

## The 'local rag' and urban histories

Dr Nick Hayes, Nottingham Trent University

We can constitute towns and cities as points of exchange for people, goods and information, where linkage remains the major urban function (Lees, 2001). Yet Daniel Monti, accepting that 'we are and must be storytellers', argues that 'the secret of great cities, quite simply, is found in what we do there and how we explain it to ourselves'; that is in the stories 'about how all of us fill those streets and buildings (Monti, 1999). In social and political terms urban space resonates beyond one, or a series of, these moment(s) of interaction to provide context. Thus, city spaces acquire 'human' meaning through the agency and association of such narratives written on a canvass of unspoken 'values and norms ... the patterns of doing, thinking and feeling ... a shared sense of identity'; those meanings that human beings attribute to actions, objects, and to other people. If we want to understand the city, we need to understand this civic culture and its promotion, and the acceptance or rejection of such shared attitudinal values, symbols and understandings that relate spatially to the identity of towns and cities (Zijderveld, 1998; Morris, 2001). Clearly also a hierarchy of order was present: certain norms and ideas – what Zijderveld usefully labels a city's symbolic infrastructure - carried greater resonance with key groups, was more mutually reflective of dominant economic and social structures, and/or the population at large.

This leads to questions of who defines those dominant local meanings/ideas and to what end (Calhoun, 1980; Rose, 1990; Pearson, 1993). The press, as institutions, maintained and promoted agendas of both self-interest and real or imagined public interest. Beyond the walkable city, it was the primary means through which urbanites understood and communicated with each other in the sense that they could think about the same things at the same time, presenting the opportunity for a common vision of social reality (Nord, 1986). It was also the purveyor of the dominant urban narrative. Yet ambiguity still surrounds its role in the twentieth century. Was it simply a local 'rag', driven by commercial pressures to banality, as orthodoxy holds, and the reflector of consensual 'good news' stories that underpinned the status quo, or, as might be suggested, a local media organ capable of impacting significantly on the municipal decision-making process, and offering a positive pivotal mediation around which local identity(s) could be constructed (Bromley and Hayes, 2002). The interface between journalism and history is not one that has been widely explored. Too many historians frequently fail to consider how the media functioned, but instead use such sources largely unquestioningly (Darnton, 1990; O'Malley, 2002). Yet noticeably, for urban historians it remains the principle narrative through which we can access the local, as opposed to a national, past. It holds the secret of who we are as city dwellers, so that what was important to us – what differences we made or did not make – is 'locked up in the civic diary we call newspapers'. The press, quite simply, was the teller of the best 'community stories', which makes it of central importance to the urban historian (Monti, 1999, Gunn, 2000).

Newspapers were not only transmitters of positive images of community. They were an effective means of extending a 'civilised gaze' over the urban landscape, acting as a piece of 'surveillance technology' and also as a 'shaming machine' (Croll, 2000). They, therefore, acted as an integral part of the urban network, and as community signifiers of positive and negative values. In the act of reporting they transferred and initiated values, in terms of what was reported and how. The local press was a complex array of more or less mediated interactions (editorial, reportage, correspondence, advertising) constitutive of civic entities through publicising and juxtaposing voices – civic, business, popular – and these interactions were themselves part of the notion of

civicness (i.e. the local news and views), where frequency and prominence of display of key ideas and promotions relates directly to perceived and understood importance (Kaniss, 1991). Newspapers function as an agenda setting mechanism because they provide shared public spaces, in which authorship and readership overlap symbiotically, for initiating and conducting debate and for promoting common understandings (Kaniss, 1991). The analysis of narrative and space carry greater significance once we consider that civic engagement can be 'engendered'. (Youniss and McLennan, 1997), and that an understanding of contemporary portrayals of the past depended heavily on an appreciation of the modes of communication through which knowledge and values were transmitted (Anderson, 1983).

If civic spectacle— mayor-making ceremonies, for example - were frequently physically exclusive, strictly structured and controlled in terms of access, the press provided open access to all. Not only did 'rituals' and other expressions of the civic occupy physical space: they transcended this space through rhetoric, ideas, values and memory (Little, 2000). Central here is such meaning and reception: for arguably civic spectacles, rituals and symbols were 'not just the *expression*' of a sense of community; perhaps 'they *were*' the 'sense of community.' (Cannadine, 1982). In a more physical sense, Meller argues that through from 1900 onwards 'quality of life' became a dominant urban concern: 'new ways had to be found of offering all the citizens more satisfying ways of living and ever more social opportunities' (Meller, 1995). For example, the provision of the new public and private suburban housing estate from 1918 onwards was one such manifestation of this political and social discourse, with its expected conformity to a 'modern' and 'civilised' identity (Hayes, 2000). Yet certain civic expenditures in the inter and post-war period which were offered as symbols of 'pride' also provided new foci for sectional opposition and for discourses promoting exclusion: the frequent antagonisms between municipal and private housing tenancy exemplify this phenomena (Olechnowicz, 1997). In all these arenas the press brought the social, political and the public together, and provided us with a prism through which to subsequently to view these events.

B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

M. Bromley and N. Hayes, 'Campaigner, Watchdog or Municipal Lackey? Reflections on the inter-war provincial press, local identity and civic welfarism', *Media History* 8 (2002), 197-212.

C. J. Calhoun, 'Community: towards a variable conceptualization for comparative research', *Social History* 5 (1980), 105-29.

D. Cannadine, 'The transformation of civic ritual in modern Britain: the Colchester Oyster feast', *Past and Present* 94 (1982), 105-130.

A. Croll, *Civilizing the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c. 1870-1914* (Cardiff, 2000).

R. Darnton, 'All the news that fits we print', in *Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (London, 1990), 60-93.

S. Gunn, 'The Middle Class, Modernity and the Provincial City: Manchester c. 1840-80', in A. Kidd and D. Nicholls (eds), *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism* (Manchester, 1999).

N. Hayes, 'Civic perceptions: housing and local decision-making in English cities in the 1920s', *Urban History* 27 (August, 2000), pp. 211-233.

L. Hollen Lees, 'Urban Networks', in Martin Daunton (ed), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume III 1840-1950* (Cambridge, 2000), 59-94.

P. Kaniss, *Making Local News* (Chicago, 1991).

M. Little, 'Preposterous City', in G. Bonifas (ed), *Lectures de la Ville* (Nice, 2000), 13-21.

H. Meller, 'Urban renewal and citizenship: the quality of life in British cities, 1890-1990', *Urban History* 22 (1995), 63-84.

Daniel Monti, *The American City: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford, 1999).

- R. Morris, 'Structure, culture and society in British towns', in Daunton, *Urban History*, 395-426.
- T. O'Malley, 'Media History and Media Studies: aspects of the development of the study of media history in the UK 1945-2000', *Media History* 8 (2002), 155-73.
- A. Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Beacontree Estate* (Oxford, 1997).
- R. Pearson, 'Knowing one's place: Perceptions of community in the industrial suburbs of Leeds, 1790-1890', *Journal of Social History* 27 (1993), 221-44.
- G. Rose, 'Imaging Popular in the 1920s: Contested Concepts of Community', *Journal of Historical Geography* 16 (1990), 425-37.
- J. Youniss and J. McEllan, 'What We Know About Engendering Civic Identity', *American Behavioral Scientist* 40 (1997), 620-31.
- A. Zijderveld, *A Theory of Urbanity: The Economic and Civic Cultures of Cities* (New Brunswick, 1998).