

# A Journalist's Duty? Continuity and change in local newspaper reporting of recent UK general elections

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**ABSTRACT** *Research studies of political communications at the local or constituency level are scarce. There are few detailed analyses of local newspapers' coverage of the constituency campaign or any systematic account of local journalists' attitudes towards election reporting. This paper seeks to redress this neglect by providing a longitudinal overview and analysis of local newspaper coverage of the local campaign in the 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2001 UK general elections. Drawing on the findings of a unique and extensive analysis of newspapers' election reporting, combined with detailed interviews with journalists, editors, politicians and their agents, the paper argues that while certain aspects of local newspapers' election coverage have declined recently, local journalists' commitments to reporting the election remain strong and coverage continues to be informative and wide ranging: indeed the findings suggest that on some grounds local press reporting of elections compares favourably with national press coverage. But in 2001 three significant changes in local coverage were evident. Reporting was: (1) markedly more locally oriented than in previous elections; (2) notably more disposed towards a "lighter" editorial emphasis preferring to focus on human interest stories about candidates than discussions of policy, and (3) finally, more partisan than previously with newspapers' overall "balance of partisanship" being replaced by a tendency to favour the Conservative Party above Labour—a trend strongly at variance with national newspapers' political sympathies.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Local journalism, Political communications, General election, Balance of partisanship, Party media relations, Readers' letters*

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I think that as a journalist you do have a duty to report the election as fully as you can. And if voters are apathetic, we have to do what we can to encourage people to go out and vote and try to make it as interesting as possible for them. (A local journalist's response to a question about voter apathy)

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## Local Newspaper Reporting of the General Election Campaign: context

Academic studies of local political communications are scarce (Carty and Eagles, 2000; Denver and Bochel, 1977; Denver and Hands, 1992; Franklin and Murphy, 1991; Franklin and Parry, 1998; Franklin, 1995). A mere handful of published studies of *local* political communications provide an inadequate counterbalance to the burgeoning literature documenting the extensive reporting of general elections in the national news media and the "packaging of

politics" by parties at the national level (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Curtice *et al.*, 1999; Franklin, 1994; 2000; Jones, 1997; 2001; Kavanagh, 1995; McNair, 1999; Negrine, 1996; Scammell, 1995). This omission is part of a more general scholarly neglect of local news media. Local newspapers remain poorly researched, even less well understood and mistakenly assumed to be uncommitted to political reporting. Most studies are not academic but autobiographical, typically reflecting the early professional life of journalists and tending towards uncritical celebrations of the local press (Keane, 1996) or disdaining accounts alleging local journalists' failure to report issues of consequence for their communities (Fisk, 2001). In political communications research, local newspapers typically attract little more attention than it takes to dismiss them as the "local rag" (Franklin and Murphy, 1998, p. 13).

Other factors have militated against local political communications scholarship in the UK. As early as 1974, the authors of the influential and prestigious Nuffield election studies, decided against including further case studies of constituency campaigns, concluding that events in the local arena had been “overtaken by the nationalisation of the campaign” (Butler and Kavanagh, 1981, p. 292). In an age of globalisation, political and media organisations are increasingly structured in centralised hierarchies and located in national capitals such as London. In this context local newspapers’ coverage of campaigns has come to be judged too parochial to be worthy of attention: local journalists’ preoccupation with reporting their particular parish pump has slipped from the political communications agenda.

This neglect is unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, the 1300 local newspapers published in the UK enjoy a substantial readership: circulation and distribution figures continue to rival sales of national newspapers (national newspapers 91,282,065 [ABC figures for July 2001], local and regional newspapers 71,873,716 [ABC/VDF figures for July 2001]). The existence of local press monopolies, moreover, means that in most settings the local newspaper enjoys an even greater readership than a popular national tabloid (Franklin and Murphy, 1991, p. 7). A study in Leicester, for example, revealed that 83 per cent of households read the local *Leicester Mercury*, but only 56 per cent read the UK’s most popular newspaper *The Sun* and a mere 25 per cent the *Daily Mirror* (Golding, 1989). Consequently local newspapers may prove highly influential in defining news and setting the local agenda for their readerships. Some party activists believe that when circulation and constituency boundaries coincide, the local press may possess a unique potential for setting the issue agenda for the local electoral debate (Franklin, 1989).

Second, previous research suggests that local newspapers are notably less partisan in their election coverage than their national newspaper counterparts, explore a wider electoral agenda, provide readers with detailed information about candidates and issues and constitute, via

the letter’s page, an easily accessible local forum for readers to debate the merits of candidates, policies and local issues (Franklin and Parry, 1998, pp. 226–27). Consequently studies of local press coverage could provide insights into a distinctive style of electoral communications and provide opportunities to compare local with national press reporting and to establish whether the volatility of certain national newspapers’ partisanship is reflected in local newspapers.

Third, it is commonplace—even axiomatic—for politicians and political communications scholars to argue that the extent to which a party enjoys the support of national newspapers during the campaign is crucial to the election outcome. Following the 1992 election, one national newspaper famously claimed in a front page headline that “It Was the Sun Wot Won It” (*The Sun*, 11 April 1992). The Labour Party seems to have been persuaded. Consequently a central priority for New Labour’s press strategy in the run-up to the 1997 election became the need to neutralise, if not reverse, the highly critical and hostile coverage of the party by the Murdoch press (Franklin, 1996, p. 19): winning the editorial support of *The Sun* remained a crucial ambition for New Labour in 2001 (Toynbee, 2001, p. 17). Given the priority that politicians evidently ascribe to winning supportive coverage in the national press, political communications scholars’ indifference to the possible impact of local press coverage on constituency level electoral outcomes represents a lost opportunity.

This paper seeks to restore this opportunity by reporting the findings of a unique longitudinal analysis of local journalists’ coverage of the constituency campaign in selected constituencies in the West Yorkshire region of England during the 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2001 UK general elections<sup>1</sup>. Each election study has addressed three broadly framed research questions. First, to what extent and with what success do local parties attempt to influence local newspapers’ reporting of the constituency campaign? Second, how have local journalists responded to (resisted?) these party initiatives? Finally, what has the eventual press coverage been like?

*The Changing Political and Media Environment for Research*

The period between the initial (1987) and the most recent (2001) studies of local press reporting has been characterised by three distinctive and significant political communication changes.

First, journalists' election coverage since 1987 has been conducted in the context of a growing concern to "professionalise" the local campaign, with parties displaying an increasing enthusiasm and facility for using local news media as part of their broader campaigning strategies. In 1987, both the Conservative and Labour parties were aware of the campaigning potential that local media offered, but within each party it was possible to identify distinctive attitudes to local media and to characterise party election agents as either "traditionalists" or "modernists": the former predominated in the Conservative Party (Franklin, 1989, p. 217).

Traditionalists tended to dismiss the campaigning significance of the local press. They knew little about the organisation, ownership and readerships of local newspapers, attributed little influence to their political coverage and were professionally ill equipped to orchestrate a media-based campaign. Perhaps unsurprisingly, traditionalists preferred the well-tested direct communication strategies of leafleting, canvassing and public meetings where they were more able to direct and control the content of political communications. Modernists, by contrast, were knowledgeable about local newspapers and understood their working regimes and the significance of deadlines across the news day. They were experienced in drafting press releases, convening press conferences and, significantly, modernists perceived election news as a negotiated outcome of contacts between journalists and party personnel.

By 1992, there were no traditionalists in the Labour Party; a few remained among the Conservative ranks. The 1992 election marked a watershed for local party campaigning. Local media, especially local newspapers, assumed a central significance in parties' local campaigning strategies. The press officer became the key person in the campaign team. Research from

earlier studies illustrates their effectiveness in shaping journalists' coverage. A comparison of Labour Party press releases issued in one constituency, with election coverage in the local newspaper, revealed 29 press releases generated 28 stories in the newspaper. The paper published at least one story based on a press release each day of the campaign: on three days all coverage of the Labour Party derived from party sources. Journalistic revision of press releases was minimal. A third of the stories simply replicated the release verbatim: a further fifth made modest revisions and published between 50 per cent and 75 per cent of the original text of the press release. Local journalists were sceptical about press releases, claiming that they usually "spiked them" but one local journalist conceded that "the Labour party was well geared up, they had some good press releases, some good copy, so they got a decent share of the coverage" (Franklin, 1994, pp. 166–72).

The elections in 1997, but especially 2001, witnessed the continuing emphasis on media-based campaigning. A Labour Party official suggested that the need to establish a press office and wage a concerted campaign via local media had become a taken-for-granted assumption:

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I think we are all getting a lot more aware of the power of local media and I think local media must be feeling that. I'm not sure that in 1983 we would have been putting out press releases. I think back to earlier times in the Labour party and I'm not sure we would have said straightaway "Who is the Press Officer" and "You sort out your campaign team". I think in those days we were a bit more blind about the importance of local media.<sup>2</sup>

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A second political communications change apparent across the four general elections has been journalists' response to this professionalisation of the campaign: journalists were indeed feeling the pressure. In interviews following the 1992 election, journalists complained about these party incursions into their traditional ways of reporting the election. Many journalists discussed the difficulties they now confronted in reconciling their professional ambition to be impartial and balanced in their election reporting with party demands for coverage. Journal-

ists constructed highly complex formulas and offered parties strictly egalitarian quotas of editorial space in order to try to quell party complaints concerning "bias" in favour of political opponents (Franklin and Parry, 1998, p. 212). By 2001 journalists had grown accustomed to such pressures and more self-confident in resisting them. The editor of one local newspaper confided,

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We do come under a lot of pressure: no doubt about it. One candidate's agent phoned 7 times one morning—and that's quite a lot of pressure. But I think that if you are confident that you are well organised, working to high standards and being fair ... Once you've got that confidence in what you're doing, then you can say to the agent on the phone, even if they are shouting and jumping up and down, "Now come on. You know we are doing a fair job here."

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In truth, journalists' greater confidence reflects significant changes in the working assumptions that inform their election coverage. Election stories have lost their claim to a status that Blumler and Gurevitch designated "sacerdotal" (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1986). This implies that election news no longer enjoys a special place in journalists' news priorities: it no longer wins editorial space by virtue of being *election* news. Journalists have thrown away their elaborate quotas and returned to news values to guide their selection of material for election coverage. An experienced local journalist acknowledged the usefulness of this shift in dealing with party pressures:

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Parties know that its no good putting pressure on a local paper to put forward a political platform because there is so little space: a page and a half a week or whatever it is. So it is better to provide a good news story than trying to put pressure on. A good news story will win whichever party puts it forward. But it's got to punch its weight ... People are bored with politics. They won't read a story simply because it is an election story. It has got to carry a great deal of news content as well. And if the parties want to get their names put forward, that is how they are going to have to do it.

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This development is not simply a response to party news management pressures but reflects a broader shift towards a local newspaper industry that is increasingly "market driven". Reporting of local courts, councils and elections

(local or national), once the staple diet of local newspapers' bill of fare, appears on the menu of local news only if looks sufficiently attractive to entice readers (Franklin and Murphy, 1998, p. 22; Franklin, 1997, pp. 111–14).

A third set of changes concern significant developments in local newspapers and local electoral politics across the study period. The number of local newspapers, for example, has shifted radically as a result of the launch of new titles and the closure of others. The 21 newspapers reporting the elections in 1987 had grown to 31 by 1992, but declined to 25 by 1997 and reduced further to 24 by 2001. Circulations also dipped, reflecting more general trends to declining number of titles and circulations throughout the UK local press. Sales of the daily *Yorkshire Post* decreased from 87,000 in 1987 to 77,535 in 1997; by 2001 they had declined markedly to 71,632. Circulation figures for the *Batley News* reveal a similar pattern with the 1987 readership of 12,843 dipping to 9156 in 1997 and 8833 in 2001. These changes have been accompanied by significant shifts in patterns of newspaper ownership. Half the newspapers in the 1987 study were independently (often family) owned by small local companies: by 1997 all newspapers had been incorporated into large media conglomerates.

Political change has also been evident. In 1987 the ten constituencies in the study were represented by four Conservative, four Labour and two Liberal Democrat MPs: political balance had been a crucial criterion informing the selection of constituencies for study. Following the 1997 election all constituencies had elected a Labour member: ten Labour incumbents entered the 2001 contest.

### Local Newspaper Coverage of UK General Elections

The local press provided extensive and detailed coverage of the 2001 general election. The 24 newspapers analysed published 1250 election-related items (934 [74.7 per cent] articles, 64 [5.1 per cent] editorials and 252 [20.2 per cent readers' letters) across the four weeks of the campaign and devoted 69,350 square centimetres of their columns to election news. Although re-

**Table 1. Local newspapers' election coverage in 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2001**

Year of election	Articles (%)	Editorials (%)	Letters (%)	Total (%)
1987	921 (77.1)	35 (2.9)	238 (19.9)	1194 (100)
1992	1544 (74.9)	42 (2.0)	475 (23.0)	2061 (100)
1997	858 (68.8)	86 (6.9)	304 (24.4)	1248 (100)
2001	934 (74.7)	64 (5.1)	252 (20.2)	1250 (100)

maining substantial, election coverage in 2001 was considerably less than in previous elections and represented a 15 per cent reduction on 1997 (81,542 square centimetres) and a striking 39 per cent reduction in overall reporting compared to the 1992 election (113,030 square centimetres). The mean size of articles in 2001 (55.5 square centimetres) was also down on the 1997 figure (65.5) but was virtually equivalent to the 1992 average of 54.8 square centimetres.

There were particular reasons to explain the reduced "square footage" in 2001: in interviews journalists and editors recited them endlessly. Public apathy, the delayed election date, the absence of any political crisis or urgency, the narrowness of party differences, the alienation of the public from politics and politicians and an anticipated low turnout signalled that 2001 would be a difficult election for journalists to sell to readers. But it was the sense of certainty about the eventual outcome which journalists cited most frequently: one journalist observed, "It was almost a case of Man United playing Colchester." Whether or not to cover the election at all and, if so, how much coverage to allocate had been a topic for serious discussion at many papers. One editor acknowledged, "In 1997 we sat down and asked 'Is the election really worth the space we give it?' We decided yes. But this time the debate took longer. We knew turn out would be well down judging by the Euro and local election results, but we decided that the election is the one time when people do take some interest in politics." Employing a different football metaphor, he suggested that "from the news side of things, it's a bit like the cup final." But despite this decline in the overall *volume* of reporting of the 2001 election, local newspapers' coverage allocated to the distinctive editorial formats of articles, editorials and letters is broadly consistent

across the four most recent general elections: the exception here is the 1992 election (See Table 1).

The total number of published items in 2001 (1250) is very similar to the overall figures for election coverage in 1997 (1248) and 1987 (1194). Again there may be particular reasons that offer some explanation of the untypical blip in the 1992 coverage. First, reflecting trends in the national press, local newspapers experienced an unprecedented expansion in titles during the late 1980s: the sustained recession of the early 1990s, however, prompted closures. Consequently, the 13 free weekly newspapers in 1992 had reduced to seven by 2001: by contrast the nine paid weekly papers in the 1987 study had mushroomed to 15 by 1992. Second, by 1997 many local newspapers had adopted a changed approach to election reporting which emphasised the news value of a particular story rather than judging stories worthy of publication simply because they were *election* stories. These revised and more demanding editorial priorities might be anticipated to generate a lower story count.

Election reports in local newspapers in 2001, as in previous elections, were accorded a highly variable news priority. The daily regional, the daily evening, the paid weeklies and the free weeklies formed a highly differentiated hierarchy of enthusiasm for election news (See Table 2).

Free weekly newspapers' reporting of the 2001 election displayed the now characteristic indifference evident during previous elections. The seven free newspapers published only 23 election-related items (21 articles and two letters) across the entire campaign. Free newspapers failed to publish a single editorial about the election and only two readers' letters: the two letters, published on the same page in the

**Table 2. Items of election coverage by newspaper title**

Paper title	Paper type	Circulation	Articles	Editorials	Letters	Row total (%)
<i>Aire Valley Target</i>	Free <sup>1</sup>	49,630	2	—	2	4 (0.3)
<i>Bradford Star</i>	Free	56,000	2	—	—	2 (0.2)
<i>Calderdale News</i>	Free	36,000	—	—	—	—
<i>Huddersfield Weekly News</i>	Free	70,000	1	—	—	1 (0.1)
<i>Leeds Skyrack Express</i>	Free	53,824	2	—	—	2 (0.2)
<i>Weekly Advertiser (Dewsbury)</i>	Free	42,846	1	—	—	1 (0.1)
<i>Wharfe Valley Times</i>	Free	45,732	13	—	—	13 (1.0)
<i>Batley News</i>	Weekly <sup>2</sup>	8833	28	3	13	44 (3.5)
<i>Brighouse Echo</i>	Weekly	6450	45	2	3	50 (4.0)
<i>Colne Valley Chronicle</i>	Weekly		17		8	25 (2.0)
<i>Dewsbury Reporter</i>	Weekly	12,776	35	4	24	63 (5.0)
<i>Hebden Bridge Times</i>	Weekly	3788	15		5	20 (1.6)
<i>Heckmondwike Herald</i>	Weekly	8397	52	3	12	67 (5.4)
<i>Holme Valley Express</i>	Weekly		17	—	8	25 (2.0)
<i>Huddersfield District Chronicle</i>	Weekly		14	—	8	22 (1.8)
<i>Mirfield Reporter</i>	Weekly	12,776	33	3	15	51 (4.1)
<i>Morley Advertiser</i>	Weekly	3556	11	—	6	17 (1.4)
<i>Morley Observer</i>	Weekly	4389	27	2	2	31 (2.5)
<i>Pudsey Times</i>	Weekly	27357	6	—	—	6 (0.5)
<i>Spensborough Guardian</i>	Weekly	8397	52	4	10	66 (5.3)
<i>Todmorden News</i>	Weekly	4977	14	—	2	16 (1.3)
<i>Wakefield Express</i>	Weekly	31,937	22	—	3	25 (2.0)
<i>Halifax Courier</i>	Daily	27,590	244	16	77	337 (27.0)
<i>Yorkshire Post</i>	Evening Daily	71,632	281	27	54	362 (29.0)
	Regional					
Total (%)			934 (74.7)	64 (5.1)	252 (20.2)	1250 (100.0)

<sup>1</sup> Free weekly newspapers are distributed free of charge to residents within a particular locale. Figures in column 3, therefore, represent a verified free distribution (VFD) rather than a circulation figure.

<sup>2</sup> Weekly, daily evening and daily regional papers are purchased by readers for a fixed cover price and consequently figures in column 3 refer to the newspaper's circulation.

*Aire Valley Target* on 31 May 2001, were identical. The *Calderdale News* with a free distribution in excess of 36,000 copies weekly carried no election reporting in 2001. But these aggregate data understate the extent to which the free press neglected election news because of the tendency for coverage to be focused in a single paper: the *Wharfe Valley Times* published 13 election stories comprising 56.5 per cent of free newspaper overall coverage. Journalists offered three reasons for lack of coverage. Free newspapers subscribe to a distinctive editorial style. An editor claimed, "they're meant to be entertaining: bright positive news that drops through your letterbox once a week to cheer you up, brighten you up. The election doesn't really fit into that agenda." Limited space, moreover, means, "you might run into problems with balance. You might get a bright story

from the Liberals and another the next week, but then the election comes and that's all you've covered. If you want coverage that doesn't have holes you leave the election alone." Finally, free newspapers recycle old news. Editorial is cannibalised from the paid weekly papers in the newspaper group: "the Subs put them together very quickly but by the time the free paper comes out all the stories are a week old because they've already been in the paid paper".

By contrast, election reporting in the sampled paid weekly newspapers was vibrant and plentiful, but again journalists' commitment to coverage varied across the different newspapers. Coverage ranged between the six items published in the *Pudsey Times* to the more typical 67 items reported in the *Heckmondwike Herald*. Even newspapers with modest circulations

**Table 3. Number of election items by newspaper type across four general elections**

Newspaper type	Item type	Number of items (%)			
		1987	1992	1997	2001
Free	Article	50 (73.5)	103 (83.7)	54 (71.6)	21 (91)
	Editorial	0 (—)	3 (2.4)	3 (4.1)	0 (—)
	Letter	18 (26.5)	17 (13.8)	16 (23)	2 (9)
	Total	68 (100)	123 (100)	73 (100)	23 (100)
Weekly	Article	251 (71.1)	595 (67.5)	329 (73.8)	388 (73.9)
	Editorial	11 (3.1)	12 (1.4)	32 (7.4)	21 (4)
	Letter	86 (25.8)	274 (31.1)	83 (18.8)	119 (22.1)
	Total	348 (100)	881 (100)	444 (100)	528 (100)
Daily	Article	231 (73.8)	359 (68.6)	167 (47.2)	244 (72.4)
	Editorial	4 (1.3)	12 (2.3)	25 (6.8)	16 (4.7)
	Letter	78 (24.9)	152 (29.1)	162 (46)	77 (22.8)
	Total	313 (100)	523 (100)	356 (100)	337 (100)
Regional	Article	389 (83.7)	476 (91)	308 (82.4)	281 (77.1)
	Editorial	20 (4.3)	15 (2.9)	26 (7)	27 (7.5)
	Letter	56 (12)	32 (6.1)	41 (10.6)	54 (15.5)
	Total	465 (100)	523 (100)	375 (100)	362 (100)

like the *Spenborough Guardian* (8397) and the *Brighouse Echo* (6450) devoted considerable editorial attention to the election, publishing 66 and 50 items, respectively. The daily papers, the *Halifax Courier* (337) and the *Yorkshire Post* (362), published, on each day of the campaign, an average of more than 15 articles, readers' letters and editorials informing and involving readers in the unraveling election story.

Certain longitudinal trends concerning the extent of election coverage by the different types of newspaper across the four elections are illustrated in Table 3.

First, election coverage in free newspapers peaked in 1992 (in common with many other aspects of local newspapers' election reporting) but slumped in 2001—and across all categories of election coverage. In 1987, free newspapers' election news represented 5.7 per cent of all newspaper coverage: equivalent figures for 1992 and 1997 were steady at 6.0 per cent and 5.9 per cent, respectively. In 2001, however, the 23 election stories in free newspapers accounted for a mere 1.8 per cent of coverage across all types of newspaper.

Second, paid weekly newspapers have broadly increased their election reporting across the 14 years of the study. In the main this trend reflects the increased publication of articles (from 251 in 1987 to 388 in 2001) al-

though some modest increase in editorials offset by a slight decline in published letters is also evident across the study period.

Third, while daily evening newspaper coverage has remained largely constant, certain aspects of regional morning coverage have shifted. The article count, for example, was substantially lower in 2001 (281) than in 1987 (389). The number of published letters has climbed steadily across the last three elections to match a similar sustained increase in published editorials. Overall what is striking is the constancy of coverage across the newspapers that comprise the West Yorkshire press.

More significant than the *extent* of the election coverage is the *character* of the press reporting, especially the papers' ambition to articulate a *local* news agenda, their attempts to "lighten" the electoral news agenda and make the election news entertaining and finally the degree of partisanship evident in coverage.

### Reporting A Local Election Agenda?

Local journalists assume that the reporting of local news and constructing a local election agenda is their first editorial priority. There is more than mere tautology to this reasoning. One journalist expressed the view that a division of labour should prevail between news

media, with "radio, but particularly television, going on national issues ... But people do get bored with it and the last thing they want is the same subjects being discussed in their local paper." But more significant than such pragmatic considerations is local journalists' belief that a *good* election story is a *local* story. Such sentiments were expressed repeatedly in interviews. A senior editor claimed that a good election story is "something that affects local people: a local issue. We had lots of Conservatives writing us letters about 'stealth taxes' but to be honest I don't think people locally are interested." Another editor confirmed that in pre-election meetings with candidates he advised them to deliver local stories if they wanted coverage. "We do talk to our candidates," he confirmed, "and tell them that we like local issues being addressed: and they tend to follow that as past practice shows ... If there's a new school being built they should talk about that. So most of the stories we're carrying are actually local stories: all the issues of the town with the politicians getting involved. So it's not all tax and NHS. It's actually addressing local issues."

Journalists' preoccupation with local stories received strong endorsement from political parties in 2001. Parties have always identified local issues as being attractive to journalists and having a high potential for press coverage. Asked if their media campaign foregrounded national policy, the candidate or local issues, one regional press officer claimed "it doesn't work like that anymore. What we try to do is have a local example of a national issue with the candidate fronting the story ... So if the national story is Labour has delivered on class sizes, then the story is local candidate at local school with local children who are in a smaller class."

But in 2001 local parties made special efforts to target local concerns and to stress the local nature of their candidates. These ambitions to "go on the local issues especially in volatile seats" was a national party strategy. "I don't know if I should tell you this but there was a determined effort by the national party," a press officer claimed, "to stress local issues. In the 246 seats that we won for the first time in 1997, we were all following the same plot:

stressing the local. The candidate had to be a local person, who understood the constituency, the people and their problems and issues. It was definitely something that we were trying to emphasise, that over the last four years this candidate has got stuck in to tasks that people around here wanted to be done."

The result of this substantial agitprop effort was a flurry of newspaper stories, clearly based around parties' press releases, emphasising the local nature of candidates. A newspaper profile of one candidate, for example, quoted her confessing that "I couldn't think of living anywhere else. I've lived here all my life (she can just about see the house in New Bond Street where she was born, from her office window), and I can't see me leaving ... There's no place like Halifax." An article on the opposite page announced that the same incumbent "met up with a couple of ladies who she had worked with at Northowram Hospital many moons ago. (Does she know everyone in Halifax? It sometimes seems she does)" (*Halifax Courier*, 17 May 2001, pp. 4-5). As the campaign intensified, candidates accused their opponents of being "outsiders" or, using a disparaging local word, "incomers". In one Yorkshire constituency a candidate was denounced as being from Lancashire (an unforgivable trait) while another story alleged that if the Conservative candidate won he would be an "alien MP for Halifax" (*Halifax Courier*, 6 June 2001, p. 6).

Analysis of newspapers' coverage established the prominence of a "local" (733; 58.6 per cent) focus in election reporting above items displaying an emphasis on "national" (517; 41.4 per cent) concerns. Indeed election coverage in 2001 was notably more locally oriented than in 1997 (49.7 per cent local), 1992 (47.7 per cent local) or 1987 (44.7 per cent local). But the issue of local and national coverage proved considerably more complex than these bald figures might suggest, with different newspapers displaying distinctive commitments to local news (See Table 4).<sup>3</sup>

Table 4 illustrates the gently descending hierarchy constituted by the various local newspapers' divergent concerns with local issues. At one end of the scale, 86.4 per cent of free weekly papers editorial is devoted to local

**Table 4. Local and national emphases in different types of newspaper**

	Local		National		Total	
	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count	Row %
Free weekly	19	86.4	3	13.6	22	100.0
Weekly paid	421	79.6	108	20.4	529	100.0
Daily	204	60.5	133	39.5	337	100.0
Regional	89	24.6	273	75.4	362	100.0
Total	733	58.6	517	41.4	1250	100.0

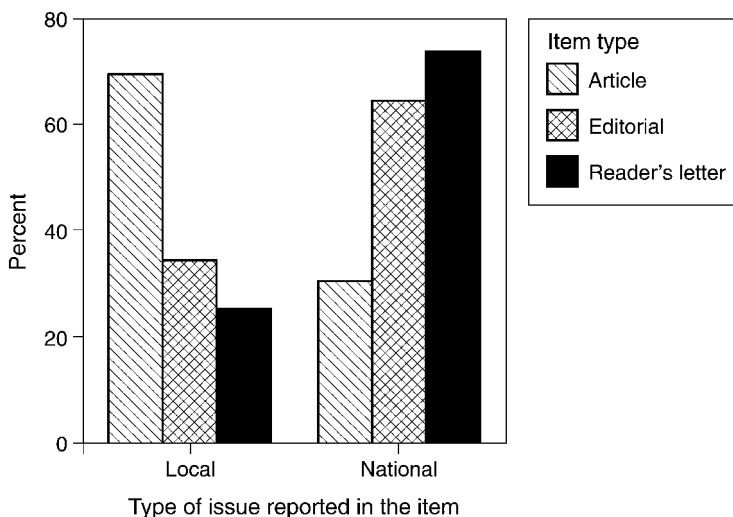
matters while the regional morning paper the *Yorkshire Post* offers only scant account of local concerns (24.6 per cent of items) and is predictably more focused in its columns on the national and international dimensions to election stories (75.4 per cent).

The complexity does not end here. Table 5 and Figure 1 illustrate not merely the extent to which different editorial formats correlate with different emphases on the "local" or the "national" in election coverage, but a more significant and interesting phenomenon. Since articles can be considered an expression of journalists' issue agenda, while letters articulate readers' preferred concerns, Table 5 reveals nothing less than the highly divergent appetites of journalists and readers for local and national news and the degree to which these two communities pursue distinctive issue agendas. This divergence is curious on at least two counts.

**Table 5. Local and national emphases in election coverage by editorial format**

Format	Number of items (%)		
	Local	National	Total (%)
Article	646 (69.2)	288 (30.8)	934 (100)
Editorial	22 (34.4)	42 (65.6)	64 (100)
Letter	65 (25.8)	187 (74.2)	252 (100)
Total	733 (58.6)	517 (41.4)	1250 (100)

First, these two groups seem to be talking past each other with little if any shared interest in the particular focus of election concerns. Second, while journalists perennially claim to be market led, providing their readers with the local stories they demand and which constitute the bread and butter of local journalism, for their part readers express little interest in local concerns and seem to be obsessed with national issues.



**Fig 1. Local and national emphases in election coverage by editorial format.**

**Table 6. Comparison of the thematic priorities of articles and letters**

Rank	Article focus	Percentage	Letter	Percentage
1	Candidate	52.7	Europe	17.0
2	"Horse race"/poll results	8.5	Taxation	13.5
3	Europe	7.7	Candidate	12.9
4	Education	4.3	Welfare/social services	9.9
5	Crime/juvenile crime	3.8	Religion	8.8
6	Health/NHS	3.7	Health/NHS	7.0
7	Taxation	3.6	Regional policy	4.7
8	Welfare/social services	2.8	Apathy/alienation	4.7
9	Industry	2.4	Economic management	3.5
10	Agriculture/foot and mouth	2.3	Public expenditure	3.5
11	Race/immigration/asylum	2.1	Race/immigration/	3.5
12	Economic management	1.6	Education	2.9
13	Regional policy	1.6	Crime/juvenile crime	2.9
14	John Prescott and the egg protest	1.6	John Prescott and the egg protest	2.9
15	Transport	1.4	Industry	2.3
Total		100		100

Two findings are striking. First, while almost 70 per cent of articles are locally oriented, expressing journalists' ambitions to provide readers with election stories with a focus on local issues, only 25.8 per cent of readers letters share this local concern. By contrast, 74 per cent of readers' letters concentrate on national matters: Figure 1 illustrates the distinctive concerns of journalists and readers very vividly.

Local journalists, at least so far as election coverage is concerned, seem to be talking past, rather than to, their readerships. But if, as Figure 1 reveals, journalists have wrongly attributed an interest in local issues to their readers, they are not alone, given parties' declared preoccupation with focusing on local matters and local candidates in their media-campaigning strategies. Second, Table 5 illustrates the disjuncture between journalists' approaches to election coverage within the same newspapers. The journalistic focus on the local, so evident in articles (69.2 per cent), finds no equivalent among the senior group of journalists who write the editorials, where the predominant focus (65.6 per cent) is on national policies and issues. Some journalists appear to be closer to their readers' interests and concerns than others. The distinctive electoral agendas of journalists and readers are revealed when the thematic priorities expressed in articles and letters are compared (See Table 6).<sup>4</sup>

For readers, the two key issues in their wide-ranging electoral agenda are Europe (17 per cent) and taxation (13.5 per cent), but these topics figure much less prominently in journalists' concerns (Europe third—7.7 per cent—and taxation seventh—3.6 per cent). In pole position for journalists, in a much narrower agenda, is "candidates" (52.7 per cent), reflecting their ambition (a constant theme in interviews) to present readers with information about candidates. This theme does overlap journalists' and readers' five most frequently cited items, but occurs in third place in readers' priorities (12.9 per cent). Even this limited concern with candidates requires qualification, however, since parties are both legendary and effective in orchestrating letter-writing campaigns to the local press during elections: especially "knocking" letters about opponents. One journalist commented that "we get to know the same typewriter—some very boring letters especially about the pound". Consequently, a good number of these letters about candidates might therefore reflect party rather than reader interests.

There are many other divergences between readers' and journalists' priorities expressed in Table 6. Education and crime, which rank fourth and fifth, respectively, in journalists' agenda are well down the listings at twelfth and thirteenth for readers. Similarly, journalist preoccupation with polls and the horse race

element of the election (ranked second) and the significant issue of agriculture and the foot and mouth outbreak (tenth) find no resonance in the readership agenda.

In summary, local newspaper reporting during the 2001 general election remained predominantly local: in truth coverage was more local in 2001 than in previous elections. But the local flavour of coverage varied radically across different newspapers in the local press and, within the same type of newspaper, across distinctive editorial formats. These findings challenge journalists' claims to be addressing readers' concerns in their election coverage.

### **Beer, Beards and Bottoms! Dumbing down the electoral agenda?**

Reporting of the 2001 general election was conducted in a nadir of public apathy if not alienation from politics and politicians: at 59 per cent of the voting population, the eventual turnout was the lowest since 1918. Politicians and journalists anticipated that this would be a difficult election to sell to their respective audiences: citizens and readers.

Journalists responded in two ways. First, most confirmed that they were "happy to brighten it up. Happy to lighten it to keep the readers interested." One time-tested editorial strategy is to report quirky, amusing stories that nonetheless retain a link with the political or electoral mood. In 1997, for example a number of newspapers reported the outcome of children's elections conducted at local schools; other papers carried the story about a local butcher who was selling red (Labour), blue (Conservative) and yellow (Liberal Democrat) sausages on election day (Franklin and Parry, 1998, p. 217).

Analysis of newspaper contents confirmed the increased emphasis on such gimmicky and quirky stories in the recent election. In 2001, nearly a quarter (295; 24 per cent) of all published items were coded as quirky or amusing compared with 230 (19 per cent) in 1987. The increase here is modest but clear. "Pick up Your Party", for example, an article on "Election Ales", replaced sausages with beer and an-

nounced that a local supermarket was selling Red Flag Bitter, True Blue Bitter, Alliance Bitter and Nationalist Brew (*Halifax Courier*, 25 May 2001, p. 13). The more sober *Yorkshire Post* reported a poll of 999 members of the public to assess their reaction to the leaders of the three main parties growing facial hair: the headline announced, "Growing Beards Would Shave Votes off Voters, Party Leaders Warned" (4 June 2001). The overwhelming majority of respondents disapproved, but the paper evidently believed the poll results justified the airbrushing of beards on photographs of the party leaders. The visual effect was not as crude as a marker pen on an election poster, but the flamboyance of the facial hair inscribed on politician's' portraits made clear the newspapers' intention to "keep the readers interested".

One final illustrative exemplar: on 31 May the *Morley Observer* carried an editorial headed "Bottoms up for a Politician Free Week" in celebration of "National Bottoms Week"; a near identical editorial was published in the *Dewsbury Reporter* (a sister paper within the same local newspaper group) on 25 May 2001 entitled "Getting to the Bottom of Things—Away from Politics". Ultimately this turns out to be another poll story! "We can't help thinking that most people will be more than happy if we give politicians and the General Election a wide berth this week," the editor suggested.

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Is it us or does the national TV news only become remotely interesting once the first quarter of an hour has been disposed of? Amid all the electioneering of the last few days, you can be forgiven for missing the fact that the next week has been designated National Bottom Week ... And just as you thought that you had got away from politicians, Slendertone Flex has revealed that Tony Blair is generally regarded as having the best rear of the party leaders with William Hague, well, bottom. Charles Kennedy, as you would expect, occupies the middle ground.

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A journalist on the same newspaper asked specifically about this editorial argued, "We were really worried about overkill. So I think he tried to lighten it ... It's been hard work.

We've all been walking on treacle for the last four weeks. And we felt that people had just about had enough."

A second editorial strategy for engaging readers with the election was more significant and seemed to have been adopted almost universally by local newspapers. It involved devoting coverage in the early stages of the election to highly personalised candidate profiles that sought to engage readers' interest through a human interest focus rather than any discussion of candidates' policy commitments. A senior editor explained,

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We decided for the poor readers' sake that we were going to make the election as interesting as we could. So my suggestion was that we interview the candidates as people as well as politicians—get pictures of them at home with their family—and try to find out why they came into politics and what they hoped to achieve rather than go on their policies.

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Such a strategy reinforced local journalists' enthusiasm for focusing on political celebrities. One local paper profiled Ann Taylor, a well-known and senior member of the Labour Party (an ex Leader of the House). The editorial emphasis was on "her high profile job, how she could do it as a mother and the small things like her clothes and how she's started wearing make up because she's going on television. It might seem rather banal but it does grab the reader seeing the person and how she has had her hair cut." A journalist at another paper supported these local profiles not only for the human interest they brought to election coverage but also because they allowed journalists to stress candidates' local credentials. The Conservative candidate, for example, was a barrister,

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But he was born in a one up and one down council house with an outside toilet and his grandma was a single mum. So I went on that and said in my introduction that he isn't your typical "pin stripe" Barrister parachuted in from down south: he's a local lad and he's standing on that. Oh, and his granddad was the local preacher at the Heckmondwike upper Chapel.

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This strategy of writing personalised candidate profiles to promote readers' interest in the election resulted in a considerable increase in elec-

tion stories focused on candidates rather than policies. In previous elections parties had expressed precisely these concerns that journalists might pay insufficient attention to explorations of policy. In 2001 a striking 552 (44.2 per cent) items of election coverage focused on candidates at the expense of policy (698; 55.8 per cent); in 1987 the equivalent figures were 394 (33 per cent) and 798 (66.8 per cent), respectively.

Journalists, however, denied that this approach representing any dumbing down in election coverage: they certainly eschewed any idea that such candidate profiles might be judged patronising or belittling of readers' intelligence or political interest. But some journalists were undoubtedly uncomfortable, if not defensive, about this editorial approach. "I hope it doesn't come across as tacky," a journalist commented, "because it wasn't done in a sensational way and it always seemed to swing around to politics anyway because politicians didn't want to talk about their private lives." Some journalists, moreover, genuinely believed that it was equally important to provide readers with an insight into candidates, their personalities and their personal histories, as much as their policies. "We wanted to show that these were real flesh and blood human people with foibles," one seasoned journalist remarked, "with things to be proud of but foibles as well." There was also an opportunity towards the end of the campaign for candidates to draft a personalised policy statement that the paper agreed to publish because, as a journalist commented, "we knew they were itching to get their policies into print. So we said to them, the week before the election we will give you 450 words to write how you would run the country and to put your national policies forward. And they were happy with that." Local journalists' endeavours to engage their readers with an election that was widely judged to be unnecessary and uninteresting involved them in some professional compromises.

### **Disrupting a "Balance of Partisanship": newspapers, politics and the 2001 election**

Party allegations of press partisanship in election coverage are routine and keenly felt: jour-

nalists' protestations of innocence are similarly forceful. One regional press officer complained vehemently about what she believed to be the biased reporting of her candidate. She also made some unequivocal statements about the perceived importance of the local newspaper to the outcome of the campaign. "I would go so far as to say that the local paper is a King-maker," she argued. "I spent a long time fighting that campaign and worrying about why it was so hard, why it was so awful. And I came to the conclusion that it was in large part due to the local newspaper. So that is how important they are. They actually have the ability to potentially win and lose elections, if they are that biased." The editor of the paper concerned acknowledged the paper's potential to be influential in electoral outcomes but denied any hint of partisanship:

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We don't fly the flag for any political party. We don't think it is right for us to do that because we have a local monopoly. It was "The Sun Wot Won It" and it could happen here. Obviously we would be in a position to influence an outcome here ... Without boasting, it's just a fact. But it's a fact you have to appreciate and a responsibility you have to accept.

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Press partisanship is evidently contentious. Newspaper editors typically assign a junior reporter to count column inches, measure photographs and monitor coverage. This study employed a number of indicators to measure partisanship, but the most decisive is the comparison of the number of positive and negative appraisals each political party receives in press coverage.<sup>5</sup> On this account, previous studies revealed a "balance of partisanship". This seemingly paradoxical phrase implied that the overall balance in press coverage, achieved across the West Yorkshire region, did not result from aggregating the "balanced" reporting of a number of individual newspapers but, on the contrary, reflected the partisan sentiments expressed in one newspaper being counterbalanced or neutralised by the differing political commitments of a different newspaper. In 1997, for example, the Conservative Party received 889 press appraisals of which 308 (34.6 per cent) were positive, compared with 789 appraisals for the Labour Party of which 287 (36.4 per

cent) were positive. Journalists would be hard pressed to produce a more equitable balance between parties in their election coverage: especially across 1248 items of coverage reported in 25 different newspapers. But the partisan sentiments of the press became apparent when the appraisals of parties in particular newspapers' coverage were analysed. In 1997, for example, the *Yorkshire Post* was strongly supportive of the Conservatives; the *Halifax Courier* was less critical of the Labour Party. This "balance of partisanship" was not sustained in press reporting of the 2001 election, disrupting a pattern of election coverage evident since 1987 (see Table 7).

Three findings emerge from Table 7. First, the overall balance of partisanship which characterised press coverage of previous elections has been disrupted. In 2001, the West Yorkshire press reported the Conservative Party more favourably than the Labour Party with coverage including a higher percentage of negative than positive appraisals of the Labour Party. The Conservative Party received an aggregate 751 appraisals of which 345 (45.9 per cent) were positive compared with Labour's overall 1245 appraisals of which 462 (37.1 per cent) were positive. The Labour Party received considerably more press attention than the Conservatives (494 appraisals) but a substantial proportion of these (377 or 76.3 per cent) were critical. 2001, of course, was the only occasion across the four studies when the Labour Party entered the election following a period in government: journalists as well as challenger politicians enjoy criticising governments. But, the Conservative Party risked similar journalistic opprobrium in 1987, 1992 and 1997 and on those occasions the balance of partisanship was sustained. The erosion of this balance is illustrated neatly in Table 8.

Second, the Liberal Democrats were the only party to enjoy a positive overall appraisal by the local press. The party received 266 appraisals of which 191 (71.8 per cent) were positive. This tendency was evident in all previous studies. This supportive coverage seems to reflect little more than the extent to which the party was marginalised in the perceptions of rival parties and journalists. In the context of

**Table 7. Positive and negative appraisals of parties in local newspapers**

Paper title	Paper type	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
		Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
<i>Aire Valley Target</i>	Free	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Bradford Star</i>	Free	1	0	1	0	1	0
<i>Calderdale News</i>	Free	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Huddersfield Weekly News</i>	Free	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Leeds Skyrack Express</i>	Free	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Weekly Advertiser (Dewsbury)</i>	Free	0	0	1	1	0	0
<i>Wharfe Valley Times</i>	Free	6	3	7	8	5	0
<i>Batley News</i>	Weekly	15	15	16	15	5	2
<i>Brighouse Echo</i>	Weekly	6	11	23	14	9	0
<i>Colne Valley Chronicle</i>	Weekly	10	10	8	8	3	1
<i>Dewsbury Reporter</i>	Weekly	21	13	22	56	10	4
<i>Hebden Bridge Times</i>	Weekly	9	10	10	16	9	3
<i>Heckmondwike Herald</i>	Weekly	23	26	29	41	16	2
<i>Holme Valley Express</i>	Weekly	10	11	8	9	2	1
<i>Huddersfield District Chronicle</i>	Weekly	8	10	7	7	1	0
<i>Mirfield Reporter</i>	Weekly	8	7	8	30	7	4
<i>Morley Advertiser</i>	Weekly	2	4	4	8	0	0
<i>Morley Observer</i>	Weekly	7	18	18	16	6	1
<i>Pudsey Times</i>	Weekly	6	2	7	3	2	0
<i>Spensborough Guardian</i>	Weekly	23	23	29	40	16	2
<i>Todmorden News</i>	Weekly	8	10	9	16	9	3
<i>Wakefield Express</i>	Weekly	6	7	14	20	10	0
<i>Halifax Courier</i>	Daily evening	68	86	124	166	46	12
<i>Yorkshire Post</i>	Daily regional	108	140	117	309	34	40
Total (%)		345 (45.9)	406 (54.1)	462 (37.1)	783 (62.9)	191 (71.8)	75 (28.2)

negative campaigning, the Liberal Democrats were rarely judged to be the main opposition by the two major parties and consequently failed to draw their fire: strategically, the party was considered unworthy of disdain. Most journalists, likewise, did not view the Liberal Democrats as potential winners in many constituencies and, given journalists' interests in the "horse race", the party received only approximately one-fifth and one-third, respectively, of the coverage allocated to the Labour and Conservative Parties.

Third, the partisan commitments of particular newspapers are evident in their election coverage as in previous studies. While the *Batley News* remained strikingly balanced in its coverage, the *Yorkshire Post* published 248 appraisals of the Conservative Party of which 108 (43.6 per cent) were positive, but only 117 (25.5

per cent) of the paper's 426 appraisals of the Labour Party were similarly positive. At the *Dewsbury Reporter*, 21 (61.8 per cent) of the 34 published appraisals of the Conservative Party were positive whereas only 22 (28.2 per cent) of the 78 published appraisals of Labour were positive. Across the paid weekly newspapers, only the *Brighouse Echo* reported the Labour Party more favourably than the Conservatives.

Two other features of press partisanship during the 2001 election are noteworthy. First, newspapers' expressed attitudes to the various political parties differed markedly across distinctive editorial formats (see Table 9).

Table 9 reveals that journalists are more evenhanded in their reporting of both major parties than editors and readers. The Conservative Party, for example, enjoys 49.4 per cent positive commentary in articles compared with

**Table 8. Local newspapers' appraisals of parties**

Year of election	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)
1987	513 (37.9)	839 (62.1)	420 (36.8)	721 (63.2)	276 (57.4)	205 (42.6)
1992	889 (36.8)	1524 (63.2)	977 (35.8)	1750 (64.2)	601 (61.7)	373 (38.3)
1997	308 (34.6)	581 (65.4)	287 (36.4)	502 (63.6)	122 (53.3)	107 (46.7)
2001	345 (45.9)	406 (54.1)	462 (37.1)	783 (62.9)	191 (71.8)	75 (28.2)
Total	2055 (38.0)	3350 (62.0)	2146 (36.4)	3756 (63.6)	1190 (61.0)	760 (39.0)

the overall coverage (45.9 per cent positive) while journalists also strike a more balanced note in their reports of the Labour Party (44.5 per cent positive) than is evident in the overall coverage (37.1 per cent positive). Journalists continue, however, to report the Conservatives slightly more favourably (49.4 per cent positive) than Labour (44.5 per cent positive). But, significantly, Labour is ravaged in editorials. Almost four-fifths (78.2 per cent) of the commentary on the Labour Party is critical in editorials, whereas the Conservative Party basks in a surplus of positive (54.1 per cent) appraisals. Readers' letters are, perhaps predictably more critical of both parties than journalists and notably more critical of Labour (80.1 per cent negative) than the Conservatives (65.3 per cent negative)<sup>6</sup>.

Second, local press coverage became more hostile towards the Conservative Party as the campaign progressed but warmed in its re-

sponse to Labour's campaigning initiatives (See Table 10).

Table 10 reveals that when the percentage of positive comments about each party published each week is analysed, the Conservative Party enjoyed supportive coverage (59.30 per cent) in the local press during the week in which the election was called (but before parliament was dissolved) and during the first week of the campaign (53.6 per cent); but thereafter positive press commentary declined until by the final week of the campaign only 33.1 per cent of reported commentary was positive. By contrast, the reporting of the Labour Party remained predominantly negative across the campaign but grew more supportive: from 34.8 per cent positive in the pre-dissolution week to 41.5 per cent in the final week of the campaign. It is possible that local press reports simply reflected the increasingly pessimistic prognoses in national media about the likelihood of a

**Table 9. Local newspapers' appraisals of parties by editorial format**

Item type	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)
Article	259 (49.4)	265 (50.6)	384 (44.5)	478 (55.5)	184 (77.3)	54 (22.7)
Editorial	20 (54.1)	17 (45.9)	19 (21.8)	68 (78.2)	0 (0)	8 (100)
Letter	66 (34.7)	124 (65.3)	59 (19.9)	237 (80.1)	7 (35.0)	13 (65.0)
Total	345 (45.9)	406 (54.1)	462 (37.1)	783 (62.9)	191 (71.8)	75 (28.2)

**Table 10. Local newspapers' appraisals of parties during the election**

Week of campaign	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)
Pre-dissolution	54 (59.3)	37 (40.7)	48 (34.8)	90 (65.2)	6 (54.5)	5 (45.5)
1	52 (53.6)	45 (46.4)	70 (38.3)	113 (61.7)	33 (63.5)	19 (36.5)
2	81 (45.7)	96 (54.3)	85 (32.3)	178 (67.7)	48 (81.4)	11 (18.6)
3	117 (44.7)	145 (55.3)	173 (38.1)	281 (61.9)	88 (75.2)	29 (24.8)
4	41 (33.1)	83 (66.9)	86 (41.5)	121 (58.5)	16 (59.3)	11 (40.7)
Total	345 (45.9)	406 (54.1)	462 (37.1)	783 (62.9)	191 (71.8)	75 (28.2)

Conservative victory; alternatively it might have been a response to the more vigorous media-based campaign conducted by the Labour Party in these local constituencies. Party officials offered a pragmatic explanation:

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Our people were in Westminster and theirs were all in the constituencies. Blair made the announcement at about two in the afternoon. Within ten minutes the Tory candidate had her four-wheel vehicle with Tory posters plastered all over it, driving up and down the middle of the town centre. Within ten minutes she was there with her blue rosette meeting people. We couldn't do anything like that because our candidate was the MP and stuck in London ... We had the advantage in 1997 because our people were in the constituencies and theirs were in Westminster. But this time it was noticeable that they had the first week to rush about, organising events and having their photographs taken: our people were in London thinking, "How am I going to get this fax machine home on the train?"

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## Conclusions

Local press reporting of the 2001 general election in the UK retained many of the features of earlier coverage. Reporting was extensive, detailed, informative and, because approximately 20 per cent of published election items were readers' letters the local press provided a truly local forum for the discussion of election issues and concerns. Local newspapers gave the election story less editorial space in 2001 than previously, but provided readers with a strikingly consistent number of articles and editorials across the four elections in the study.

In 2001, election coverage was unprecedentedly local although this focus varied across the different types of newspaper and editorial formats, signalling a disjuncture between the election concerns of journalists and their readers. For their part, journalists stressed local themes in articles, while editors emphasised a national agenda and readers likewise seemed preoccupied with issues raised by the parties nationally, such as Europe and taxation. Journalists' insistence that a "good election story" was a "local" story found little resonance with readers. Parties also mistakenly assumed readers' interest in local concerns. The strong emphasis that parties placed on local matters in their press releases undoubtedly helped them to win coverage with journalists reporting the campaign, but it seems less certain that the resulting stories stirred the interest of readers.

The partisanship expressed by the local press in its reporting of the 2001 general election was much more complex than the parties appreciated. Their post-mortem analyses were typically expressed in manichaeistic tones: newspapers had been for or against them. In truth, press partisanship varied across different newspapers, editorial formats and the weeks of the unravelling campaign. Parties' failure to understand this complexity is understandable given the intense pressures of campaigning. But journalists' confident assertions that their coverage was "balanced" is more curious given their close involvement in the planning and production of election news and the detailed

monitoring of their coverage which they conducted.

Election reporting was also more focused on candidates than policy in 2001. This emphasis reflected a conscious editorial strategy to provide readers with human interest stories and personal details of candidates' biography, to lighten election coverage, in the context of widely held journalistic assumptions about public apathy. Journalists were resistant to suggestions of dumbing down the election debate but there were more quirky and humorous stories published in 2001 than in previous elections and coverage was undoubtedly less policy focused. More significantly, a number of newspapers reported lengthy debates within the senior editorial group about the extent of coverage that they would allocate to the election. In 1987, when the general election was the biggest political story the local paper reported, such discussions would have been unthinkable. Visiting ministers provided local journalists with untypical opportunities to interview senior politicians and to present some of the excitement of the national political debate to local readers. By 2001, there was noticeably less

journalistic enthusiasm for election reporting. Some journalists remained committed to a duty to report the election, but the majority of journalists had relegated election news from its previously sacerdotal status: election stories, like other stories, had to punch their weight in news terms. If journalists currently have a duty, it is to write stories that interest readers and prompt sales. One editor was explicit: "We had to sit down and ask 'Will election coverage give us value?' We only have so many pages and we are governed by strict ratios to make a profit. So we have to fight for the space for election stories and yes, it has to be seen to be of interest to the reader. I think you have to say not only, are people interested in this, but can we get value for money out of it?" It has always been a journalistic ambition to entertain as well as inform, but the balance between these priorities has undoubtedly shifted in local newspapers' recent election coverage. A local journalist cited above suggested that a "good election story is something that affects people locally", but National Bottom Week is more congenial to the bottom line.

## Notes

- 1 Two methodological techniques have been deployed to generate data for each election study. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists and editors of local newspapers as well as political candidates, their agents and press officers for the three major political parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat) in ten West Yorkshire constituencies: Batley and Spen; Bradford North; Bradford South; Colne Valley; Halifax; Leeds East; Leeds North; Leeds West; Pudsey and Wakefield. The constituencies were selected according to a number of political criteria (the marginality of the contest, the incumbency status of candidates, the seniority of candidates within their party and their national "celebrity status") that it was hypothesised might prove influential in attracting media interest. Sixty interviews (35 with politicians and 25 with journalists) each lasting an average of approximately one hour were conducted and transcribed for the research across the four election studies. Second, every item of election coverage (article, editorial or reader's letter) in a comprehensive sample of free weekly and paid weekly newspapers, complemented by a selected sample of daily evening and regional morning newspapers, circulating in the ten constituencies, has been coded for 38 variables (including, for example, partisanship in coverage, incumbency status of candidate, the type of newspaper, the use of photographs and headlines, etc.) across the campaign period and analysed using SPSS. The authors are grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for financial support for the studies conducted in 1992, 1997 and most recently in 2001.
- 2 All quotations derive from the 2001 election study.
- 3 All items of election reporting were assigned to one of four categories, according to their focus on national or local concerns: "local"; "predominantly local with national"; "predominantly national with local"; "national". In 2001 the great majority of items were distinctly "local" or "national" and consequently the categories were conflated.
- 4 The thematic contents of articles and letters were coded for 29 issues/themes. Table 6 lists the 15 most frequently occurring themes.
- 5 The other three indicators include: party prominence (measured quantitatively) in press coverage; the number of published quotations by party spokespeople; and the number of photographs of party members. But while these indicators measure which party has been the beneficiary of press coverage they do not indicate the political direction of the press coverage. The Conservative Party, for example, might enjoy substantial but highly critical coverage. Consequently it is the assessment of the number of positive and critical appraisals which each party receives which offers the definitive judgement.
- 6 It is important to note that readers' letters are subject to editorial selection, which may favour vociferous, opinionated and critical letters above more measured letters, which may get spiked. In brief, letters that are published may not be representative of the letters that a paper receives. Parties, moreover, typically make great efforts to fix the letters page by submitting letters that are highly critical of their political opponents.

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