAPS AHEAD OVER ROADS ISSUE; Borough Council Gets By-Passed at Reading':

> "Three days after Windsor Borough Council's Works Committee made its recommendation for the signposting at the Clarence Road roundabout - in connection with the Windsor and Eton Relief Road - they were accepted by Berks County Council's Highways and Bridges Committee. By doing this the counсy council's Highways and Bridges Committee has cut the ground from beneath Windsor Borough Council's feet. For these were only recommendations made by the Works Committee at its meeting on Monday, October 25, and are due for consideration by the borough council on Monday night. If by some chance the full council decide that it would not accept the recommendations, it would be in a completely ineffective position.
>
> And it has been placed in that position by the County Highways and Bridges Committee's decision to treat the proposals for signposting at the Clarence Road roundabout as a resolved item.
>
> The county committee has used its delegated powers to push the matter through without references to the full county council. But the County Education Committee, at whose meetings on Friday the action of the Highways and Bridges Committee was made public,

1. 20 May 1966 (my underlining). The treatment of the chairmanship issue in the paper serves to illustrate the point that the absence of formal party politics from a council does not mean that there is nothing 'political' to report.

> did not seem too happy about the situation. ...It would seem that the recommendations made by the Works Committee were contrary to the policy of the borough council over the past five years - namely to route much of the traffic along Imperial Road. But one might also assume that the Highways and Bridges Committee saw the chance of a quick compromise and seized it."

Although this passage is not written in such a way as to make it easy to read or follow, it does ~~not~~ contain information usually absent from local government reports but essential to an understanding of this sort of situation, particularly the attitudes of the various committees involved and their willingness of one to exploit this possibility.

These examples were almost the only ones to be found in all the papers read. In politics, most newspapers avoided all but the occasional reference to the party allegiance of councillors, and never indicated the existence of a party caucus. Where party politics was most formalized, failure actually to indicate which party leading councillors belonged to was rarer, but this was about the only perceptible difference. Where parties did not dominate local politics the reader had no indication of the alignments and voting patterns in the council chamber. All but the most enterprising papers (and even those for much of the time) were content to rely on town-hall 'hand-outs', committee minutes and public statements rather than to establish independently the reasons for decisions.

<u>Two further exceptions</u>

To all this there remain two further exceptions, each

wholly unlike anything to be found in any of the other newspapers listed. The first was a regular weekly column on Canterbury politics in the Kent Herald. Its title was 'Behind the local scene', and its author or authors adopted the pseudonym 'Diogenes'. In many ways it was more akin to the newspapers of the nineteenth century than the twentieth with its violently controversial and often personal comment:(1) it certainly bore no comparison with the contents of other provincial weekly papers, and could ~~no~~ more appropriately be likened to the writings of the more controversial political correspondents on the national papers.

Diogenes' articles frequently sought to indicate where, in the authors' opinion, power and political responsibility resided, as in the following passage:

> "The reporter who described the Council's Policy committee as the 'Trouble Shooting' Committee, and who would consider that its main function would be to reconcile the contrasting claims of other committees, did it less than justice. This small body of seven influential members will, in practice, make the main decisions on real policy for the city's future."(2)

This is the mildest of examples. Diogenes went much further in seeking to describe relationships and tensions within the administrative and political structure. Reference to personalities was not avoided, as in this item about the

1. see below, pp. 167-8
2. from 'Points for Planners', Kent Herald, 21 June 1967.

allocation of improvement grants:

> "The City Architect, who at heart is a traditionalist, thinks that he, not the Public Health Inspector, should be the best judge of such points. In between on this technical see-saw, is the Housing Committee, whose wish is only for someone to make up their minds what is the correct advice."(1)

In the same article he said of a speech by the Finance Committee chairman, "this committal to commercial development caused offence in the City Architects department." His extremes of personal and political writing are illustrated in the following extracts from an article headed 'That Man Brown', describing the Conservative agent for Canterbury, who was also a councillor:

> "It is said that he has an inability to listen to arguments; that he thinks that he is always right and that is largely true. However, he does not carry it to the point that Alderman Kingsman does, who, his friends say, has no toes left because he has dug them in so often.
>
> Ted Brown is just plain pigheaded and never more so than when dealing with the Town Clerk. He came on to the Council with the avowed intention of breaking what he thought was John Boyle's virtual dictatorship of the City Council, and wasted no time in gathering around him in support what in those days was known as the 'Hews faction' (as opposed to the 'Jennings group'. (2) And because chief officers, particularly tactless ones

1. 'Planners all', 9 November 1966.

2. The 'Hews faction' could refer to Col. Hews, a conservative no longer on the council but the editor of the Kent Herald, or to his mother, who had been mayor and a leading conservative.

like John Boyle, are easy targets, some of the chief officers found that their empires were suddenly crumbling.

Hugh Wilson, the City Architect and designer of post-war Canterbury, was a most able administrator, but another who knew not the boundaries between policies and administration. He was given such hell that he found other furrows to plough. As things turned out the fields were lusher in Scotland than in Kent.

...He had an inability to say 'No' to any job offered to him. Perhaps this is because he is always convinced that he can do it better than anyone else. He is not always right, but this may be the reason he allowed that wily old bird, Stanley Jennings, to manoeuvre him into the chairmanship of the Committee on Comprehensive Educatiom."(1)

Diogenes articles frequently gave extensive background information on council decisions. Discussing planning policy, he referred in one article to the difficulties faced by the City Architect in coping with the outstanding planning permissions he inherited from his predecessor.(2) Other articles dealt in a similar way with water charges and market lettings.(3)

The articles are open - and have been subjected - to a number of serious criticisms. One is that Diogenes frequently indulged in extended personal attack on individuals usually scornful in tone, which his own dislike of them appeared to weigh more heavily than the issue involved. Another is that

1. 21 September 1966.
2. 9 November 1966.
3. 4 January 1967.

his articles are highly tendentious, and insofar as the reader is informed, the information often serves the interest of the author's generally Tory convictions. The latter criticism clearly links Diogenes with the nineteenth century partisan journalist and pamphleteer. The force of these criticisms does not invalidate the conclusion that, whatever Diogenes' motive, and however biassed his articles the Canterbury reader of the Kent Herald had at his disposal an enormously fuller account of some features of his local government and politics than the readers of any other local newspaper.

The identity of Diogenes remains a guarded secret. He may of course have been several writers, although there is clear stylistic consistency in the articles. All evidence points to the conclusion that the articles originate from a participant in local politics (only a participant would be likely to have this level of information), and that the participant is on the Conservative side. In Canterbury some claim to detect a close correspondence between the views expressed in the articles and those expressed in council by Councillor Brown; suggesting an identification which casts a strange light on the article about Councillor Brown which was quoted above.

The other extraordinary case is that of the Southport Advertiser (1).

1. Not to be confused with the old-established and very conventional Southport Visiter.

This paper which sometimes appeared as the West Lancashire Advertiser, looked at first sight like a rather badly - produced but otherwise unremarkable small town weekly. Its contents did not confirm such an impression, for the Advertiser proved to be the closest thing to a nineteenth century partisan paper to be fouhd in recent years. One example will suffice to illustrate its style. (Dr. Hepworth was the leader of the controlling Liberal group on Southport Town Council).

THE MYSTERY OF THE DOCTOR'S MALADY:

> How ill is Dr. Hepworth? Just before the May Municipal Elections - over four months ago - he announced to a stunned Southport that on medical advice he would have to relinquish the leadership of the Town Council and of the Liberal Party. I don't suppose anyone imagined that Hepworth's health was so serious that only three weeks from polling day he would be forced to plunge his Party into a semi-leaderless state.
> ...The end of the municipal year came and went. Heppy stayed on not only as chairman of the strenuous and controversial Development Committee, but as vice-chairman of the onerous and exacting Finance Committee.
> ...Doctor Hepworth has announced that a special meeting of the Council will be called to discuss the whole question of Forumania.(1) Ye Gods!! Does that mean that he is going to continue ignoring medical advice for six months? This special council meeting is going to be a killer...surely it would be grossly unfair to expect the Tories to be chivalrous and pull their punches because the Liberals put as their champion the frail figure of a well-publicised invalid.

1. 'Forumania' was the paper's word for the Liberals' plans to develop the site of a disused cinema, the Forum, with civic buildings.

> What is behind this invalid? A rabble - an unco-ordinated, disunited, bickering, back-biting rabble. Some want the Forum site, some most definitely don't, some couldn't care less, many are uneasy and far from confident, others are being dragged unwillingly by the coat-tails of more aggressive 'pioneers.'" (1)

The reader was promised further excitement the following week from 'The amazing silence of Jack Smith-Hughes' (another leading local Liberal, often referred to in the paper as 'Junta Jack!). The editor had clearly received a threat of libel action, from the 'only one person capable of such imagination', to whom he addressed the warning 'DON'T RUSH INTO COURT IF YOU ARE ANGRY OR HAVE A GRIEVANCE UNLESS YOU ARE PREPARED TO PAY OUT...the average contribution demanded of a legally aided litigant in the High Court or County Court is as high as £50...'

Subsequent investigations revealed the nature of the Southport Advertiser. It was published by/on a very careless basis, the revenue coming from advertisments paid for jointly by national suppliers and local retailers: apparently the cost was in effect contributed largely by the national advertisers. Initially the paper was pro-Labour, but later (as at the time studied) took up the Conservative interest. The proprietor then changed his allegiance again when the Conservative group failed to pay him for surplus copies he had printed for them, and after a very short pro-Liberal

1. West Lancashire Advertiser, 7 August 1964.

period the paper closed down. During the paper's Conservative period the Liberals brought out a rival publication, the Southport Resident.

Both Diogenes of the Kent Herald, and, to a much greater extent, the Southport Advertiser, were so totally removed from the general pattern of local government journalism as to sharpen the contrast and make more obvious the extent to which the realities of local politics tend to be ignored in most papers.

The Provincial Daily Papers.

This chapter has dealt specifically with weekly papers, although provincial daily papers feature in the list of newspapers read.(1)

(i). The daily newspapers, particularly evening papers, place an emphasis on topicality which influences their selection of material to be published.

(ii). National news as well as local news has a place in the provincial daily papers, particularly the mornings (which compete for circulation with the national papers);(2) this leads to further selectivity. Provincial morning papers differ in their balance of emphasis between national

1. Most of the conditions which apply to provincial daily papers apply also to the few provincial Sunday newspapers.

2. There is one purely local daily paper which carries no national news, the Leamington Spa Morning News.

and local affairs. The Manchester Guardian's emphasis on national news led to its becoming a national paper; among the present English provincial dailies the Birmingham Post and the Yorkshire Post suggest more of a national emphasis than, for example, the Bristol Western Daily Express or the Nottingham Guardian Journal.

(iii). The regional circulation patterns of the daily papers, covering a multipicity of local authorities, impose further selectivity. Moreover, in most of the daily papers' areas weekly papers exist to serve the needs of the individual localities; often the daily paper owns or is part of the same organisation as some of these weekly papers, and reporting services are pooled.(1) However, it sometimes happens that the centre of publication of a morning or evening paper has no local weekly, and must rely on the daily papers for local news: this is the case in Newcastle upon Tyne.

(iv). Generally, the provincial daily papers have larger resources and staffs than the weeklies, and this gives them opportunities to pursue stories more actively and to have a regular municipal correspondent. For this reason there was more and better background information in the daily papers than in the weeklies, and there were a few rare cases of realistic political reporting. The Newcastle Journal, for instance, (a morning paper), went to some lengths to investigate the suspension of a direct Labour housing scheme

1. This applies, for instance, to the Oxford Mail and the Birmingham Post.

planned by Jarrow Council. In one of several articles on the subject the background was set out in detail, and there was speculation as to what had led to the failure, cost increases and staff shortages being among the reasons advanced. However, the article went on as follows:

> "The real reasons why the scheme has been suspended will not be known until the committee meeting on Monday. In committee meetings during the past few days, however, it has been strongly hinted that it may have been caused by the internal politics of the Jarrow Labour party." (1)

It should be added that this kind of reporting was not typical of the Journal's local government coverage, which often displayed the same weaknesses as that of the weekly papers.

The Oxford Mail (evening), more serious in approach than most evening papers in its political reporting, was no better than other papers in political reporting, but it was distinguished by fairly frequent background articles of a searching kind. In 1966, when two possible schemes of comprehensive education were being considered by the City education committee, the Mail investigated a third possibility and interviewed officials of the West Riding County Council, (2) in order to discover whether it had been successful there. A series of articles by members of the Mail's staff on Planning investigated the ways in which the planning

1. Journal, 10 September 1966
2. Oxford Mail, 6 September 1966.

machinery in Oxfordshire and Berkshire could be improved. Articles discussed at length delays in planning applications, the staffing problems and delegation arrangements, and assessed the successes and failures of planning in specific villages.[1] On another occasion a survey into the state of public conveniences in the area was published.[2]

The provincial evening paper is about the only class of newspaper in which expansion is currently considered possible. The Thomson Organisation, for instance, has set out to establish several new evening papers produced by the webb-offset method in the South-East, and despite labour disputes papers were established at Reading (1964) and Luton (1967).[3] The Reading Evening Post sought to innovate in style and content, and its municipal correspondent had a regular column entitled 'In Depth', which frequently provided perceptive and informative background material, usually on Reading County Borough, and which occasionally gave insights into the political background. The issue of 28 July 1966, for instance, carried an extensive background study of the new Civic Centre project, while the issue of

1. ibid, 9, 11, 12 November 1965.

2. ibid, 13 November 1964.

3. In the same period new evening papers have been established at Dawley (Shropshire Star) and Doncaster (Doncaster Evening Post).

4 and 6 November 1965 carried articles discussing the attitudes expressed towards the admission of the Press to Committees at a Labour Party group meeting.

Thus, although the daily papers were able to command greater resources and produced more background material, as in the weekly papers it was only in exceptional instances that realistic political reporting was to be found.

CHAPTER 5.

RESTRICTION ON THE PRESS:

SECRECY AND LIBEL.

It has been argued that the English provincial press - particularly the weekly press - regards itself as responsible for informing the public about local government, and that in certain respects it fails to do this. In particular it generally fails:

(1). to give sufficient information of the activities of the county and rural district councils (in the case of the counties their much smaller share of space in comparison with boroughs and urban districts suggests a false conception of their relative powers):

(2). to inform the readers of the political factors in local decision-making:

(3). to provide sufficient background material for the implications of and alternatives to decisions to be understood.

Journalists themselves contend that in so far as they fail to give a complete picture of local government, it is because they are prevented from doing so by official or legal restrictions. They point to the practice of many local

authorities in keeping secret their meetings, decisions and reports, and to the laws of libel. They argue that for the most part the restrictions on their reporting are external to them, imposed upon them by naturally secretive bureaucracy. Those most critical of the press, on the other hand, argue that the restrictions on the press are basically internal, and relate to its ownership and control and its consequent commercial and political commitments. Other less obvious restrictions, internal or external, may also be important. If we are to take seriously arguments for greater freedom of the press based on the assumption that the press is a channel of information essential to local democracy we must consider whether the restrictions on the ability of the press to do this are the ones they wish to have removed, or others internal to journalism or to the provincial weekly press at is it at present organised. How far, then, do the external restrictions of official secrecy and libel account for the deficiencies already discussed? Let us, therefore, examine the position of the newspapers under the various degrees of external restrictions to which they are subjected.

A. The authority with maxinum secrecy.

Where the local authority makes public the minimun of information required by law and thus does most of its business in secrecy, the newspapers will find it very difficult to fulfil its informing responsibility. If little

is said at council meetings and the published minutes convey nothing of the background, then the reporter is thrown entirely on his supplementary sources for information. The newspaper is faced with a choice between the passive attitude, reporting what it can while lamenting the restrictions on its editorials, and a militant attitude in which it attempts to break down the secrecy both by frequent criticism of the council and by making use of information obtained through every possible alternative channel. These might include a councillor with a grievance against his fellow-councillors, or even an officer: the sources used would not, of course, be named. Many papers, although they deplore the restrictions in their editorials, take the passive line. A few - the exceptions - are provoked by restrictions to militancy. In some of the extreme cases of secrecy rather more informative - albeit more strident - journalism is to be found.

B. The normal authority.

The normal authority we can define as that which holds most of its committee meetings in secret, but has fairly full discussion at council meetings and does not use its general purposes committee as a regular secret council meeting. The press in this situation still argue that secrecy is the explanation of reporting weakness.

(1). It would be argued that it is the secretive authorities who get the least coverage and that this explains

the low rating of the counties in terms of space, since they have fewer actual council meetings than the districts. To some extent this is true. In the Banbury papers Oxfordshire had relatively little space; it had only four public council meetings in 1964. Chipping Norton Borough Council, with open committees, secured a generous allocation of space.(1) Gateshead with many open committees, received wider coverage reflected in the Gateshead Post's total of 15% of space devoted to local government.(2) Against this it can be argued:

(a). that not all the available sources of information from the counties are used; in the case of Oxfordshire more information could have been got from the minutes, which, for four meetings, would amount to 850 pages. Again in the Oxfordshire case, as often elsewhere, the meetings of the Education Committee, open to the press and public, want largely unreported.

(b). that the difference of standard of repporting between the counties and the towns was far greater than the difference in degree of secrecy, which was only slight.

(2). It would be argued that in the secrecy of committees decisions lies part of the explanation of the newspapers' inability to disclose the political background of decisions.

1. see above, p. 78.
2. see above, p. 100.

If most of the discussion takes place in committee, then the newspaper is unable to discover and report the attitudes taken up by individual councillors and groups of councillors, and much of the politics remain concealed. Similarly, it is difficult to discover the real reasons for decisions and the extent to which alternatives were explored and rejected. A brief summary of the committee's attitude such as might appear in the minutes and the assurances of the chairman that the committee had 'gone into all aspects of the problem' before reaching its decision give no real indication as to which arguments weighed most heavily. This argument applies particularly when there are limitations of time. Where committees meet in secret the reporter will be faced with cases where he learns of a decision long after it has been put into effect under delegated powers; or he may learn of a decision on the day on which it is to be adopted - a foregone conclusion - by the council. In such situations he may feel that it is futile to explore the background of and reasons for the decision, since the matter is decided and no 'lobbying' or public participation can effectively ensue from his report: unless the story was politically important enough to be kept going, it would be regarded as dead or dying.

There are several arguments to weaken this case.

(1). It has been the writer's experience that local reporters, particularly the abler of them, are much better

informed of the political scene in their area than is evident from their reports. This is, of course, less true of the trainee than of the chief reporter, but is none the less noticeable. It was in discussion with reporters that it was often possible to establish a clearer picture of local politics to contrast with the impression given in their own newspaper. Journalists have other sources of information than speeches and meetings, particularly:

(i). Disclosures by councillors (from political or personal motives). Information offically secret is often 'leaked' to reporters by councillors opposed to proposals, whether they belong to opposition groups or the majority group. In one case studied a committee chairman described by reporters as 'a good friend of ours' supplied full details of a major redevelopment report while it was under secret discussion in order to weaken or forestall opposition to its proposals. Publicly and in interview he deplored this 'breach of confidence by some untrustworthy member of the committee'. In his studies of Local Government in Leeds H.V.Wiseman pointed to the difficulties of preventing an '"inspired" paragraph in the Press' emanating fron members of the majority group in a caucus system.(1)

(ii). Disclosures by officers. These are rarer - a strong commitment to professional integrity found amongst local government chief officers tends to discourage them - but

1. 'The Working of Local Goverment in Leeds', Public Administration, 1963.

examples can be found. An officer persistently overruled in council or committee may feel that if the reasons for decisions were more widely known, public pressure would lead to a change in the committee's attitude. One well - documented although extreme case of this is provided by the Report of the Inquiry held into the dismissal of the Clerk of Bognor Regis Urban District Council in 1965.(1) One of the matters discussed at length was the fact that the clerk, Mr. Paul Smith, on several occasions gave information to the press in a manner adverse to the interests of the council. Paragraph 295 of the report (by a barrister) reads:

> "I have...sought explanation for Mr. Smith's recourse to the press against his Council (or certain members of it) which I feel can have few precedents and which seem [sic] to me to be wholly inconsistent with the traditional loyalty expected from the Clerk towards his Council. ...under the mistaken belief that certain councillors were plotting against him, Mr. Smith regards himself as justified in making his position clear to the ratepayers through the press. It is right to add that Mr. Smith claims that he was forced to resort to the press because he was afforded no chance by the Council to answer criticisms of his administration. Even so, it is, I think, proper to questioh whether Mr. Smith might not have found a more dignified and possibly more successful way of dealing with his threatened position, as he saw it..."

In the course of this research a similar instance was

1. <u>The Report of the Bognor Regis Inquiry;</u> presented to the Minister of Housing and Local Government and the Chairman and members of the Bognor Regis Urban District Council by Mr. J. Ramsay Willis, Q.C. (1965).

brought to light the location of which cannot be disclosed. A heavily Labour-dominated council was perturbed by a constant leak of information to one newspaper, whose reporting of that authority was generally critical and particularly well-informed. The Council complained of political bias on the part of the local reporter, and for a period the paper's chief reporter was sent to cover their meetings. It came to light - although not, it seems, to the knowledge of the council - that the leak of information had been direct from the Clerk of the authority to the reporter, Both were Conservatives. Attempts are sometimes made to buy information from officers, more often on behalf of national than of local papers. In 1966 a case involving alleged neglect of a child in the care of Dorset County Council aroused widespread interest in the administration of the council's welfare services: a secret report was prepared by the council and submitted to the Home Secretary. A freelance journalist was accused of offering a £20 inducement to a junior clerical employee of the county council to obtain a copy of the report. He was acquitted of the charge, the defence claiming that although he had tried to obtain the document, as any journalist would have done, the prosecution had not succeeded in proving that he had offered an inducement. The journalist revealed that he was acting for a popular Sunday newspaper.(1)

1. Southern Evening Echo, 8 and 9 July 1966; The Times, 8 July 1966.

But these major disclosures, usually either premature revelations of plans still under committee discussions, or reports of administrative failures, usually find their way into print. It is generally the higher level of the reporters knowledge of local politics than is apparent in his copy which is striking. This knowledge derives not so much from specific 'leaks' such as those described, but from sustained informal contact with local politics. Even his official dealings with councillors and officers provide the reporter with opportunities to see a little way beyond the official explanation. He may meet the officers at press conferences and have regular consultations with the Town Clerk: a few local authorities have a press officer who must be by-passed before the chief officers can be reached, but in many authorities this work is handled by the clerk as a matter of course. The reporter sees the councillors at meetings, and will probably talk to some of them on the way in and out.(1) A neighbouring public house may be frequented regularly after meetings by councillors and reporters. Even the most secretive local authorities rarely neglect to extend to the press the formal courtesies, such as invitations to the Mayoral Dinner (at which a toast to 'the gentlemen of the press' is frequently offered)(2)

1. Many council chambers are not designed in such a way as to segregate the press from the councillors, and in some - Macclesfield R.D.C., for instance - the reporters sit at the same table as the councillors.

2. Mansfield, op.cit. p.17

or to the Chairman's Christmas sherry party. There are many instances of tributes paid at meetings to retiring journalists.(1) The reporter will also see the councillors in all their other public capacities. Through these contacts he makes his own assessment of their personal compatence, integrity and credibility, and of the amities and animosities between the various personalities involved. He may be made aware of differences between a man's public statements and private convictions.

The reporter may also have informal social contacts with councillors and officers. These are less extensive than might be imagined in some small towns, but none the less are sufficient to be reckoned important. In many towns there is a social grouping involving such elements as the Rotary Club, the Masonic Lodge and the Golf Club, including in its numbers leading local government officers and Conservative or Independent councillors. The newspaper editor is often found in this group, and is less likely to be found in the grouping which embraces the Labour Party, Trades Council, Co-operative organisations and W.E.A. Churches, Chapels and religious organisations provide further possibilities for contact. On the whole, reporters (as distinct from editors) are less likely to be involved in such organisations than might be expected. This is particularly true of younger

1. ibid. p. 454-5; Leamington Spa Morning News, 19 June 1964; Lincolnshire Standard, 26 June 1964.

reporters, who are often sharply divided in age and interests from the councillors, and whose mobility in the profession may discourage them from maintaining firm local contacts of this kind. In addition, the nature of their work often makes involvement in local organisations difficult, since many of their evenings are taken up with reporting duties. Sometimes they have social links with younger officers through club or public house: the Dorset case[1] arose out of an incident involving a journalist and a young officer at a Dorchester club, the "Steering Wheel". But even these limited contacts, combined with second-hand information and that which is officially released, can be very informative. A good knowledge of the daily round of local life can make an unusual occurrence noticeable and revealing to the reporter; in one case the fortuitous experience of a reporter seeing the Town Clerk and the Chairman of the Development Committee on the London platform at the railway station soon led to the discovery that direct negotiations with the Ministry had been opened.

It is noticeable that these formal and informal links are oftem very much weaker or totally absent at County level (and sometimes at Rural District level); both of these levels are less likely to correspond to actual communities, and at the county level the social gulf between journalists and councillors is at its widest. As an explanation of reporting

1. see above, p. 137.

weakness however, this is not adequate, since it would need to be supported by a greater difference in depth and quality (rather than merely quantity) between town and county reporting than in fact exists.

(2). A second major weakness in the argument that committee secrecy is the explanation of reporting limitations is the fact that the experience of the most open authorities fails to support it. It has already been observed that some of the more searching reporting occurs in secretive areas; the authorities least marked for secrecy are not reported more effectively than those which remain secretive. In quantity, of course, the open authorities (like Gateshead and Chipping Norton) are more fully reported. It is also true that in so far as the actual debate on issues and the reasons for the council's actions were more evident because of the publication of reports of committee meetings, the newspapers had less occasion to seek and write up 'background' in order to explain decisions. But still the spoken word and the minuted resolution tended to be the limit of the newspaper's reporting. The reader was better informed about the work of open authorities such as Gateshead or Hazel Grove & Bramhall U.D.C. in that he had more of the process of arriving at decisions in print; but anything that was not actually spoken or minuted remained unsaid, even though it was necessary to an understanding of what had taken place.

(3). A third weakness of the newspaper argument about

local authority secrecy is that some things that are important and yet unreported are not, in fact, secret.

(i). The activities of the political parties and groups are, to some extent at least, open. Their existance, if nothing else, is almost impossible to conceal. If there are caucus meetings, even through locked doors may prevent the journalist from learning what discussion there is at them, he can hardly fail to find out that they take place. Voting in the council chamber is open [1] and can be reported; where political groups dominate the voting pattern, this can readily be seen by the reporter. If, in councils where there are no formal party politics, there is an 'establishment' majority which invariably votes with the committee chairman, this will be obvious.

(ii). Much of the context of the council's work can be set with the aid of information obtained from other less secretive authorities. (Almost all newspapers cover more than one local authority, and most cover several.) The fact that the Secretary of State for Education has put pressure on local authorities to abolish the 11 plus examination, for instance, could be discovered from published Departmental circulars and from other local authorities, however secretive the council in question might be about it.

1. In the case of Urban and Rural District and Parish Councils the law provides that voting must be by show of hands,'and on the requisition of any member of the council the voting on any question shall be recorded so as to show whether each member present and voting gave his vote for or against that question.'(Local Govt.Act,1933,3rd.schedule, part III (6) and Part IV (5))

Although one council may be extremely guarded about its negotiations with the Ministry over the Town Development Map, the sort of points likely to be at issue and the stand the Ministry generally takes on key points may be obvious from the more open negotiations of other nearby authorities. In a recent case pressure was put on Wilmslow Urban District Council by Cheshire County Council: both were concerned with an overspill development report, but while it was being kept secret at Chester, Wilmslow were willing to release it to the press in order to enable public discussion, and eventually they did.(1)

D. Embargoes.

The practice of some local authorities in furnishing committee minutes to newspapers on condition that they are not reported before the council meeting at which they are to be discussed has taken place was discussed in chapter I(2) Where it is carried out systematically this precedure can restrict the newspaper's work in two ways. First, it means that all council business, both committee reports and council meeting, compete for space in the same week, and even if the editor is generous in the space he gives to local government other interests still have to be catered for and other news may be pressing; the result is that without the possibility of spreading the monthly diet of local government news over

1. Alderley and Wilmslow and Knutsford Advertiser, 29 July 1966.

2. see above, pp. 43-46.

two weeks, the newspaper is forced to cut down the total amount of space it devotes to the council. Secondly, the newspaper is prevented by the embargo from ventilating proposals which are to come before the council in time for some public reaction and comment to take place before the matter is decided. This, of course, is the purpose of the embargo, and there is a difference of opinion between those local authorities which believe that public criticism should not be allowed or encouraged before decisions are taken and those which see the public debate as an important part of the process of taking decisions.

Not many authorities now maintain, at least in principle, embargoes of this kind; however, some take steps, justifiably, to ensure that newspapers make clear the differences between a final decision and a committee recommendation which could still be rejected by the council meeting. Embargoes are often flouted by newspapers, which, under the 1960 Act, no longer run the risk of loosing all facilities including the Agenda of the meeting, which must now be sent to them.(1) They do, however, risk losing that co-operation beyond the letter of the law which is useful to them and which they cannot afford to leave to their competitors.

Thus embargoes can be a restriction on newspapers, and on the newspapers' contribution to and encouragement of public debate and participation. They do not, however, do anything to explain the weakness under discussion.

1. see above, pp. 44-45.

E. The Law of Libel.

Many journalists feel that the present law of libel in this country operates harshly against them and prevents them from publishing the truth. In local government matters they see it as one of the principle restrictions on:

(a). exposing corruption and abuses;

(b). explaining the machinations of local politics;

(c). describing the actions and particularly the weaknesses of officers of local authorities.

Up to a point this is unmistakeably true, and in the courses of this study one instance has come to light in which the fear of libel action acted as a deterrent to publication of a political story, and in other instances some reporters felt inhibited in a general way. But the law of libel is not so extensive in its consequences as to cover the greater part of the area of weakness under discussion. There is a great deal to which it does not apply, and the defences of qualified privilege and fair comment (1) allow some opportunities to the newspaper. In any event, the law does not prevent the newspaper from criticising the council's policies and singling out those who most keenly support them. Comparing this with national politics, it would not, for instance, be libellous to claim that the policy for Transport outlined in the 1966 White Paper (2) involved increased public expenditure on a considerable scale, and that

1. see above, pp. 46-47.

2. Cmnd. 3057.

Mrs. Castle promoted it and staked much of her political fortune on it. It would not have been libellous to suggest that there had been disagreements in the Cabinet between Mr. Wilson and Mr. Brown on the issue of arms to South Africa or that civil servants in the Treasury and the Department of Economic Affairs have held differing views about the possible rate of economic expansion. It would be no more libellous to suggest that the town's road programme had been conceived entirely in the engineer's office, and was not much favoured by the architects on the council's staff, and that the Conservative group's reluctance to alter it owed something to the commercial interest's opposition to any diversion of traffic away from the centre of the town.

Moreover, the national newspapers have found ways of circumventing the restrictions of the libel laws, not least in respect of local government. During the period of renewed interest in allegations of corruption which followed the Bognor Regis Case (1) The Times published two articles by its Midland correspondent on the business interests of Birmingham councillors, a particularly difficult subject to handle within the letter of the law. (2) The People's agility in handling potentially risky material is admired within the profession:

1. see above, p. 136.

2. The Times, 12 & 13 August 1965.

> "The People handles hot potatoes weekly... Inhibited? Nothing like it - remembering, among others, the soccer bribes investigation the Challenor case, the deflation of the town hall caesars..." (1)

Admittedly the much greater resources of the national papers enable them both to retain an officer lawyer to vet their copy, and, in the last resort, to stand the cost of a successful action against them. It is an indication of the changed pattern of the provincial press that newspapers no longer rise on scandal and fall on libel as many did in the nineteenth century. But the fact remains that local newspapers have not used the same skill and sophistication in circumventing the restrictions of the libel laws as have their national counterparts. It may be that the current criticisms of the libel laws will lead in time to some reduction of the limitations they now impose upon the Press. These limitations however, do not go far to explain the weaknesses of political reporting.

1. 'Patterns of the Press' by "Perceiver" in World's Press News & Advertisers' Review, 11 June 1965. Examples of the type of story referred to here can be found in The People of 31 October 1965 ('City Education Chief is Accused') and 6 February ('A story that will anger 78,000 families: this women owns two houses...and she hogs a council flat.') The People's campaigning journalism has often been criticised, but the paper was exonerated bt the Press Council in a case brought by Droylsden Urban District Council, whose policy it had attacked. (The Times, 25 July 1965)

CHAPTER 6

THE LIMITATIONS OF PROVINCIAL NEWSPAPER STRUCTURE AND PRACTICE

Structure: the Newspaper as a commercial undertaking.

Many, especially those most critical of the present ownership and organisation of the press, have attributed its weakness to its present structure. It is frequently claimed, first, that paramount commercial considerations prevent the press from fulfilling its responsibility, and secondly that the political commitment of individual newspapers causes them to fail to give a fair and representative account of politics at the local (as at the national) level. These arguments must be examined.

The fact that newspapers are, in the main, commercial undertakings designed to make profits for their owners and, whether profit-making or not, under heavy pressure to maintain sales and advertising could in several ways be argued to be the root cause of the deficiencies under discussion. The crudest form of this argument is that since newspaper proprietors are concerned primarily to sell newspapers and make money out of them they are not interested in local government at all. In so far as the public is interested they report it - but the public is not very interested, as the poll at local elections indicates. In this form, the argument neglects some important facts.

(1). It must be remembered that commercial and journalistic interests in all but the smallest newspaper undertakings are to some extent divided. The commercial interest is represented by the advertising, circulation and management side of the business, while the editor is at the head of a staff of journalists whose attitudes are significantly different. Commercial calculation in newspapers may be made primarily by the non-journalist executives, but it is journalists who decide what to put in the paper. From time to time the journalists may be put under pressure to publish or not to publish certain kinds of material, or to alter the balance or reader-orientation of the paper; the decision will be a compromise between the commercial interest and the journalist, who, as a profession, have strong loyalties and traditions of responsibility. The journalists' abilities to withstand these pressures will depend to a considerable extent upon their relative position in the power-structure of the undertaking. It is noticeable, for instance, that some of the most glaring examples of commercial restriction on the freedom of the press come from either newspapers with a high degree of proprietorial control (often because of family ownership) in which journalists have been in a relatively weak position [1] or from newspapers of which the

1. e.g. D.C.Thomson & Co., publishers of the Dundee Courier, cited by the Royal Commission on the Press (Report paragraph 529).

editor was in reality a manager and whose background was not that of a journalist.(1)

(2). It has already been argued(2) that many local newspaper editors acknowledge an obligation to inform the electorate even though they regard active public interest in local government at present as low. Even when the fullest allowances are made for any desire editors might have to identify themselves publicly with an altruistic and respectable role which might be far removed from their real motivations, these statements cannot be cynically disregarded. The public pronouncements of newspaper and journalist organisations may be similarly influenced by the desire to create a favourable public image. But, in the first place, this explanation does not seem sufficient to explain the zeal with which journalists and newspapers pursue both the extension of their rights to report local government, and the task of reporting itself. Secondly, my interviews have convinced me that all the local journalists with whom I have discussed the matter, even the most cynical of them, hold the view I have indicated and are to a considerable extent motivated by it.

(3). Whatever commercial calculations newspaper proprietors and editors may make about local government, the fact remains that they devote a great deal of space to it -

1. e.g. the Buxton Advertiser; see below p. 164.

2. Chapter 2.

often more than 10% of their space. It is, indeed, surprising that they should be prepared to devote so much space to reporting a subject which they admit is not one of acute reader interest without going to some lengths to ensure that the standard and liveliness of their reporting of it increase its readability.

(4). Local government reporting need not be unprofitable or commercially unattractive in all situations; some national newspapers wax fat on a kind of local government reporting not often to be found in the local press. The People, has already been referred to: it pursues local authorities in search of examples of administrative incompetence, bureaucratic officiousness and corruption, (1) and produces some local government story almost every week. These stories, moreover, often began as lineage stories (2) sent up by local freelances or employees of local newspapers. There are, of course, various reasons why such a policy might not be successful for a local weekly paper (although some have tried it), but it is at least an indication that local government reporting can have commercial profitability.

It could, however, be argued that a more specific commercial calculation prevents newspapers from 'opening up' local politics: it is often suggested that, directly or indirectly, pressure from the advertisers upon whom the

1. see above p.147 and footnote (1)
2. cf. the Dorset case, page 7

newspaper is dependent serves to restrict freedom of expression. In a small town this could affect the reporting of local government in any of several ways. Leading local politicians might have power over the newspapers through the advertising purchased by their own commercial enterprises. Tradesmen might wish through the same kind of influence to avoid references to their own pressure group activities. Tradesmen in resorts are particularly nervous of press criticisms which might reflect adversely on tourist traffic. The Whitley Bay Guardian was criticised for publishing an account of the loss of sand from the beach after high winds; its editorial, however, was defiant:

> "What is the press supposed to do if thousands of tons of sand are shifted by gales and tides, leaving part of the beach at Whitley Bay bare? Tell the public or keep quiet about it?
>
> A man with strange ideas in what the press should publish is Coun. Norman Woolford, a seafront trader. Last week, he accused the Press and television of driving visitors from the town with bad publicity.
>
> It seems that Coun. Woolford would have preferred the Press and television to have buried their heads in what little sand there is left on part of the beach and instead publish fictitious accounts and pictures of Miles and miles of golden sand...
>
> We sympathise with the traders, but such an unwarranted attack on journalists for doing the job which they are paid to do will solve none of their problems." (1)

In a more general sense, the commercial interests in a town often take the view that 'trouble is bad for trade', and that the more turbulent local politics look from the press the less settled commerce will be.

1. Whitley Bay Guardian, 17 July 1964.

First, it should be said that the notable examples of commercial pressure on newspapers are in the nature of exceptions, and tend to involve fairly untypical newspaper undertakings. The 1949 Royal Commission on the Press considered a number of examples of alleged influences by advertisers over newspaper content and concluded that advertisers' overtures were generally resolutely ignored, and that there was no evidence at all of concerted policy pressure by advertisers on newspapers.(1) Many of the allegations brought before the Commission concerned cinema advertising, and the successful attempts by cinemas to prevent criticism of films in the weekly papers in which they advertised. None of the allegations of pressure by advertisers involved local government. The infrequency of allegations since the Royal Commission and the lack of substantiation of the practice suggests that direct pressure by advertisers has, if anything, decreased. I have been unable to find an example from recent years of a newspaper responding to this kind of specific pressure from an advertiser by amending local government reports, and the reports of the Press Council to which one would now except all perceived cases to be reported, do not alter the impression that this practice has declined.(2)

1. Report, para. 527.
2. The Press and the People, annually, 1954-

However, newspapers unresponsive to direct pressure might still be influenced by their own estimations of possible loss of advertising revenue. The effect of such an attitude is less clearly perceptible in local government reporting than in areas like film criticism, but there are still possibilities.

(a). The newspaper may accept the view that 'trouble is bad for trade' and play down stories that might be disruptive to commerce in the town. The increasing willingness of all types of newspapers - including the 'quality' national papers - to publish advertising supplements containing editorial matter favourable to the trade or tradesmen in question indicates the possibility.

However, there is virtually no evidence to be found of stories being deliberately buried because of considerations of this kind. Moreover, newspapers are almost always prepared to print and give prominence to acutely controversial political and other stories affecting these same interests, when they are raised in the Council Chamber or in public statements of individuals or groups. If a councillor complains at a meeting that the town's shops offer a poor selection of goods, the newspaper prints it. If the Civic Society attacks the 'dirt and decay' of the town, the story is splashed across the front page. The issue must be raised and be seen to be raised not by the newspaper but by someone else.

One factor in this situation which weakens the argument

that advertisers' influence is strong and which is often neglected is the increasing stability of the advertising revenue of the local weekly newspapers. With the battle for survival of the national newspapers and the fierce competition for mass consumer advertising through which it is fought, the nature of the local paper's economic situation is sometimes forgotten. Its staple revenue comes from kinds of advertising which have tended to increase vastly in recent years: classified 'small' advertisements of small businesses and private individuals, vacant situations, the property market, and the official notices required by statute or regulation to be inserted in 'newspapers circulating in the area' by local authorities and other public bodies at various junctures. Although these fields also offer some opportunities for threats of withdrawal, it must be remembered that :

(a). The advertisements are inserted out of necessity rather than charity, because the individual or body has some matter which needs to be advertised.

(b). In the increasingly monopolistic situation of the local press, the advertiser rarely has the choice of papers and is therefore obliged, if he is to carry out his object, to place the advertisement with the only available paper, however repugnant its policies or treatment of news may be to him. The 1949 Royal Commission Report was written at the time when this pattern of one paper to each town was first beginning

to appear, and weak papers were foundering in many parts of the country. The cases of influence which it discovered mostly concerned those papers which were relatively in the weaker position, and therefore desperate for advertising revenue; indeed, most of these very papers have ceased publication since the time of the report. The monopolistic newspaper in any but a declining area - outside times of severe depression - can be in a fairly strong position relative to individual advertisers.

There is yet another sense in which the commercial nature of a newspaper can restrict its ability to fulfil the functions of a channel of communication in local democracy. Its resources are limited, especially when its proprietors are more anxious to maintain profits than to make risky investments in men and time in order to secure a higher standard of reporting. The establishment of the paper is often a subject of conflict between editor and management, the former contending and the latter disbelieving that the paper's repetution and sales depend on maintaining a high standard of reporting through the employment of a sufficient number of able reporters. Few papers are able to employ either the numbers or the quality of journalistic staff necessary - in the opinion of their editors, as well as of outside critics - to carry out the responsibilities they undertake. This has its effect in several ways:

(1) Few local weekly papers can afford to pay the salaries which their best reporters could get by moving on to evening

or national papers. (This is one reason why the evening papers, drawing more successfully on the available talent, maintain a generally higher standard of local government reporting).

(2). Rates of pay in journalism outside Fleet Street and the major provincial dailies are low, and compete unfavourably with industry and the professions. They are not attractive to university graduates (only in the Thomson Organisation and the Westminster Press did I meet university graduates on other than morning papers); with the opening up of university education to all classes one traditional source of recruits to journalism, those able and articulate young men of literary inclinations whose financial circumstances denied them higher education, is drying up. The industry is discovering the limitations of a form of recruitment the success of which was based on the failings of the system of higher education selection, which has now vastly improved. The effect is to depress the level of ability in journalism and ofteh to make it difficult to fill vacancies in the weekly newspaper press at all.

(3). Weekly newspapers, understaffed either because their establishment is too low or because they are unable to fill vacancies, are forced to rely on agency and lineage services for much of their local government reporting. They may be obliged to use these services for all but their own town council (which, in desperation, the editor himself may

report).(1) At one county council meeting I attended, two newpapers editors were at the reporters' table, forced by staff shortages to undertake this work. At an Education Committee meeting I was asked the name of the chairman (who had been in the office for many years) by a junior of one month's standing who had been sent to cover the meeting alone for two papers because of an art theft had taken the usual reporter miles away. When the Cheshire County Council proposed to organise a Press Conference some days before each council meeting, the Macclesfield Advertiser commented:

> "All very nice, but is it really believed that newspapers located at distant parts of the county have the staffs available to spend a day in Chester receiving Press releases and official explanations?" (2)

This situation makes it almost inevitable that local government reporting should be limited; use of agencies, lineage and juniors removes the advantages of regular contact and confines reporting to a bare account of the proceedings. The lack of continuity of the reporter's knowledge will severely restrict his reports.

1. The editor of the Banbury Guardian found it necessary to report county council meetings himself from time to time. cf. Dilys Hill on the West Riding County Council: 'Apart from the largest papers, no papers had contacts in the County Hall; even one the size of the Huddersfield Examiner had given up sending a reporter to Wakefield.' ('Democracy in Local Government', p.258).

2. 11 November 1965.

(4). Similarly, few papers can afford to give one or more reporters the time and opportunities to pursue local government stories beyond the regular cycle of meetings. The traditional picture, much found in fiction,(1) of the reporter stalking the local corridors of power and listening at the keyholes for the 'hot news' story is far removed from reality. The weekly press reporter's life is bound up with the 'diary' of local events to be attended and 'written up.' With the diary of events to cover, the working reporter has scarcely time to investigate whether the town's drainage is keeping pace with the rise in population or why the planning department is so slow in settling applications. The evening papers are more often able to set aside a 'municipal correspondent' with a watching brief on local government and local politics.

Not all the weaknesses of local government can be attributed to commercial pressures on the press. Of direct advertisers' influence there is virtually no evidence, and the commercial calculations of the proprietors, especially as the monopoly position becomes more common, are more likely to lead to a lack of adventurousness than to the suppression of particular items of news. Broader commercial considerations in the apportionment of resources do to some extent explain the newspapers' failure actively to open up some aspects of local government, but even this cannot be held to explain

1. e.g. in John Arden, The Workhouse Donkey, London 1964.

their failure to indicate the broad outlines of local politics such as are familiar to most reporters.

The Newspaper's Political Commitment.

If it is not entirely the commercial commitment of the press which is the explanation, then perhaps it is its political commitments. The English provincial press has a history bound up with politics, and in particular with the Liberal/Tory, Dissent/Church and Municipal Reform politics of the 19th. century. It is still often alleged that the weekly press is prevented from giving a true picture of local government and politics because it is politically committed one way or another. The argument - or rather the attack - on newspapers' political commitment has stiffened with the growth of monopoly (which was earnestly deplored by the Royal Commissions)[1]: it has always gained force from the fact that the political allegiances of local papers are almost always Conservative or Liberal and hardly ever Labour. A national newspaper journalist, Mr. Hannen Swaffer, alleged in evidence to the Royal Commission that despite widespread Labour control of local authorities the newspapers were "violently anti-Labour both in national and municipal politics." "Labour parties all over the country", he alleged, "complain of constant misrepresentation in local newspapers which possess a journalistic monopoly". Canon Richard Roseveare

1. 1949 Commission Report, Chapter XVIII; 1960/61 Commission Report, paras. 26 - 41.

was quoted as saying that Labour voters wishing to 'get the result of the 3.30 race' are compelled to buy a paper 'whose editorial columns, at least, express anti-Labour views and, in their opinion, frequently distort the reports of the meetings of Labour councils'.

Any student of the contemporary English local weekly press is early forced to the conclusion that both the extent and the significance of political commitment on the part of local papers was already diminishing at the time of the Royal Commission and has diminished even more noticeably since. The political labels in Willing's Press Guide bear virtually no relation to reality in this matter, and a catalogue of them would be about as misleading an analysis of the situation as could be devised. The conclusion of the survey work done for this thesis is that, for some of the reasons set out below, many newspapers have ceased to have or ceased to act according to any but the vaguest political commitment, and that where political commitment remains it is increasingly confined to the pontifications of the editorial and the publication of occasional signed political articles. The reasons include the following:

(1). The passing of newspapers out of family ownership. This in itself is explained by changing social and economic circumstances and by the operation of death duties on family papers not under limited liability companies. Its effect is the removal of the sustained political tradition which long dominated many papers. The Banbury Guardian was

committed to the Liberal cause for over a century because in all that time it was edited and controlled by only two men, William Potts the founder and his grandson, both Liberals. When they went, so did the paper's political continuity and commitment. Many of the remaining politically committed newspapers are those still in family hands, unless political commitment has been built into the constitution of the paper.

(2). The influence of radio and television, with their enforced objectivity of reporting, has brought about an imitative decrease in overt political commitment in both national and local press.(1)

(3). The passing of newspapers into chain ownership has tended to bring about a dilution of political commitment. Few large newspaper chains (with the exception of the Beaverbrook newspapers, and, to a lesser extent, the Westminster Press) enforce any kind of political subservience, and the primary commercial objectives of chain ownership tend to cause disparagement of strong political commitment which might be damaging to sales. The largest chain proprietor, Lord Thomson, leaves his editors complete freedom in political matters, and sets only commercial objectives for his papers.

(4). Newspapers are no longer the one-man businesses they were in the 19th. century. Their establishments have grown, and they are not now confined to one editor, one reporter and one (unpaid) junior. The editors part in and dominance of

1. cf (for national press), A.J.Beith, 'The Press', in Butler, D.E. and King, Anthony, the British General Election of 1964. London, 1965.

the writing of the paper has declined, and with it has declined the influence over the whole paper of one man's political views.

(5). The rise of the Labour party in local government, has confused the loyalties of the newspapers, whose traditional allegiances were Tory and Liberal. Many newspapers initially were and some still are aggressively anti-Labour: virtually none are committed to Labour, but the growth of Labour control in local government led to an initially reluctant but widespread acknowledgement by newspapers of Labour's place in local politics. Many which still do obeisance to the anti-Socialist cause in their election week editorial through the rest of the year support Labour or Labour - originated programmes of housing and welfare. Herbert Morrison in his Autobiography points out how Labour reporters supported Labour councils in their early days of the power in the L.C.C. and the London boroughs.(1) The connections between working journalists and the Labour movement, dating back to the foundation of the Union,(2) helped to ensure that newspapers were not always wholly unsympathetic to Labour.

(6). Contrary to prophecies (including those of the 1949 Royal Commission),(3) the monopolistic tendencies of the local press have reduced rather than intensified the

1. London, 1960: pp. 47-48.
2. see above, pp. 3-6.
3. Report paragraph 355.

problems of political commitment of newspapers. In competition, although some papers feel a necessity for commercial reasons to play down political ties, others are content to pursue one political line while their competitor pursues another. But many papers respond to the monopoly situation by becoming increasingly uncommitted in politics, either out of a sense of responsibility, or because they fear that they will lose or fail to gain their defunct competitor's readership if they offend its political susceptibilities, or because change in the structure of ownership has diluted the paper's political tradition. Underlying most of these points is the suspicion that too strong a dose of party politics is, in these days, bad for circulation.

The newspapers, it appears, are less inclined to political commitment than hitherto, and even those which maintain a firm allegiance tend to confine it to editorial comment, special articles and the like. It was certainly hard to trace cases of political suppression of local government news; where it could be found the newspapers concerned tended to be of the small owner - dominated family type, where the editor was a weak servant of the proprietor or himself one of the owning family. The Royal Commission studied examples of this kind from the Buxton Advertiser, which was edited at the time by a non-journalist, the managing director of the printing firm which owned the paper. A former chief reporter alleged that criticisms of the previous owners of what had

become the Civic Restaurant made by a councillor were deleted from the report of the council meeting, at the behest of the chairman of the directors (a friend of the restaurant owners). Other parts of council reports were cut out from time to time by the editor at the instance of an alderman; when the former reporter asked the editor why this had been done he was told that 'there are wheels within wheels'.(1) In my own inquiries I found one case only - also a small family - owned paper - where, after the editor had given offence to some of the owner's golfing friends, he was warned off by the owner and thereupon ceased to include any leading articles in the paper at all, (but at no stage did he suppress news items). The Royal Commission heard from the Hon.R.E.Beckett, Chairman of the Yorkshire Conservative Newspaper Company - an unusual sort of undertaking - that "indirect hints about municipal affairs" which were not to be reported were received from unspecified quarters from time to time.(2)

1. Minutes of Evidence, question 74.

2. ibid., Question 7537. Dilys Hill says of the Company's morning paper, the Yorkshire Post: "The Conservative policy of the paper affected the presentation of civic news. The Conservatives are the opposition party on the Leeds City Council but their reports of their attack in council meetings is always given first by the paper, with the majority party proposals forming the last third of the report. This arrangement was not only due to the direct demands of the paper's policy, but also to the fact that the reporter had a better chance of getting his copy into a more favourable space in this way".
op. cit. p. 258.

But, if it is admitted that these cases of specific political pressure leading to suppression of news or criticism are rare and confined to declining categories of newspapers, is there not a still more general sense in which political commitment inhibits newspapers from actively investigating the politics or government of their town? Is it not political loyalties, however weak, which discourage newspapers from giving a clear account of the operation of party or group politics in the council chamber, and from going to any lengths to explore the competence of the administration? There are several reasons for doubting the value of this explanation. In the first place, the weaknesses of local journalism are by no means confined to those places in which a Conservative paper reports a Conservative council: the politics of the council are not reflected in the quality of reports. In the case of the Banbury Guardian, a Labour paper, its reporting under Labour administration was not perceptibly inferior to or in any way different from its reporting when the Conservatives held a majority on the Borough Council. Throughout the country nominally Conservative papers report Labour town councils - to which they would not, according to this argument, have any loyalty - in the same unperceiving way. Moreover, most newspapers prefer to be or appear to be and generally are to some extent in disagreement with their local council, whatever its political complexion and theirs.

The truth of the opposite also casts doubt on the argument: it appears that political commitment of a strong kind actually encourages more "lifting of the veil" in reporting. Where the paper is politically deeply committed, it can have an incentive to explore and criticise the administrations of its opponents, and has no inhibitions about revealing what political machinations and influences are at work on the other side. The strongest evidence for this claim is the English local weekly paper of the last century, which, in addition to its extensive verbatim report of the council meeting would carry several 'editorials' discussing both the failings of municipal administration and the politics of the ruling party, (or, if it supported the controlling interest, attacking the opposition). The Oxford Herald of the mid-nineteenth century, characteristic of the period, abounds with attacks on the controlling Whig-Dissenting-Reform councillors of Banbury and went to great lengths to point out which way councillors voted on various issues and - especially - what was the extent of the influence of the nonconformist ministers and leaders on their deliberations. In addition to the battle of wards, there is plenty of disclosure of party background. Some nineteenth century papers were deliberately satirical, such as the Birmingham Town Crier, which 'came into existence because it was felt that there were certain things and perhaps certain people, who could best be assailed and suppressed by ridicule.

...all the men connected with the Town Crier at its starting were interested in the good government and progress of the town, and they used the influence of the paper for the purpose of removing stumbling blocks, and putting incompetent and pretentious persons out of the way'.(1)

The declining degree of political commitment which has already been noted means that there are few parallels to these nineteenth century papers in modern times; however, to have been noted and extensively discussed above, namely the Southport Advertiser and, at a more serious level, 'Diogenes' of the Kent Herald.(2) The latter, in particular, despite his partisanship, provides an extremely informative commentary on some aspects of local politics. It may be argued that this kind of veil - lifting is worse than none at all, since it tends to contain exaggeration and is confined to one party: it could be said to demand the two-paper pattern of small town journalism which, it has been observed,

1. Thomas Anderton, A Tale of One City: The New Birmingham (articles reprinted from the Midland Counties Herald) Birmingham, 1900.
Other examples of this pattern of the nineteenth century provincial journalism can be found in Thomas Latimer's Exeter Paper, the Western Times. (See Lambert, R.S., The Cobbett of the West: a Study of Thomas Latimer and the Struggle between Pulpit and Press in Exeter. London, 1939).

2. see above pp. 119-122.

is fast disappearing. But, whether or not it is desirable in present circumstances, it does illustrate the political commitment, far from being a barrier to perceptive reporting, may actually encourage it. Another example already illustrated gives further support to this interpretation:(1) it was no doubt political malice which encouraged a Conservative chief officer to leak information to a Conservative reporter, whose Conservative newspaper gave great prominence to unusually well-informed descriptions of the politics and administration of the Labour council in question. But the reports which arose from this chain of events were accurate and informative to a degree much greater than that generally found in the provincial press. Political commitment in this instance had again encouraged rather than discouraged informative reporting.(2)

Newspaper practice: the limitations of traditional local journalism.

Some part at least of the explanation of the weaknesses of local government reporting lies not in the external limitations on newspapers, nor in their commercial calculations, but in the long established conventions, traditions and working practices of local journalism.

1. see above p. 137.

2. cf. references to the militancy of newspapers in South Wales in 'One - party rule resisted in the Welsh valleys', The Times, 5 May 1964.

Journalism, and provincial journalism in particular is a conservative and traditional trade, and those who practice it often show both a conscious loyalty to the traditions of the press and an unconscious allegiance to working practices established long ago. This conservatism is illustrated, for instance, by the extreme reluctance of journalists to accept the recruitment of university graduates to the profession, which is only now beginning to weaken; graduate recruitment on a regular basis is still confined to a handful of the largest provincial newspaper groups. Many journalists, including editors, remain convinced that the 18-year-old or even 15-year-old school leaver, trained 'on the job', will continue to provide an adequate basis of recruitment to the profession.(1) However sympathetically one views the case against graduate recruitment, the extent of the journalists' opposition to it indicates a considerable reluctance to change. Changes in the other very conservative

1. cf. The Times, 23 February 1958 and H.C.Strick in N.U.S. News 23 February 1958.
see also U.K.Press Gazette 29 November 1965 in which two article illustrated journalists' hostility to universities: one is headed 'Professors warned: you can't teach journalism...you learn by doing it'. The other alleges that university interest in the press is inspired by a desire to 'attract the financial patronage, if not of the newspaper industry, of the highly profitable commercial television industry'.

craft on which the press depends, printing, have begun to take place and to affect the other aspects of newspaper production, but the low rate of adaptability is as conspicuous as the changes themselves.(1)

The effects of this conservatism of practice are various: one is the absence of specialisation in such areas as local politics. In this context it is not necessary to conceive of specialists in a strict sense, as journalists who have devoted a large part of their career to a single subject in which they have acquired an expert status (as the main specialists in fashion, defence or motoring on the national newspapers might be described). The normal working arrangements of a newspaper office discourage even short-term specialisation arrangements under which a journalist might act as 'correspondent for the local council for a few years, devoting his main effort to local government reporting, and dealing with almost all of the local political scene. In practice local newspapers operate what is known as a 'diary' system. The 'diary' is a list of forthcoming events, attendances at which will be handed out as assignments to the reporters. The chief reporter and his senior colleagues may themselves attend the most important events, but some attempt will usually be made to give each reporter a share of the tedious and of the more interesting duties. Diary items will include council meetings,

1. cf. Reading Evening Post and other new Thomson evening papers, p. 128 above.

public inquiries, courts and political meetings as well as social events, dog shows, weddings, funerals and Church functions: in addition there will be a rota of regular 'calls' at the police station, fire station, town clerk's office and on the clergymen of the neighbourhood. With such a wide variety of subjects widely distributed among the reporting staff, no individual is in a position to draw together the information from various sources which make up the main factors in local politics. The chief reporter may make a practice of attending the main council meetings in person, but the information at his disposal will be limited if committee meetings, public inquiries, party meetings, the 'town hall calls' and the meetings of the county council are all dealt with by other members of the staff. On any issue raised at a meeting, information tends to be widely dispersed and occasion rarely arises for it to be collected and compared.

Accompanying this lack of specialisation is the absence of the specialist's column which might provide a vehicle for freer discussion of local politics: the political correspondent's column in the national paper has no parallel in the local press.(1) It has been observed that in the nineteenth century local newspapers usually contained a faithful verbatim report of council proceedings as well as a column in which the editor would describe and comment on

1. 'Diogenes' of the Kent Herald is the exception.
(see above p. 119)

the political scene. With the disappearance of this type of political commentary (1) and the failure of a 'political correspondent's column' to develop, the newspaper reader is left with only the report of the council meeting. This will generally be more selective than hitherto, and will contain much less of the detail of speeches than hitherto; in freer form, however, it remains an account of what was said and done at the meeting, with little or no place for commentary by the reporter. Thus the persistence of a tradition of objective reporting of meetings illustrated by the heavy emphasis still laid on shorthand in the reporter's training, has combined with the decline of the political commentary to exclude from newspapers any vehicle for describing local politics. (2)

1. The modern 'editorial' does not compare with this, consisting usually of a short comment, often very moderate, on some item reported elsewhere in the paper. (see above pp. 82 & 108)

2. A former municipal correspondent of The Journal, Newcastle Upon Tyne, was regarded as the fastest and most accurate shorthand writer in the North East, and in addition to reporting council meetings for his paper he provided the council with a verbatim report for record purposes. Inevitably, this left him no opportunity to seek and write up any background information to his reports.

While the traditional structure of the reporter's work reduces his opportunities for accumulating background knowledge, the content pattern of most modern local papers gives him no opportunity to exploit (and therefore no added incentive to seek) such knowledge.

Some newspapers, particularly the provincial daily papers, do set aside a local government specialist or 'municipal correspondent' and a few assign him the freedom of a regular column.(1) Some municipal correspondents are specialists only in name, since they retain many other commitments and political reporting is not entirely nor even mainly in their hands. Others do come nearer to being 'political correspondents', attending as many council, committee and party meetings as they can and taking over press conferences, 'town hall calls' and other activities which might otherwise be divided among the reporting staff. Specialisation of this kind almost invariably seek to extend their knowledge through informal contact with councillors and officers, and the few who are given a regular column in which to make use of this knowledge provide most of the examples of perceptive journalism quoted in earlier chapters. The benefits to be obtained by such specialisation have been noted within the profession; as the editor of the

1. e.g. 'Atticus' in the Stockport County Express. (see above p. 116).

Essex County Standard has spoken of a need for :

> 'intelligent and trustworthy interpreters... men and women who understand local government as fully as councillors and officials, and who will take the positive role of seeing subjects from the layman's viewpoint, demanding as well as accepting information. It means local government correspondence as well as local government reporters, for the straight reporting of council meetings nowadays only gives part of the picture; local affairs have become so complex that for proper appreciation the background constantly requires to be filled in'.(1)

Very few newspapers take seriously the existence of such a need, and of those who appoint specialist correspondents, many newspapers provide little opportunity for their knowledge of local affairs to be extensively used.

The weaknesses in reporting which resort from lack of specialism are worsened by a widespread lack of general knowledge and understanding of local government among some categories of journalists, a phenomenon which has been noted by journalists themselves and is bemoaned by editors.(2) The establishment of a national training scheme for journalists(3) in which local government is one of the subjects studied has not solved this problem, for several reasons:

(i). Many older journalists have never had this form of training, and learned their work through what can only be described as a form of apprenticeship; the journalists

1. Benham, op. cit., p. 262.

2. cf. J.Minogue (local government correspondent of The Guardian) in Municipal Journal, 25 September 1964, p. 3069.

themselves feel that this form of training was of great value to them, but it has tended to preserve traditional attitudes to local government reporting.

(ii). A great deal of local government reporting is done by juniors who have not completed - in some cases scarcely begun - their training.

(iii). Although the training course includes local government, the work is usually confined to explaining the basic structure and legal framework, and giving trainees some indication of how to find their way through committee minutes and council procedure. Local politics rarely finds a place in the lectures and exercises provided.

(iv). The reluctance already described to recruit graduates into journalism or to make use of universities in any way tends to mean that none of the developments in the study of politics, and particularly the interest shown in recent years in local politics, have any influence on journalist's thinking on the subject. This contrasts with national political journalism, where academic developments in the study of party structure, elections and parliament have gradually been reflected in an increase in the sophistication with which some journalists have approached those subjects. However jealously national journalists preserve their independence from academic study, they are nevertheless influenced by its developments and not infrequently drawn into its discussions.(1) The provincial

1. e.g. David Wood (political correspondent of The Times) in a symposium on 'Parliament' in Political Quarterly, Vol. 36 No. 3, July-Sept. 1965.

newspapers' unwillingness to deal with the universities has prevented any similar effect on local political journalism in the weekly papers, even in those university towns where the newspapers regularly report university affairs.

Another convention or habit which affects political reporting is that of attributing all comment (other than the editorial) to some person or organisation outside the newspaper. Thus - as was pointed out in chapter 6[1] - material highly critical of local policies or personalities will find a ready place on the front page if it is in quotation marks and followed by such attributions as 'alleged Councillor Smith ' or 'according to the Chamber of Commerce' or even 'writes the Vicar of All Saints' in his parish newsletter'. This applies to political description as well as to outright criticism: where as the existance of a split in the Conservative ranks may be well known to reporters, it is only likely to appear in the newspaper if it can do so in the form"'Tories split from top to bottom' claims Labour leader".

This practice of printing only what can be attributed can be explained in several ways. In part, it may derive from the habit of avoiding the entanglements of the libel law, since quotations from a council meeting, for instance, are more likely to be open to a defence of qualified privilege

1. p. 154 (ed. p. 6)

than comments made directly by the newspaper's own staff.(1) Alternatively, it can be a defensive avoiding of community pressure and criticism such as was described in chapter 6, strengthened by the journalist's personal fears about adverse local reaction to what he writes. It was argued in Chapter 6 that the newspaper's susceptibility to these pressures can be exaggerated, and although they can apply with some force toadverse criticism, they have a less obvious bearing on mere description. If newspapers merely described some of the less violently controversial features of local politics, without going so far as to question the motives and sincerity of the chairman of the planning committee, it is hard to envisage that they would be exposed to great local opprobrium. However, perhaps the strongest force maintaining the practice of attribution is, once again, the traditional nature of newspaper practice. Since the decline of the editor's political column, there has been no place in the cycle of preparation of a newspaper for anything other than the reporting of events. Those things which appear in the diary, together with accidents, disasters and unexpected happenings constitute, so far as the editor and the chief sub-editor are concerned, events to be reported. What is not an event is not reported. Thus a reporter is never invited to indicate the existence of a Conservative caucus or a division in it:

1. Defamation Act, 1952, Sect. 7 and Schedule II, paragraph 10; Standen v South Essex Recorders, Ltd. (1934). See above pp 46-51.

only if a Labour councillor raises these matters at a meeting does it constitute an event to be reported. The journalist who handed in to his office an account of the mounting tensions over comprehensive education among Conservative councillors might well be invited to explain to the news editor what he thought he was reporting.

Conversations with journalists pointed to the existence of a further tradition which may be one of the most important explanations of the low level of political reporting. Many reporters have an unmistakeable dislike of some features of local politics, and several of the journalists interviewed clearly inclined towards an anti-partisan view of local government, disliking the whole notion of party involvement. Journalists frequently volunteered sentiments of the form 'Running the town demands honest common sense, not party bickering' or 'There's no party line on drains'. Those who take such an unfavourable attitude to some of the characteristics of local politics are tempted to avoid reference to these characteristics in their reporting, usually unconsciously. The evidence of a willingness among journalists to 'write out', consciously or unconsciously, that which they do not like is abundant. Although journalists are frequently accused by councillors of 'sensationalising' council reports, which there is an obvious incentive for them to do, many of them instinctively 'tone down' the livelier and more acrimonious parts of council meetings, even though they may select these items for their main story. Bitter criticism and colourful

language were omitted from reports of some meetings attended in the course of this study. Most journalists automatically correct bad grammar, and hardly ever allow an obviously nonsensical contribution to appear in print. Questioned about this practice, journalists replied 'I couldn't put in some of the things ---- says: he always regrets them afterwards' or 'It would give the town a bad name if some of the stupid things said in council got in print'. One reporter said of a former mayor, 'I couldn't put it in just as he says it - it would look terrible'.(1) One municipal correspondent admitted that he had submitted only a very brief report of a local government reorganisation inquiry because the evidence given by the newly-appointed town clerk had, as he put it, been 'cut to shreds by a couple of clever Q.C.'s'. 'I could never have shown him up in the paper like that - they made such a fool of him. Think what it would have done to the name of the town.' Afterwards the town clerk wrote

1. Not all nineteenth century journalists had such scruples, and some would use the lethal device of accurate reporting to make a bad speaker look foolish. Thomas Latimer carried this to extremes, as in this report:

> "I seconds it, and why I do this is for these general grounds of proboney publyke. In the first place the old original street would have been for the convenience of them as built it...."

The speaker, much offended, challenged Latimer to a spelling duel for a wager of ten guineas. (Latimer, <u>op.cit.</u>, p.67).

to the journalist to thank him for 'sparing' him; the journalist commented, 'I told him "I didn't do this for you, I did it for ----- [the town]'.

Given this express willingness to tone down what is disliked or not thought appropriate to the dignity of the town or of local government, it is readily conceivable that journalists who dislike the politics of local government tend to ignore it in their writing. In areas with formal party politics this can mean that the reporter is unwilling to acknowledge the existence of or disinclined to refer to many of the characteristics of formal party politics, such as caucus meetings, discipline (and the problems of indiscipline) and faction. Where formal party politics is absent, the reporter may be inclined to assume that, since the partisanship he dislikes is not present, then there is no 'politics' to describe, and for the good of the area the various allegiances and feuds of local councillors can best be left undescribed. Just as reporters write into their copy their assumptions about the standard and style of public conduct to which local government ought to aspire, so also do their assumptions about [illegible] what they consider to be the undesirable features of politics affect their willingness to investigate or write about politics. It must be emphasised, first, that this process can be unconscious, and, secondly, that even if only a minority of journalists have the sort of assumptions about politics which might

cause their writing about it to be limited in this way, they may well influence a far wider group of journalists to adopt a similar pattern and style of writing. In this way particularly if they have editorial positions, they may help to bolster some of the other conventions and practices which, it has been argued, discourage political reporting.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS.

The English press, particularly the provincial press, has invloved itself in a long campaign to secure greater rights and facilities to report the activities of local authorities: the campaign has consisted primarily of attempts to secure statutory rights of admission to council and committee meetings, but has also involved access to committee documents, opposition to embargoes, and attempts to obtain greater freedom than the present law of defamation allows. The demands for these rights are based on the assumption that newspapers play an important part in the democratic process, providing the elector with the information on which to judge the behaviour of those he elects and the potential participant in local politics with the opportunity to question decisions through the lobby processes before they become final. It has been argued that although the provincial newspapers accept this duty of informing the public both consciously in the views of their editors and reporters and implicity in the space they devote to local government regardless of its 'news value', they do not succeed in providing the necessary degree of information. In the first place, they frequently ignore or neglect county councils, which in many cases are considerably more powerful than the borough or urban district councils to which they give almost all their attention; secondly, they do not convey anything

of the political process which leads to local authority decisions, and thirdly they often fail to convey to the reader sufficient of the context and implications of a decision for it to be understood. The campaign which the newspapers have conducted suggests that external limitations are the main cause of these deficiencies. Although extreme secretiveness on the part of a local authority severely limits the sources of information available to a newspaper, it does not prevent description of some of the political background: indeed, secretiveness has sometimes acted as an incentive to newspapers to uncover and disclose more of local politics. The law of libel, although it discourages all but the most powerful national papers from dealing with such subjects as corruption in local government, does nothing to prevent newspapers from discussing the administrative and political context of decisions.

The most effective limitations on reporting of local democracy may in fact be internal, not external, to the newspapers. It might be thought that the commercial or political commitments of newspapers prevent them from 'opening up' local politics. This does not appear to be true. The need to make newspapers profitable does not cause them to abandon their local government reporting, and the possibility that advertisers' influence might lead them to supress certain reports or certain types of reporting is no longer of great significance. (However, those newspapers, like the provincial daily papers, which are able to devote

larger resources to their reporting work often achieve better results in this field, particularly in giving the administrative background to decisions.) Political commitment in the provincial press has decreased considerably in intensity, and can hardly be regarded as a serious influence on content in all but a minority of newspapers. However, it is noticeable that strong political commitment has often led (particularly in the nineteenth century, but also in a handful of exceptional current papers) to a willingness to discuss local politics much more freely, albeit from a partisan standpoint.

The most effective limitations on the reporting of local government are not external, nor are they such often criticised features of newspaper control as political commitment or unwillingness to deal with subjects with no obvious commercial appeal. They are aspects of the very traditional practice of journalism as it is carried on in most newspaper offices. In particular, there is a noticeable absence of specialisation in provincial journalism, so that the reporting of local politics is usually divided among the reporting staff, and no individual journalist is usually in a position to draw together the many threads involved. Moreover, with the decline of the editor's political commentary (a feature of many nineteenth century newspapers) and the adherence to conventions of objectivity in the reporting of meetings, no vehicle remains for description of

the political scene. Since there is no obvious place in the newspaper for such material to appear, the journalist has no incentive to seek it. The use on the more ambitious newspapers of a 'municipal correspondent' may, if he has the full range of responsibilities which his title implies, go some way to meet the problem: in a number of cases illustrated municipal correspondents provided good background information, and a few produced instances of perceptive political reporting. However, there persists in the minds of many journalists a notion that the politics of local government - not merely party politics - is disreputable, and interferes with the good government of the town, in which they believe that 'common sense' should be the guiding factor. This assumption tends to be 'written in' to their reporting, so that political forces are ignored and reference to influences at work tends to be avoided. Even if only a minority of reporters and editors retain this conception of a politics-free 'ideal' local government, most provincial journalists, particularly those on weekly papers, are influenced by it or have absorbed unconsciously the style of reporting which such an attitude produced.

The assumption on which the newspapers' campaign for greater rights is based has been shown to be weak, in that the newspapers fail in several respects to provide adequate information, despite their willingness to give space to local government. This may lead one to argue that their demands should not be met; alternatively, one might look

for signs of improvement in local political journalism.

It has been argued that conventions and styles of journalism are of primary importance in restricting the capacity of the newspapers: clearly only editors and journalists with originality and a willingness to innovate are likely to succeed in breaking through limitations of this kind. By and large, local weekly papers rarely recruit and hardly ever retain the ambitious and original journalist, who generally regards Fleet Street as his target. Any time he spends on a local weekly will be at the beginning of his career, when he is still learning the job and when his status within the hierarchy of the paper is too low to give him much scope to exercise originality. The provincial morning and evening newspaper groups, with the higher salaries and possibilities of internal promotion which they can offer, are in a stronger position to retain good journalists, including graduates, and some of the examples of enterprising journalism have come from these papers. The expansion now taking place in the evening newspaper field (1) may lead to an improvement in general standards through the stimulus of competition (which will be felt by the weekly papers within the circulation areas of the evening papers). Since an improvement in the pay and occupational status of the provincial journalist on weekly papers does not seem immediately likely, this limited expansion provides perhaps the most promising possibility of a general development of political journalism in the provincial press.

1. See above p. 128

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County Councils Association.

Association of Municipal Corporations.

National Union of Journalists.

Institute of Journalists.

Berkshire County Council.

Oxfordshire County Council.

Northumberland County Council.

Exeter Corporation.

Andover Borough Council.

Banbury Borough Council.

Manchester City Council.

Newburn Urban District Council.

Macclesfield Rural District Council.

GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS.

Parliamentary Debates.(4th. series).

House of Lords Debates.(5th. series).

House of Commons Debates.(5th. series).

House of Commons Standing Committee Reports

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Ministry of Housing and Local Government Circulars: 21/61 and 49/62.

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Sheffield Police Appeal Inquiry. Cmnd. 2176, 1963.

Report of the Bognor Regis Inquiry, presented to the Minister of Housing and Local Government and the Chairman and Members of the Bognor Regis Urban District Council by Mr. J. Ramsay Willis, Q.C. 1965.

Management of Local Government: Report of the Committee on the Management of Local Government appointed by the Minister of Housing and Local Government.
Volume 1: Report of the Committee.
Volume 2: The Local Government Councillor by Louis Moss and Stanley R. Parker.
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Volume 5: The Government Administration in England and Wales by Margaret Harrison and Alan Norton.

Unpublished Paper.

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Unpublished Theses.

HILL, Dilys M. 'Democracy in Local Government: a study in participation and communication'. Leeds 1966(D.Phil.)

NOBLE, G.D. 'The development and use of public relations in local government in England and Wales'. Manchester 1950 (M.A.)

PERIODICALS (other than local newspapers).

Frequency of publication, where not indicated in the title, is shown by the figure in parentheses of the number of issues published per year.

Benn's Newspaper Press Directory (1)

British Rate and Data (6)

British Weekly

County Councils Gazette (4) (formerly County Councils Association Official Circular).

Daily Mirror

Daily Sketch

Daily Telegraph

Directory of Newspaper and Magazine Personnel and Data (1, with 3 correction supplements).

The Economist (52)

The Guardian (Daily)

The Journal (Institute of Journalists) (12)

The Journalist (National Union of Journalists) (12)

The Justice of the Peace and Local Government Review (52)

Keesing's Contemporary Archives (52)

The Liberal Challenge (irregular)

Liberal News (52)

Local Government Chronicle (52)

Municipal Review (Association of Municipal Corporations) (12)

Municipal Journal (52)

New Statesman (52)

The Observer (52)

Parish Councils Review (4)

The Press and the People (The Press Council) (1)

Public Administration (4)

Public Law (4)

Rural District Review (12)

Sunday Mail

Sunday Telegraph

Sunday Times

The Times (Daily)

The Times House of Commons (irregular)

U.K. Press Gazette (26)

Willing's Press Guide (1)

World's Press News & Advertiser's Review (52)

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PROVINCIAL NEWSPAPERS

Notes.

(1) Newspapers analysed in detail (see chapters 3 and 4)

(x) Newspapers which have subsequently ceased publication.

Newspapers sharing common editorial matter with others (e.g. in a series of newspapers) have not been cited or counted individually unless the amount of exclusive editorial content in issues seen exceeds that of common content.

'Provincial' is used (as in the trade) as the antithesis of 'national', not of 'metropolitan'; thus an inner London 'local' paper such as the South London Press is included; the London evening newspapers, which can be regarded as partly local, have not been included.

'English' is used in this context primarily to avoid the inclusion of Scotland, which has a distinct local government system, and Welsh newspapers have been included in the bibliography. The total number of newspapers published in Wales cited is seven: of the total figure of approximately 950 weekly newspapers, approximately 80 are published in Wales.

26 or more issues read.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.

A. MORNING PAPERS.

Birmingham Post.

The Journal (Newcastle Upon Tyne).

East Anglian Daily Times (Ipswich)

Eastern Daily Press. (Norwich).

Guardian Journal. (Nottingham).

Liverpool Daily Post.

Northern Echo. (Darlington).

Sheffield Telegraph. (subsequently known as Morning Telegraph).

Western Daily Press. (Bristol)

Western Mail. (Cardiff).

Western Morning News. (Plymouth).

Yorkshire Post. (Leeds).

Morning News (Leamington Spa).

B. SUNDAY PAPERS.

Sunday Mercury. (Birmingham).

Sunday Sun. (Newcastle Upon Tyne).

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.

C. EVENING PAPERS.

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.
Evening Chronicle. (Newcastle Upon Tyne)	Birmingham Evening Mail & Despatch.	Bath & Wilts Evening Chronicle.
Manchester Evening News, and Chronicle.	Evening Post. (Reading)	Bristol Evening Post.
Oxford Mail.	Hull Daily Mail.	Cambridge News.
	Express & Star. (Wolverhampton)	Chronicle & Echo. (Northampton)
	Evening Sentinel. (Stoke-on-Trent)	Coventry Evening Telegraph.
	Liverpool Echo.	Cumberland Evening News. (Carlisle)
	Shields Gazette. (South Shields)	Derby Evening Telegraph.
	Shropshire Star. (Dawley)	Lancashire Evening Telegraph. (Blackburn)
	Southern Evening Echo. (Southampton)	The Star. (Sheffield)
		West Lancashire Evening Gazette. (Blackpool)
		Yorkshire Evening Press. (York).

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.

D. WEEKLY PAPERS.

Alderley & Wilmslow & Knutsford Advertiser.	Bucks. Free Press. (High Wycombe).	Bedfordshire Times. (Bedford).
Altrincham, Hale, & Bowdon Guardian.	Hampshire Chronicle. (Winchester).	Beeston Gazette & Echo.
Andover Advertiser.	Kent Herald. (Canterbury).	Berrow's Worcester Journal.
Ashton-under-Lyne Reporter. (1)	Montgomeryshire Express. (Welshpool).	Berwick Advertiser.
Banbury Advertiser (1)	North Berks Herald. (Oxford, Didcot, Wallingford & Wantage)	Blackburn Times.
Banbury Guardian.(1)	Salford City Reporter.	Blaydon Courier.
Birmingham Planet.	Smethwick Telephone & Warley Courier.	Blyth News & Ashington Post.
Essex County Standard. (Colchester).	Thame Gazette.	Border Counties Advertiser. (Oswestry).
Gateshead Post. (1)	Wells Journal.	Buxton Advertiser & Herald.
Hendon Times. (1)		Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News.
Hexham Courant.		Caernarvon Herald.
Macclesfield Advertiser.		Cambrian News. (Aberystwyth).

M.T.

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.
Macclesfield Express.		Carlisle Journal.
Northumberland Gazette. (Alnwick).		Central Somerset Gazette. (Wells).
Oxford Times.		Chatham, Rochester & Gillingham News.
Shields Weekly News. (North Shields).		Chester Chronicle.
Stockport Advertiser.		Chester Courant.
Stockport Express.		Chigwell Times.
Witney Gazette.		Chipping Norton Advertiser.
Whitley Bay Guardian.		Y Clorianydd. (Llangefni).
		Congleton Chronicle.
		Consett Guardian.
		Craven Herald & Pioneer. (Skipton).
		Crewe Chronicle.
		Cumberland News. (Carlisle).
		Cornish Guardian. (Bodmin).
		Cornish Times. (Liskeard).

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.

Dorset County Journal.
(Dorshester)

Durham Chronicle.

Durham County Advertiser.

East Essex Gazette.
(Clacton)

Essex Chronicle.
(Chelmsford)

Essex Weekly News.
(Chelmsford)

Evesham Journal.(x)

Gosport Journal.

Gravesend Reporter.

Harrogate Advertiser.

Harrow Observer.

Haltwhistle Echo.

Haverhill Echo.

Henley & South Oxfordshire Standard.

Herald Cymraeg a'r Genedl.
(Caernarvon).

Herald Môn.
(Caernarvon)

ATK

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.
		Hertfordshire & Hemel Hempstead Gazette.
		High Peak Reporter. (Chapel-en-le-Frith)
		Huddersfield Weekly Examiner.
		Ilkeston Advertiser.
		Isle of Thanet Gazette. (Margate).
		Isle of Wight Times. (Ryde).
		Kensington Post.
		Kent & Sussex Courier. (Tunbridge Wells)
		Kent Messenger. (Maidstone)
		Kent Messenger Chatham Observer.
		Lancaster Guardian.
		Leamington Spa Courier.
		Lincolnshire Chronicle. (Lincoln)
		Lincolnshire Standard. (Boston)
		Loughborough Echo.

AM

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.
		Luton News.
		Malvern Gazette.
		Mansfield Chronicle Advertiser.
		Merioneth Express. (Bala)
		Morecambe & Heysham Visitor.
		Morecambe Guardian.
		Morley Observer.
		Mossley & Saddleworth Reporter.
		North Devon Journal-Herald. (Barnstaple)
		Penrith Observer.
		Pulman's Weekly News. (Yeovil)
		Reading & Berkshire Chronicle.
		Reading Mercury.
		Reading Standard. (x)
		Shepton Mallet Journal.
		Southport & District Advertiser(x
		Southport Visitor.
		Stretford Express.

26 or more issues.	13 or more issues.	Fewer than 13 issues.
		Stratford-upon-Avon Herald.
		Surrey Mirror.
		Swanage Times.
		Swindon Echo.
		Thanet Times. (Ramsgate)
		Todmorden News & Advertiser.
		Ulverston News.
		South London Press. (S.L.P.)
		The West Briton. (Truro)
		Westmorland Gazette. (Kendal)
		Windsor, Slough & Eton Express.
		Wythenshawe Express.