

# New Urban Politics and the Media: An Overview

Kevin Ward, Geography, School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK; Phone 0161 275 7878; E-mail [Kevin.ward@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Kevin.ward@manchester.ac.uk); Website [http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/geography/staff/ward\\_kevin.htm](http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/geography/staff/ward_kevin.htm)

A newspaper's essential role is not to protect a given firm or industry ... but to bolster and maintain the predisposition for general growth (Logan and Molotch 1987: 72)

The metropolitan daily newspaper is ... a political institution of great importance (Banfield and Wilson 1963: 313)

## 1. Introduction

According to K. Cox (1993: 433) 'urban development, for many scholars, is now what the study of urban politics is about'. Particularly in the UK and the US, the attention to what has been labelled as the New Urban Politics (NUP) gradually replaced what one might think of studies into the Old Urban Politics (OUP). For Cochrane (1999: 111), '[i]f the approach of the 1970s and the early 1980s encouraged a focus on struggles in and against the state, around issues of collective consumption and social reproduction, the late 1980s saw a shift towards an analysis that encouraged a focus on the local politics of business and the importance of local elites.' This tended to involve a sometimes explicit but more often than not implicit theoretical generalizing from the US. Urban growth coalition and urban regime theories that had been designed out of a particular spatial and temporal context were asked to do their explanatory work in the UK – and beyond – in order to assess what a local politics of growth might look like. It was in this intellectual context that I began my academic career.

This short paper provides an overview of 'my' urban politics literatures, the ones that I was socialized into all those years ago, and that remain of interest to me today. I set out how this particular set of literatures has dealt with the media, arguing that it has paid little attention to the ways in which different media types and practices might be constitutive elements of an urban politics of growth. It seems to me, and this is the argument I make

here, that the role of the media in its entirety – rather than just local newspapers – remains something of a black-box. Opening it up and exploring the range of ways in which ‘the media’ plays a role in the performing of the urban politics of economic development would be a fruitful area for future theoretical and empirical intellectual endeavours. This conference may mark just such an occasion.

## **2. Conceptualizing the newspaper in the New Urban Politics**

In their classic study of US city politics Banfield and Wilson (1963) highlight the two functions of the metropolitan newspaper. On the one hand it performs as a political institution, involving itself in a myriad of ways in various aspects of local decision-making. On the other, it is a business that employs workers and has to manage a payroll, and in many cases it is accountable to shareholders. In their view, to understand the civic role played by the newspaper it is necessary to keep these two functions in mind. Not always do they work in harmony. In some cases tensions become apparent between the two functions.

This classic study is one of a number performed in the US that informed in the UK the ‘renewed emphasis on economic development as a focus for the analysis of urban politics’ (Cochrane 1999: 122). Others include Logan and Molotch (1987) and Swanstrom (1985). In general terms these works are bound together through a unity in how they characterise the local media. As Thomas (1995: 315) argues, ‘[a]ll of these mention the media, give a general indication of their function, but do not explore their contribution, nor, ultimately provide convincing accounts of the forces which condition and shape media involvement in episodes of urban restructuring.’ What this work has done is make a series of arguments over why local newspapers (and it is this narrow, there is next to no mention of other types of media) involve themselves in the urban politics of growth and the types of roles they perform through their involvement in the territorial coalitions that form to promote a pro-growth agenda. I will take each point in turn.

Local newspapers are *locally dependent*, according to K. Cox and Mair (1988: 307, original emphasis). By this they mean:

[t]he *idea* of local dependence ... signifies the dependence of various actors – capitalist firms, politicians, people – on the reproduction of certain social relations within a particular territory ... local dependence ... provides a basis for the suspension of conflict in favour of a solidarity within each locality: a solidarity that can then be turned again the locally dependent in other localities.

The notion of local dependence – or of a degree of spatial immobility – is argued to stem from a range of factors, from the relative immobility of built environment investments to the relative non-substitutability of localized exchange linkages. It provides the abstract underpinnings of both the urban growth coalition and urban regime theories, explaining why, in both cases, a range of actors come together to protect ‘local’ interests and values (Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1989). K. Cox and Mair (1988: 309) argue that:

[t]he local newspaper company, dependent on the brand loyalty of readers and advertisers and operating in a set territory, is one of the clearest cases of a firm that is locally dependent as a result of geographically limited and non-substitutable commodity exchanges

This sense of being territorially embedded is also advanced by Logan and Molotch (1987: 70). They argue that ‘most newspapers ... profit primarily from increasing their circulation and therefore have a direct interest in growth’ and that ‘the newspaper’s assets in physical plant, in “good will”, and in advertising clients are, for the most part, immobile.’ Although pre-dating much of the US work, the classic UK study of the nature of the relationships between local newspapers and city politics underscores the importance of local dependence. H. Cox and Morgan (1973: 135, original emphasis), drawing on their Liverpool fieldwork, conclude that ‘[b]ecause the papers *are* local, they are very much bound up with local social relationships, which exert powerful inhibiting pressures against any papers disposed to stir up controversy.’ A range of economic factors behind the successful performance of the newspaper as a business are understood to be tied to the locality, as a result of which it is understood to play an important role in presenting a ‘favourable image to outsiders’ (Cox and Morgan 1973: 136). Within the territorial alliances that form to protect the interests of the locality, the involvement of the newspaper is argued to be like no other. Rather than being interested in the ‘specific patterns of growth’ (Logan and Molotch 1987: 70), the newspaper is understood to be motivated by growth *per se*. This is its only ‘axe to grind’, but one that, according to

Logan and Molotch (1987: 71), 'holds the community elite together'. It supports in the words of Swanstrom (1985: 1985: 35) a 'growth ideology', through evoking notions of civic pride, passing off political issues as technical ones and focusing on symbolic rather than distributional issues (Logan and Molotch 1987; Thomas 1995).

If we move onto the second point and the type of roles local newspapers perform in territorial alliances, it is argued that due to their general interest in growth as opposed to being for or against particular patterns or types of growth they are afforded a 'statesman like position in the community' (Logan and Molotch 1987: 71). This involves the construction and maintenance of a set of stable, longer-term relationships to deliver 'more properly planned growth' (Logan and Molotch 1987: 71). The local newspaper also plays a unique role vis-à-vis mediating between the growth strategy and the various publics. Particularly, it plays an 'invaluable role in coordinating strategy and selling growth to the public' (Logan and Molotch 1987: 72).

### **3. Conceptual limits and some thoughts**

This way of treating 'the media' is not without its insights. It is also not without its limits. These are just worth noting here. It's a start. First, there is a need to acknowledge the range of types of media activities and practices that might inform the NUP. The local press may still be important but other media technologies may also play a role in a way that wasn't the case twenty five years ago. Second, while professional journalists have a privileged structural position, in terms of the nature of their relationships with powerful local decision-makers, nevertheless there are a range of DIY journalists who write through a range of mediums. Including these practices would provide a fuller account of the ways in which the urban politics of growth are enacted. Third, there is a need to be more specific about the causal mechanisms at work. It may not be the case that local newspapers always translate the objectives of the business elite into a set of public policies that would be supportable by the electorate. The transition from a general ideological commitment to copy may be more complicated and non-linear than much of this literature presupposes. Fourth, there has been little attention paid to the means and the mechanisms through which the notion of a 'growth ideology' is assembled. This process needs to be unpacked at the very least. Fifth, there is some intellectual mileage in a coming together of this literature on the politics of growth on the one hand, and that

on the social production of news, on the other (Hall et al. 1981; Thomas 1995). This would provide a means of examining the means through which ‘news’ is manufactured and produced, as opposed to being assumed to be already in existence, waiting to be discovered. Sixth, while corporate geographies may seem rather dry to some, they may also be important. Writing about the US twenty one years ago Logan and Molotch (1987: 206) argue ‘[u]rban media, traditionally critical for growth coalitions, are being absorbed into ever larger corporate structures ... [l]ocal publishers and editors are becoming branch managers, weakening the daily newspaper as a force for integrating diverse elite groups and selling growth to the public.’ Changes within the media industry have been dramatic in the last three decades. What changing ownership patterns in the newspaper industry mean for how ‘local’ managers in wider corporate networks relate to the place in which they are located has yet to be analysed. Seventh, and related to point six, the changing conditions under which professional journalists work cannot but have a number of consequences for the type of ‘news’ they produce, which again is likely to be bound up with changing definitions and understandings of what is newsworthy (Burgess 1985). The quote below from my PhD research is illustrative. The role for this individual was not simply to represent the news but rather to construct it:

To be as up-beat as I possibly can while obviously reflecting the news in the city ... I mean I cannot ignore the news but you do try and be up-beat as possible. People don't want to read about murder, rape, muggings on page one every day of the week ... We don't cover crime as much as we used to in the past (Media representative, Manchester, September 1996)

#### **4. Conclusion**

This short piece has highlighted the academic context out of which I work. It reveals how the literatures upon which I draw have conceived of the relationships between the media and urban politics, the theme of this workshop. The work has tended to emphasise a small aspect of both ‘the media’ and ‘urban politics’, that is the local newspaper and the politics of growth. And it has proved rather mechanistic at that, constructing ‘the local press ... [as]... a mouthpiece for powerful elite, selling a development to a passive audience’ (Thomas 1995: 330). A more nuanced account of the nature of the relationships between the local press and the politics around economic development would be a starting point. This might yield some insights into why local

newspapers behave in the way they do, and the kinds of relationships they have with different publics, from those who buy the newspaper to those who advertise in it. It might also provide evidence that in some cases the role of the newspaper is more complicated than that allowed for in the orthodox accounts. In addition, widening understandings of 'the media' beyond the local press, opening up for exploration the range of media practices involved in shaping the nature of urban economic development, would perhaps yield greater scope for appreciating the range of opinions that feed into and contribute to urban growth politics. It is not only professional journalism who are involved in enacting urban politics. A range of new media technologies authored and organized by a range of actors play a role in challenging, destabilizing, legitimizing and so on different economic development projects and their consequences.

## 5. References

- Banfield E C and Wilson J Q (1963) *City politics*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass
- Burgess J (1985) News from nowhere: the press, the riots and the myth of the inner city, in J A Burgess and J Gold (Eds.) *Geography, the media and popular culture*, Croon Helm, London, 192-228
- Cochrane A (1999) Redefining urban politics for the twenty first century, in A E G Jonas and D Wilson (Eds.) *The urban growth machine: critical perspectives two decades later*, State University Press: Albany, New York, 109-124
- Cox K R (1993) The local and the global in the new urban politics: a critical review, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11 433-448
- Cox H and Morgan D (1973) *City politics and the press*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge
- Cox K R and Mair A (1988) Locality and community in the politics of economic development, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78 307-325
- Hall S, Chritcher C, Jefferson T, Clarke J and Roberts B (1981) The social production of news: mugging in the media, in S Cohen and J Young (Eds.) *The manufacture of news*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 75-97
- Logan J R and Molotch H L (1987) *Urban fortunes: the political economy of place*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California

Stone C (1989) *Regime politics: governing Atlanta 1946-1988*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas

Swanstrom T (1985) *The crisis of growth politics*, Temple University Press: Philadelphia

Thomas H (1995) The local press and urban renewal: a South Wales case study, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 18 315-333