

# **THE DEMOCRATIC ROLE OF CAMPAIGN JOURNALISM: Partisan Representation and Public Participation**

**Jen Birks**

*Campaign journalism is a distinctive but under-researched form of editorialised news reporting that aims to influence politicians rather than inform voters. In this it diverges from liberal norms of social responsibility, but instead campaigning newspapers make claims to represent the interests or opinions of publics such as their readers or groups affected by the issue. This could be understood as democratically valid in relation to alternative models such as participatory or corporatist democracy. This essay examines journalists' understanding of the identity and views of these publics, and how their professional norms are operationalised in their journalistic practice in relation to five case studies in the Scottish press. The campaigns are analysed in terms of four normative criteria associated with corporatist and participatory democracy: firstly, the extent to which subjective advocacy is combined with objectivity and accuracy; secondly, the extent to which civic society organisations are accorded access; thirdly, whether the disadvantage of resource-poor groups in society is compensated for; and finally, to what extent the mobilisation of public support for the campaigns aims to encourage an active citizenry.*

**KEYWORDS:** campaigns; democracy; partisanship; political participation; professional practice; public

## **Introduction**

Campaign journalism is a distinctive but under-researched form of editorialised news reporting. It is a particularly interesting practice on a local level, at which the democratic participation of the community is possible. Research to date has suggested that campaigns aim, quite conventionally, to construct a consensus by othering deviant groups (Aldridge, 2003, Cross and Lockyer, 2006), but for commercial rather than ideological purposes – in particular to mark out a continued market for the local press (Aldridge, 2003), and take an oppositional stance toward government because they are distant and inaccessible as sources (Cross and Lockyer, 2006). Both of these studies noted newspapers' claims to represent some form of public or "public opinion", but the interrogation of these claims was not central to their analysis. This article aims to examine the ways in which journalists attempt to understand, politically engage and represent their readers as a public. It analyses the democratic implications of campaign journalism, with reference to case studies in the local and (quasi-)national press in Scotland, where it was hoped that devolution would bring greater civic participation, taking inspiration from Scandinavian corporatism rather than American neo-liberalism (Arter, 2004).

## **Campaign Journalism**

Journalists' first criteria for a definition of campaign journalism is reporting that is labelled as such, with a title and logo that is attached to every article on the topic. This is not

unique to campaigns, however, and may also be used in ongoing investigative journalism such as The Telegraph's *The Expenses Files* (2009) or open-ended debate such as The Guardian's *A New Politics?* (2009), as well as charitable fundraising appeals. Secondly, campaigns have an objective by which success can be defined. Again, this is not unique – what defines campaigns is the *type* of objective.

The limits of investigative journalism within the US model of the press are clearly stated in Ettema and Glasser's (1998) study of the practice in mainstream metropolitan newspapers. These investigations often included calls for some form of response – for a resignation, even for regulatory procedures to be tightened up – but crucially such actions were located in relation to “usable standards that can be presented as ‘objective’” rather than substantive or moral goals (Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 192), calling for the proper functioning of the existing system rather than a challenge to it. Investigative journalism is delineated, in other words, by the formal rationality of existing legal-bureaucratic structures. In this, investigative journalism fulfils the liberal “watchdog” role of the press, operating as a check on power, revealing evidence of unambiguous wrongdoing by those in high office, subjecting them to public scrutiny and calling them to account.

Debate pieces can usefully provide the information and arguments for citizens to make up their mind from informed deliberation, but do so from an impartial position, facilitating debate between others. This notion of newspapers, and particularly their letters pages, as a site of the deliberative public sphere has been widely explored (for instance, Richardson, 2001, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). This is clearly a useful model for the democratic role of the press, though in some cases debate is reduced to a balance of unsubstantiated “truth claims” (Tuchman, 1972), and evidence from the US suggests that emotional contributions from members of the public are preferred as “authentic”, excluding political argumentation as “manipulative” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001).

There is also a distinction to be made between campaign journalism and fundraising. Although charitable appeals are often labelled as campaigns, journalists understand the two differently. The distinction is not always clear, however, as illustrated by the criticism of the BBC for its support of the *Make Poverty History* campaign, which was deemed political because, unlike *Children in Need* and *Red Nose Day*, it was “awareness-raising” and aimed at influencing politicians (BBC Trust, 2007), and conversely, controversy surrounded the corporation's decision not to air a Disasters Emergency Committee humanitarian appeal for Palestinians in Gaza for fear of similar accusations of political bias (Davies, et al., 2009).

In contrast to investigative journalism, the newspaper as public sphere, and charitable appeals, then, campaign journalism advocates or opposes particular policies and overtly expresses a substantive, value-oriented bias, with the purpose of influencing policy decisions. This is an obvious contravention of the liberal model of the press often assumed to be dominant throughout the Western world – it makes no claim to be impartial or balanced, and it aims to influence politicians rather than inform voters. Government ministers such as Tessa Jowell have criticised this as evidence of a “pressocracy” (Branigan, 2005) and Labour-affiliated think tank Demos argued that the press were “Manufacturing Dissent” (Milne, 2005) in a way that undermined democracy.

Contravention of the principles of liberal democracy and the liberal model of the press does not, however, mean that campaign journalism is undemocratic. The assumption that the US is representative of all Western democracies and can only be contrasted with communist and authoritarian regimes (Siebert, et al., 1984) has been challenged in recent years by more comprehensive comparative studies. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) work, for instance, has highlighted different systems throughout Western Europe with different approaches to the role of civic organisations and other public associations in democratic decision-making. Much as letters pages have the potential to facilitate deliberative democracy, campaign journalism has the potential to facilitate participatory or corporatist democracy.

## Media Systems and Democracy

One of the ideal types that Hallin and Mancini developed from their observations was a north/central European ‘democratic corporatism’ model, which is of particular interest since they noted some corporatist characteristics in the British media. Corporatism traditionally refers to the organisation of interests via tripartite negotiation between capital, labour and the state, as represented by formally integrated interest groups (Held, 2006: 179-83), however, contemporary democratic corporatism, as exercised in various Scandinavian and other north European countries, is not limited to economic interests but includes broader social issue groups such as social cause and minority rights organisations, often with an emphasis on the access of disadvantaged groups to participate in political decision-making.

The media system associated with corporatist democracy was characterised by strong parallelism between the range of political parties and supporting newspapers, that is to say, strong political bias and external pluralism. This also extends to sympathies with certain civic organisations and social movements. Journalists in Germany and Sweden understood their job to entail “championing particular values and ideas” far more than their counterparts in the USA, with the UK falling in-between (Donsback 1995 cited in Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 180). More interestingly, there was a distinction between *types* of value-bias in corporatist and liberal systems – journalists in corporatist countries were more likely to see their role as to “stir [the audience] up, train it or educate it”, rather than the liberal role to “mirror what the public thinks” as a market (Schoenbach et al 1998 cited in Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 180). Their political and substantive bias coexisted, however, with a developed and formalised system of journalistic professionalism and regulation. Professionalism in the corporatist context is distinct from the liberal definition to the degree that it can simultaneously defend objectivity in its factual observations yet allow for interpretive and ideological political partisanship, in contrast to Siebert et al’s (1984) view of propagandistic partisanship. This is supported by the PCC Code of Practice (PCC, 2007), which allows for partisanship but not inaccuracy.

Hallin and Mancini (2004: 189) draw comparisons between aspects of this model and James Curran’s proposed model of “radical democratic” media, “associated with partisan or investigative styles of journalism” (Curran, 1991: 32).

[T]he media should seek to redress the imbalance of power in society. Crucially, this means broadening access to the public domain in societies where elites have privileged access to it. It also means compensating for the inferior resources and skills of subordinate groups in advocating and rationalizing their interests by comparison with dominant groups (Curran, 1991: 30)

Whilst investigative journalism can expose formal injustices suffered by subordinate groups, only partisan campaign journalism can advocate in their interests. The focus on actively facilitating the participation of disadvantaged groups (rather than the mere absence of constraint, which favours those with more resources) is particularly characteristic of participatory democracy, especially as advocated by the New Left (Held, 2006: 209-16), though it is not inevitable that the contributions of disadvantaged groups would be left-wing in substance.

The Scottish press is a particularly interesting example in this context. Post-devolution Scottish democracy has aspired to some characteristics of democratic corporatism, with particular attention to the Scandinavian model (Arter, 2004). Specifically, the system includes a mixed electoral system, including an element of proportional representation, a strong committee system and the incorporation of civic society pressure groups into parliamentary decision-making via the Scottish Civic Forum, including extensive legislative

consultation (Arter, 2004, Lynch, 2001). The Scottish Parliament also facilitates more direct public access through the Petitions Committee (Lynch, 2001).

However, early post-devolution research suggested that the Scottish *press* does not give coverage of such participation either by civic society or active citizens (Schlesinger, et al., 2001), any more than it does (as Milne suggests) to representative politics via a party or the constituency MP or MSP<sup>1</sup>, therefore, this essay will examine journalists' current attitude to politically active citizens and organisations, as well as affected groups, and their readers more generally. The campaigns will be analysed against four criteria associated with corporatist and participatory democracy: firstly, the extent to which Scottish newspapers aim to advocate in accordance with their own values and beliefs whilst simultaneously accurately informing their readers; secondly, the extent to which civic society organisations are accorded access; thirdly, whether the disadvantage of resource-poor groups in society is compensated for; and finally, to what extent the mobilisation of support for the campaigns aims to encourage an active citizenry.

## Method and Sample

The following analysis draws on a multiple case study research project encompassing production, content and political reception. Case studies of campaigns with a clear political or legislative objective were selected at three Scottish newspapers, comprising over 500 articles<sup>2</sup>. These articles were thematically coded using the search function of NVivo computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Search terms were suggested from the initial read-through, conducted on the lexical root of the word to include all conjugations, tenses and plurals, and close synonyms were also included. Data was returned in paragraphs, which were reviewed for relevance and refined. The full articles were then reviewed with the coding visible to identify any gaps. At this stage, text that appeared in quotation marks or otherwise attributed to a source was hand-coded. Passages directly relating to the readers or other publics were also analysed using discourse analysis to identify aspects such as syntactic attribution of agency, and semantic and stylistic choices.

Nineteen interviews were conducted with editors and journalists, and a further three with the politicians targeted by the campaigns. Interviewees were selected according to seniority (editors, correspondents, reporters) and area of content (news, political, home affairs or other specialisms where relevant), as well as from the bylines of campaign articles. Interviews were undertaken to examine journalists' rationalisation of choices and decisions rather than them assume from the text. Questions included their assessment of the identity and views of their readers and its implications on their journalistic practice, such as the obligation to inform, challenge or reflect dominant views. However, it was acknowledged that journalists have well-rehearsed justifications, so their responses were analysed as expressions of their professional ideology and were not assumed to be their true underlying motivations.

Three Scottish newspapers were selected for this study, representing the spread of market positions. The Herald is a national Scottish "broadsheet" quality comparable with national UK counterparts though it has suffered in recent years from cuts by owner Newsquest. The Daily Record is a Scottish popular "red-top" tabloid published by Trinity Mirror, which continues to outsell the editionised Scottish Sun when the latter is not discounted. The Evening Times is a local evening newspaper for the Glasgow area and sister title of The Herald. This sample is not representative of the whole of the Scottish press, as all three are based in Glasgow, but it includes the only national tabloid and the most actively campaigning quality and evening titles in the sample period<sup>3</sup>.

The Daily Record was the most active but ran shorter campaigns – for tougher action against drug (principally heroin) dealers, loan sharks, and anti-social youths. The Evening

Times ran one persistent year-long campaign, *Hands Off Yorkhill*, against the closure of one of Glasgow's three maternity hospitals, the Queen Mother's, citing its co-location with the Yorkhill children's hospital and its neo-natal services. The Health Board maintained that the closure was necessary due to the over-capacity of the maternity provision, the shortage of obstetricians, and the risk to mothers from the lack of adult emergency care. The Herald identified itself less as a campaigning newspaper, with more of a focus on investigative journalism (such as revealing the problematic implications of a rape case ruling) and public debate (such as the Herald Health Debate), but explicitly campaigned against the lengthy detention of children in the Dungavel Asylum Removal Centre. All three newspapers took a moral or principled stand, but journalists' understanding or justification of campaign advocacy in socially or democratically legitimate terms varied with their normative notion of professionalism.

### **Professionalism: Objectivity and Advocacy**

Editors and journalists at The Herald identified strongly with the principles of objectivity and accuracy, whilst those at the Daily Record were less concerned with defending their journalism in these terms and referred to detached factual reporting as just one kind among many. At the Evening Times, journalists were torn between the two approaches, stating the importance of the liberal professional norms, but also acknowledging that they were not always pursued in campaign journalism. Significantly, this contradiction was accommodated by defining campaign journalism as a legitimate exception, not only from the rule of impartiality or balance, but also of objectivity.

In abstract terms the Evening Times Editor, Charles McGhee characterised the newspaper's practice in terms of "a philosophy that says simply tell it as it is, and try and make it as balanced as possible", however, in addition to expressing a biased opposition to the closure of the maternity hospital, the campaign made some assertions that were demonstrably not true. Most significantly, the newspaper suggested that the children's hospital was under threat of closure<sup>4</sup>, when in fact the Health Board had reported clinicians' preference that, whilst it was crucial that maternity care should be linked with adult emergency care, ideally the children's hospital should also remain linked to a maternity hospital ("triple co-location") and therefore eventually also be moved to an integrated site, but that this lay outside their remit (Greater Glasgow NHS Board, 2003). By the end of the campaign the Evening Times claimed that triple co-location had always been their preferred option, and accused the Health Board of having opposed it<sup>5</sup>.

The editor explained the partisanship of campaign journalism in a way that failed to distinguish between norms of impartiality or balance on the one hand, and objectivity, accuracy or truth on the other.

We *will* be biased on occasion when it comes to campaigns, because when we decide to take up a cause then obviously we'll throw our weight behind that cause, but that's... in terms of what we're doing I believe – and I know the PCC backs me in this, and other newspapers – that you can be partisan provided you separate that from, you know, the sort of factual elements of the story. As long as you aim for balance and fairness and accuracy in your general reporting, if you choose to be partisan in pursuit of a cause, then that is quite acceptable provided you label it as a campaign and that this is what the paper believes, as opposed to presenting it as fact when... well it may be or it may not be, depending on your view of it. (Charles McGhee, Editor, Evening Times)

McGhee seems to equivocate in his explanation; at first he attempts to reconcile the campaign bias with standard liberal practice by making claims for the separation of news and comment *within* the coverage, separating partisan elements from the “factual elements”, but then amends this to the separation of all campaign reporting from balanced, fair and *accurate* general reporting, by proscribing “presenting [campaign coverage] as fact”. Truth or “fact” is – where convenient – framed as relative, and dependent on “your view” rather than as objective and knowable; the audience is invited – via a consumer discourse of product labelling – to choose to believe it or not.

The newspaper’s Health Reporter, John McCann also acknowledged campaigning as an exception from usual practice with regards to objectivity, contrasting the conditions under which he would resist publishing something that was objectively “wrong” with the conditions of campaigning whereby the line would be held regardless of contradictory expert assertions.

You have to reassess what you’re thinking, if they say “you’re wrong”, you’ve gotta to say, “okay I’m wrong”. But it depends, because campaigning is different in many ways, I mean, yes, there are things where you’re looking for a certain line and it’s a case of finding people to argue it and then finding people that will respond to it. (John McCann, Health Reporter, Evening Times)

Balance is strategically used in place of objectivity so that the newspaper is able to present the preferred meaning via a selected source, but point to a rebuttal or denial as a balancing of “truth claims”. This lip service to objectivity “as strategic ritual” (Tuchman, 1972), as a procedure to deflect criticism rather than as a professional principle, is not new or unusual, but in this case it is *consciously* adopted to justify inaccuracy as part of permitted partisanship. Such means were also justified by the merit of the ends, as decided by the editor.

Journalists at the Daily Record made far fewer claims to objectivity, and when they did so also adopted a relativist discourse. Political Reporter Dave King referred to balance as a particular mode of reporting, rather than an overarching guiding principle, but once again interpreted the principle of objectivity – giving “the facts” – as the balancing of contradictory assertions.

Quite often you’ll use experts, you know, if there’s a major issue and you’ve got one expert who’s for something and one expert... you’ll put the two of them side by side on a page, the for and against, and let the readers make their own minds up. [...] It’s very good if you’re using it in that context, of just saying to the readers, “here’s the facts”. (Dave King, Political Reporter, Daily Record)

However, whilst in part motivated by a desire for accuracy, King also admits that it is simply “easier”, “because the reporter isn’t an expert in the field and they have to get everything explained to them”, so journalists will defer to “expert” sources on issues they do not fully understand, distance themselves from the claims and pass responsibility for any evaluative judgement on to the audience, even though readers, crucially, are not able to interrogate the source. Campaign assertions were often based on even less evidence, for instance, in relation to the drugs campaign, the Daily Record refused to justify its position that prohibition and tough enforcement was the most effective solution<sup>6</sup>, and vilified opponents of this ‘common-sense’ belief.

The editorial decision to make such assertions without supporting evidence is justified by the “reasonableness” of the editor’s opinions and the resulting “credibility” of the newspaper (David Leask, Chief Reporter, Evening Times) – in other words, that the editor is usually right and readers trust the newspaper. This suggests that credibility and trust are not related to adherence to objectivity norms, and that a newspaper is allowed exemption from the

principles of social responsibility *to* citizens (by accurately informing them) on the basis of being responsible *on behalf of* a disengaged public because the readers trust it to do so.

Herald journalists, meanwhile, consistently referred to the liberal norms of objectivity, accuracy and balance. Furthermore, Deputy Editor Joan McAlpine explicitly aligned the paper with the more archetypal North American model rather than the more corporatist-inflected British model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), interpreting this as being “a paper of record”, that is to say, reporting accurately what officials have said. This could be operationalised as merely reporting “truth claims” without interrogation, but unlike the other newspapers, journalists at The Herald did not confuse objective reporting of fact with balancing of opinion, but instead explained their partisanship as a subject selection bias, whilst retaining a commitment to accuracy.

I think there's a difference between taking a campaign and saying we think this is important, and we're going to give it a prominence in the paper in our news agenda that perhaps other papers aren't doing. But you're not actually... generally speaking, you're sticking to the facts, but you're exposing facts that would otherwise be covered up because people don't care about them. Because they don't think they're important. (Joan McAlpine, Deputy Editor, The Herald)

Like other Herald editorial staff, McAlpine framed advocacy in terms of revealing facts (that “would otherwise be covered up”), objective reporting that was partial to correct a wider partiality or imbalance, as a form of external pluralism that broadened the agenda. However, despite having a clear agenda against asylum detention, Herald journalists were uncomfortable with their partisanship and therefore restricted their advocacy within the more conventional model of investigative journalism, highlighting the specific failures of Dungavel to meet formal educational and welfare standards<sup>7</sup>, rather than challenging the system more fundamentally.

Whilst none of the tabloid journalists understood good practice in campaign advocacy in relation to universally applicable principles, but rather in terms of the editor as benign dictator, The Herald suggests a model of partisanship that retains a commitment to objectivity. However, it stops short of outright political advocacy because of a broader attachment to the liberal watchdog model that restrains the journalists from expressing a subjective opinion about what *should* be done. One way of engaging with these arguments in a more evidence-based way than the tabloids is by association with civic society organisations.

### **Representing Active Publics: Civic Society**

The way in which the British press most clearly display corporatist qualities, as noted by Hallin and Mancini (2004), is in the party-political allegiance of newspapers. However, the commercialisation of the press has been associated with its de-politicisation, to some extent in terms of less propagandistic use of news vehicles by their owners but also a more general political disengagement. This was reflected in editors' and journalists' reluctance to explicitly associate their papers with party politics, or indeed anything overtly political.

The Evening Times Editor explained that he dropped the newspaper's allegiance to the Labour party because he felt “that it was no longer acceptable to preach to readers and tell them how to vote and what to do”. Whilst the Daily Record remains Labour-supporting, and journalists openly acknowledged that certain stories were biased in a particular direction “because you've tied your allegiance to a political mast” (Mark McGivern, Reporter), the paper's Political Editor, Paul Sinclair agreed that readers did not want party politics pressed on them, citing the failure of the pro-independence, Scottish National Party-supporting

weekly newspaper The Scottish Standard, which folded after just seven weeks because “it was just, pay 70 pence to get told to vote for the party you [already] vote for”.

Sinclair suggests that the party-political support of those with strong allegiances is not contingent on the policies pursued, and so – to the extent that journalists believe in a surviving party grassroots – political news is as irrelevant to those active publics as it is to other readers who are characterised as cynical toward politics in general. Sinclair argued that “people don’t believe in politicians any more, they believe less and less in the political process”; a view echoed by others such as Joan McAlpine of The Herald and Charles McGhee of the Evening Times. Editors and journalists are therefore reluctant to express allegiance with political parties for fear of readers becoming similarly alienated from the newspaper, and may feel more able to engage readers on single issues.

This suggests that newspapers are responding to readers’ (perceived) political behaviour, concerns and agenda at least as much as leading them. However, there was some evidence that newspapers capitalise on declining trust in elected political representatives in order to encourage readers to believe that the newspaper is speaking for their interests against an unresponsive political system that is inaccessible by any other means. Both the Daily Record’s anti-social behaviour campaign and the Evening Times’ hospital campaign directly utilised parliamentary mechanisms for civic access (a public consultation and the petitions committee respectively), rather than supporting the established civic society. Indeed, such organisations were regarded as equally suspect “interest groups”.

However, if those newspapers wish to be understood as operating themselves as a civic organisation or single-issue pressure group, then they should have a clear membership or constituency rather than simply a market. Some newspapers certainly frame themselves as constitutive of the group they claim to speak for (such as the Daily Mail and “Middle England”, local newspapers and the “community”) but don’t take meaningful representations from members of that group. Indeed, journalists’ very definition of “ordinary” people (or, in the Daily Mail’s terms, the “silent majority”) is that they are *not* politically active or vocal.

The Evening Times editor claimed a quasi-constituency commitment for the newspaper to represent their city and their readers, but understood the “community” in terms of a market.

[The newspaper being recognised for campaigning] kind of cements its credentials with the community. It says to our readers that we are part of the fabric of the community. [...] we’re committed to Glasgow and the West of Scotland, we’re committed to campaigning for readers, we’re committed to being your voice, and influencing the people in power to bring about change that we believe and that you believe is to the betterment of the community, and you know, we’ve demonstrated that time and time again over the past six years. (Charles McGhee, Editor, Evening Times)

The claim to reflect readers’ views remains unsubstantiated – “being”, not *listening to* their voice, reflecting an assumption that proximity means identification or identity with community. Instead, it is based more on conveying such a reputation to the audience. McGhee begins by rhetorically describing a communication of image, “it says to our readers”, and goes on to shift from talking about the readers in the third person to addressing them in the second person, in a persuasive, marketing mode of discourse, pursuing brand “credentials”. To substantiate this superficial assertion, he goes on to claim to have “demonstrated” this commitment to the community, referring to the *campaigns themselves* as the evidence for their altruism, trustworthiness and thus legitimate bias in an entirely circular argument, rather than offering any real evidence of having listened to readers or involved them in decisions.



Like the responsibility to inform, the claim to represent is based in trust, where “trust” is understood as a brand characteristic rather than a relationship earned through reciprocal interaction. Indeed, this reification of the (imagined, passive and trusting) audience seems contrary to many journalists’ dismissive view of feedback and criticism from (actual) readers with strong political views, who were dismissed as “weirdos” (David Leask, Evening Times) and “nutters” (Calum MacDonald, The Herald). Validity is contingent, then, as at US newspapers (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001) on political passivity, as those affected by politics, not engaging in it.

David Leask of the Evening Times did however claim to listen to the views and criticisms, of “local opinion formers” and “community leaders”, who will “be on the local housing group, she’ll be on the community council, she’s probably involved in a church perhaps, or a woman’s group, or she helps out in homeless something”. This was a rare recognition of civic association, though Leask did not give any examples of their concrete influence on his journalism or the newspaper’s content, and indeed it seems to be limited to avoiding offending them as a market – “they’re the people you’ve got to keep on side, even commercially”.

This concern for civic society is also limited to charitable and other voluntary work, since Leask referred to activists dismissively as “well-known green-ink brigade people or well known campaigners”, who were considered untrustworthy sources who had “cried wolf”. This suggests that the participation of active publics is regarded as valid only when uncontroversially helping individuals, but not when trying to politically change the situation for a whole group. This lack of engagement was then compounded and perpetuated by a lack of trust in the newspapers on the part of civic organisations. Journalists at both papers reported difficulties in developing sources such as drug rehabilitation charities and health professional associations, who preferred to trust The Herald.

Indeed, The Herald’s Dungavel campaign did give access to refugee groups and asylum campaigners, suggesting that organised active publics *were* regarded as valid, though journalists tended to describe them apolitically as “experts” or, again, as “charities”. More typically, journalists’ notions of publics were not as associative groups, but as atomised individuals, whether represented individually in “vox pops” or aggregated in opinion polls. This relates to the liberal notion of reflecting “public opinion” as conceived of as a market, rather than “stirring it up”. There was a tension, therefore, between taking a principled substantive position based on the arguments and judgements of relevant civic groups in the policy community and the impulse to avoid contradicting the instinctive feeling of a more atomised public-as-market.

This was particularly clear in relation to anti-social behaviour. Whilst Daily Record journalists adopted an editorial position in favour of anti-social behaviour legislation on the basis of an assumption that it was “in tune with” their readers (Magnus Gardham), the Herald was critical of the policy on the basis of “expert” sources from civic society organisations such as charities and professional associations. When The Herald later ran an opinion poll, journalists were surprised to find that 90% expressed support for the policy, and “discovered that ‘oops, if this is right, then there’s some explaining to do’” (Calum MacDonald, Deputy News Editor). The suggestion that the newspaper’s line on the issue contradicted “public opinion” troubled MacDonald, and had to be “explained”. This suggests either embarrassment at the failure to rationally persuade their readers – the democratic corporatist urge to educate; or discomfort at the failure to *reflect* a broad (instinctive) aggregate of public opinion – the liberal concern that readers would stop buying the paper if it failed to reflect their views. Despite having a niche market of “key decision makers [...who] hold different opinions”, editors expressed some concern about that niche in a declining market where “broadsheets are trying to reach out to beyond just a tiny elite, they’re trying to reach out to the general public who are less interested in politics” (Joan McAlpine, Deputy Editor).

Similarly, Evening Times Editor Charles McGhee described the Dungavel campaign as “laudable” but immediately qualified it with, “did it do them any good in readership terms, I suspect not”, implicitly assuming that a failure to accurately anticipate reader opinion would have commercial consequences. The Herald Editor, Mark Douglas Home, was notable for believing that “working in the dark” in relation to “public opinion” was “probably the way it should be”, but the discomfort of his senior staff shows that even where considered argument from civic groups is represented and principles upheld, then, there can be tensions with liberal notions of aggregate “public opinion” or their (current *and potential*) market. This also has an impact on the interests that the newspaper claims to represent.

### **Redressing Imbalance in Favour of Subordinate Groups**

The role of market research definitions of the audience is particularly clear in the choice of ‘victim’ group that each newspaper claimed to represent. The Evening Times, as a local newspaper that needed to appeal to a diverse, geographically delineated market, chose a campaign related to a universal health service, because “if you’re just fighting for some people then it’s never going to have that mass appeal” (David Leask, Chief Reporter). In contrast, The Herald spoke up for otherwise invisible detained asylum-seekers, and sought solutions to a problem that would not directly affect the vast majority of the audience. However, journalists described this as reflecting the “different political consensus” in the Labour-led Executive in contrast with Westminster politics (Damien Henderson, Reporter), and the influence of “the great and the good of Scotland” (Joan McAlpine, Deputy Editor) as discussed above, rather than as a less self-interestedly instrumental or more altruistic general audience interested in the plight of subordinate groups.

The Daily Record’s campaigns focused on problems that disproportionately affect poor and deprived communities, since they were conscious that many of their readers lived in those areas. Reporter Mark McGivern argued that the Scottish Daily Mail would never have run the drugs campaign because “their sales don’t penetrate in the same way that the Daily Record’s do in areas where there are loads of drug addicts”, but also because “they’re not the right kind of people, they don’t really want those, they’ll sell papers to them but they won’t be crowing about them being ‘our kind of readers’”, highlighting the role of the a newspaper’s representation of their audience in constructing the newspaper’s brand. At the same time, this does suggest a genuine attempt on the part of the Daily Record to take up issues affecting their working class readership.

The Daily Record focused heavily on the experiences of individuals affected by symptoms of deprivation, giving direct access to readers and citizens as sources of stories, allowing them to relate their experiences. In particular, “victims” of drug use were treated sympathetically, though sources were almost exclusively parents who had lost a child to hard drug use, and the few drug-users given a voice had recovered from their addiction and were repentant about their actions. Furthermore, drug use was framed overwhelmingly in the passive voice, often with drugs syntactically the active agent (for example, “killed by drugs”), syntactically denying agency to drug users.

Despite this, the structural conditions associated with victimisation, whilst not rejected, were rarely explicitly discussed. There were just six references to “poverty” or “deprivation” in the drugs campaign, of which two argued that it was *not only* the poor who suffered from drug misuse, and one argued that drug use *caused* poverty, whilst just two referred to poverty as a circumstance that could motivate drug use, and there was only one explicit reference to loan shark victims as “weak and underprivileged” (DR 04/06/02). Furthermore, in the anti-social behaviour campaign poverty was explicitly “not an excuse” (First Minister Jack McConnell, quoted in DR 05/09/03). Accordingly, child welfare and social care aspects of the anti-social behaviour legislation were ignored, much as drug

rehabilitation funding and effectiveness was underexplored, replaced by a more simplistic and populist focus on blaming “evil” individuals such as drug dealers, loan sharks and working class youths.

At The Herald, in contrast, the opinion and letters pages featured a strong (if vague) discourse of social responsibility. Editor Mark Douglas Home explicitly argued that it was important to compensate for dominant discourses against disadvantaged or minority groups, especially those (citing the Daily Mail in particular) that implied that immigrants were arriving in greater numbers and were less qualified than was supported by the evidence.

Because democracy is served by accurate information, and I think that’s where they make a mistake, they think that by confirming what people already think they’re somehow serving the people, and serving their constituency, whereas their function is actually to find out the truth. (Mark Douglas Home, Editor, The Herald)

This still, however, addresses readers and voters as instrumental individuals, which relies on immigration being seen as in the interests of present citizens in order to justify tolerance, rather than making an argument for the substantive principle of universal human rights. Like the tabloids, The Herald aimed to avoid framing the issue in such a way that would suggest that subordinate groups’ interests might be different from those of the dominant group, favouring constructed consensus over potential conflict.

Nonetheless, Douglas Home forcefully argued that newspapers could and should challenge readers’ views, rather than reflect their expectations and assumptions back to them. Again, however, this view was not shared by his journalists, or even his news editors – Calum MacDonald argued that “sometimes it can be very posturing and very kind of pose-y and ‘aren’t we smart’”, suggesting that readers would feel that they were being lectured, whilst Reporter Damien Henderson argued that readers felt “patronised” by the personalisation of the asylum issue, which he believed had gone beyond contextualisation of the impact of the policy in terms of asylum-seekers’ experience, to become a manipulative use of emotion whereby disagreement was framed as being heartless.

Overall, access and visibility for such subordinate groups was broadly positive, but the urge for a broader consensus and assumption of self-interest meant that it was deemed easier to unite readers in blame and even hatred of deviant others, than in favour of measures that might actually help those affected by the issue but not be in the personal interests of readers generally. This appeal to emotion and instinctive belief was also reflected in the recruitment of readers’ support.

### **Campaign Activism: Participation and Support**

All of the tabloid campaigns appealed to readers to participate. Two of the Daily Record campaigns (drugs and loan sharks) asked readers simply to report criminal activity, which can be regarded as civic-minded behaviour, but is not political as such. However, the drugs campaign also encouraged readers to attend a protest march, and the Evening Times’ Queen Mum’s campaign encouraged readers to attend public meetings, sign a petition, and even to express their opposition to their MSPs and the Health Board directly. The Daily Record’s anti-social behaviour campaign included a letter-writing campaign, although in that case the letters were directed to the newspaper, which first published them before passing them on to the Communities Minister, nominally as part of the Scottish Executive’s public consultation.

At the Evening Times the recruitment of readers’ support was explained as facilitating latent beliefs or desires.

But you have to give them something to care about, and something to do about caring, in this case the petition and all that. So get them... let them realise they want to help, and then give them a way to help. And off they go. (John McCann, Health Reporter, Evening Times)

McCann seems to quite consciously frame the petition in these terms, correcting himself from “get them [to help?]” to “let them realise they want to help”. Accordingly, the campaign aimed to recruit support, not by rationally persuading readers that the cause was just, but assuming that they would trust the newspaper’s judgement and simply needed to be motivated to act in support of the campaign. This was reflected in the articles’ invitations to “show how much you care” by signing the petition (ET 10/10/03) and to contact the Health Board “telling them why you think...” (ET 09/10/03), which implies that non-participation would be uncaring, and assumes agreement with the campaign objectives, without acknowledging that some people might, for instance, favour the availability of emergency care for women in childbirth.

The Daily Record organised a public protest against drugs and drug dealers, with a focus on those who were directly affected, including producing banners for bereaved parents featuring a picture of their child. Journalists reported receiving (unpublished) criticisms accusing the paper of exploiting the vulnerable.

A lot of people said we were cynical about it, said ‘well there you go, marching out these bloody families’, a lot of people feel that they were exploited as well ‘to make your campaign look good you’ve huckled them out onto the street and they’re doing your bidding’, [...but] there were scores of people with banners with their dead son or their dead brother on it, I mean it was a bit eerie, but it was full of punch, you know it was very poignant, I thought it made for a very powerful display. (Mark McGivern, Reporter, Daily Record)

McGivern doesn’t quite contradict the criticism, since his justification seems to be precisely that the display of support made the campaign look good. Though readers were given an active role and told “you can” make a difference (15 times in the Evening Times, three in the Daily Record), their participation in the petition and protest march was not understood in the terms of participatory democracy, but as support for the newspaper’s action on their behalf as quasi-political representatives.

## **Discussion**

There could be a democratically valid and even useful model of campaign journalism, particularly within a (devolved) nation with corporatist ambitions, but journalists did not understand their campaigning as part of a positive model of professional practice. Since the only explicit professional norms, as formalised by the NUJ and PCC, were drawn from the liberal model, journalists rationalised their behaviour in those terms, either as an exemption from accuracy obligations via a selectively relativist notion of truth (the tabloids) or as a constraining force on their advocacy, holding them back from overtly expressing the substantive arguments behind their political objective (the broadsheet).

Nonetheless, the newspapers did claim democratic purposes for campaigning. Firstly for drawing attention to social injustice that was otherwise being overlooked. The Herald journalists’ account of this was consistent with liberal norms, framed in terms of agenda-setting and investigative journalism, which “uses certain stylistic features of journalistic objectivity, but it does so in an effort to amplify the call for public indignation at the facts” (Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 185). The tabloids also called for such indignation, but

journalists' expectations of readers' reception meant that the minority interests of subordinate groups were not explicitly championed.

In contrast to the dominant myth of perfect agency, subordinate groups were portrayed at the opposite extreme, as tragic, helpless victims to emphasise their blamelessness, with the assumption that readers would discriminate between deserving cases and those who had in some way brought their suffering on themselves. Whilst the personal can equally be political and ideological, and emotional responses can provoke a "community of feeling" that can overcome self-interested impulses (Berezin, 2002), journalists assume that readers would not identify with the culturally "other" and would instead understand issues in terms of competing interests and blame. As Aldridge (2003) suggests, the tabloids' focus on moral outrage against deviant outsiders was commercially motivated, but specifically because journalists assumed readers to be instrumental, self-interested and distrustful of politics in any form, and therefore more easily united by blame and calls for retribution than sympathy and concern for the interests of disadvantaged communities.

Secondly, journalists claimed to be reflecting or representing some form of general reader or public opinion, and influencing politicians on their behalf, but only gave citizens access to publicity to narrate their personal experience of how they felt about being affected. The tabloids offered no evidence of having listened to citizens as active publics. Instead, they dismissed individual readers' political opinions as evidence of their being peculiar and unrepresentative, whilst reifying an imagined public who were affected or fearful of being affected by an issue, and therefore necessarily in agreement with the "common-sense" solutions advocated by the newspaper.

The validity of the newspaper's political advocacy and influence was expected to be taken on trust, so the aim of the campaigns was therefore not to 'train' or 'educate' readers, but retain their relevance in the community by branding themselves as the only trustworthy champions of ordinary people. Not only did these newspapers represent formal representative politics as inaccessible (even though this is less true of Scottish politics than at Westminster), but they also dismissed alternative participation through civic society. The tabloids' encouragement of direct participation through protest mechanisms could be interpreted as having 'stirred up' their readers in a way, but not as a political public, and with no regard to the notion of 'public opinion' as a consensus reached through public deliberation.

If political advocacy is to have a positive democratic role, then there needs to be a professional framework that can accommodate it. Key to a professional practice of campaign journalism would be a coherent and consistent notion of objectivity and truth, an understanding of "publics" as politically active, a commitment to discussing what should be done (not just finding fault), and to empowering publics (not speaking for them).

## NOTES

1. Member of the Scottish Parliament
2. The sample period was between January 2000 and December 2005, delineated by the availability of electronic archives and the limits of journalists' memories, and the number of newspapers was constrained by the limits of available resources.
3. For instance, The Scotsman only ran one serious political campaign – against the Scottish regiments merging (2002), and otherwise ran campaigns for a Scottish national anthem (2004), for the Golden Eagle to be named as Scotland's national bird (2004), and for St Andrew's Day to be a national holiday (2002). Edinburgh's city newspaper, The Evening News ran a number of spirited short campaigns, especially opposition to parking fines (2002) and a new traffic management scheme (2005), but nothing as sustained or political as the Evening Times' *Hands Off Yorkhill* campaign, which was also recognised at the Scottish Press Awards in 2005. The Aberdeen Press

- and Journal only engaged in fundraising campaigns, consistent with its less partisan approach.
4. For instance, the opening line of the article that launched the campaign read: “A RECOMMENDATION to close the Queen Mother's Maternity Hospital and ultimately Yorkhill Sick Kids has provoked a furious reaction” (ET 09/10/03).
  5. For example “Yet bizarrely, board executives have even claimed a new hospital had been their idea all the time” (ET 01/10/04).
  6. For instance, “The case for the campaign against hard drugs is irrefutable. It is so obvious it does not even have to be stated” (leader column, DR 03/03/01).
  7. For example, “The Inspectorate of Education staff visited Dungavel in October 2002 and found ‘serious shortfalls’ in education facilities” (HD 15/08/03).

## REFERENCES

- Aldridge, Meryl (2003) “The Ties That Divide: Regional Press Campaigns, Community and Populism”, *Media Culture & Society* 25(4), pp. 491-509.
- Arter, David (2004) *The Scottish Parliament: A Scandinavian-Style Assembly?*, London; Portland, Or.: Frank Cass.
- BBC Trust (2007) *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century*, London: BBC.
- Berezin, Mabel (2002) “Secure States: Toward a Political Sociology of Emotion”, in Jack Barbalet (ed) *Emotions and Sociology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 33-52.
- Branigan, Tania (2005) “Jowell Warns of Voter Cynicism”, *The Guardian*, 17 January.
- Cross, Simon and Lockyer, Sharon (2006) “Dynamics of Partisan Journalism”, *Journalism Studies* 7(2), pp. 274.
- Curran, James (1991) “Rethinking the Media as a Public Sphere”, in Paul Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (eds) *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere in the New Media Age*, London: Routledge, pp. 27-57.
- Davies, Caroline, Thorpe, Vanessa and Hinsliff, Gaby (2009) “BBC Crisis over Refusal to Broadcast Gaza Appeal”, *The Guardian*, 24 January.
- Ettema, James and Glasser, Theodore L. (1998) *Custodians of Conscience*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Greater Glasgow NHS Board (2003) *Board Paper No. 2003/61: Future of Maternity Services in Greater Glasgow*, GGNHSB.
- Hallin, Daniel C. and Mancini, Paolo (2004) *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Held, David (2006) *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Lynch, Peter (2001) *Scottish Government and Politics: An Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Milne, Kirsty (2005) *Manufacturing Dissent: Single Issue Protest, the Public and the Press*, London: Demos.
- PCC (2007) "Code of Practice", <<http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>>, accessed 29 February.
- Richardson, John E. (2001) “‘Now Is the Time to Put an End to All This’: Argumentative Discourse Theory and ‘Letters to the Editor’”, *Discourse & Society* 12(2), pp. 143-68.
- Schlesinger, Philip, Miller, David and Dinan, William (2001) *Open Scotland?: Journalists, Spin Doctors and Lobbyists*, Edinburgh: Polygon at Edinburgh.
- Siebert, Fred S., Peterson, Theodore and Schramm, Wilbur (1984) *Four Theories of the Press*, Chicago; London: University of Illinois Press.
- Tuchman, G. (1972) “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual - Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity”, *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4), pp. 660-79.

Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin (2001) "Letters to the Editor as a Forum for Public Deliberation: Modes of Publicity and Democratic Debate", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18(3), pp. 303-20.

**Author's contact details:** Dr Jen Birks, Department of Cultural Studies, University of Nottingham. Room C50, Trent Building, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD. Email [j.r.birks@gmail.com](mailto:j.r.birks@gmail.com)

Telephone (for proofing only): 07814 752324

**Biog blurb:**

Dr Jen Birks is a Lecturer in the Dept of Cultural Studies at University of Nottingham and previously taught in Dept of Film, Media and Journalism at University of Stirling. She completed her PhD in Sociology at the University of Glasgow, with the Glasgow University Media Group. She is the author of "The Professional Ideology of Campaign Journalism", in K. Ross and S. Price (eds.) 2008, *Popular Media and Communication: Essays on Publics, Practices and Processes*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.