

Only a town planner would run a toxic-waste pipeline through a recreational area

Planning and planners in the British press

Given the many planning reforms underway, including the increasing emphasis on public participation, and the many high-profile issues to which planning can be linked, it is an important time to reflect on the media image of planning and planners. This paper draws on the results of a survey of newspaper coverage in British national and local papers in 2003–04 to illustrate how planning and planners are being represented and framed in the media. The results of the survey suggest a frequently stereotypical and critical image in the national print media, with more of a focus on planning in action in the local press. A similar survey of the professional journal *Planning* suggests a mismatch in public and professional images of planning. Taken together, these results give cause for concern as to how planning is represented in the public press and it is argued that such 'planning pessimism' highlights the need for greater attention to media representations of planning and planners.

Planning skills are in high demand in contemporary Britain, with the Egan Review (Egan, 2004) highlighting the central place of planning and planners in the creation of so-called 'Sustainable Communities'. Yet, despite this renaissance for planning, Durning and Glasson (2004) highlight a 2001 Local Government Association survey which found that 87 per cent of English local authorities had experienced problems regarding the recruitment and retention of planning staff. They point to the poor image of the planning profession among the general public as a major cause of this problem.

Taking its title from the punchline of a joke printed in *The Daily Star* (Daily Star, 2004), this article is concerned with that public image, and specifically with how planning and planners are portrayed in the print media. This is clearly an important topic, not only because of its links to recruitment and retention, but also because of its impacts upon the policy process and public confidence in the planning system. After briefly reviewing the rising fortunes of planning in recent years and the importance of the media image of planning and planners, this paper draws on empirical evidence to highlight the 'planning pessimism' frequently seen in the British press. It concludes with a call for action to address this pessimism.

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British planning: a time of change

Ongoing reforms

It is an important time for planning, one of the most high-profile activities undertaken by any local authority in Great Britain. Central government sees planning as a key vehicle for delivery across a wide range of policy fronts, with planning being linked to a number of high-profile issues such as sustainable development, housing provision, environmental justice, social justice and economic growth. Expectations are high. For example, commenting on 'how fundamental the planning profession is to everyday life', Keith Hill, former Planning Minister for England, said that 'the government is committed to a huge programme of housing growth and regeneration and the planning system underpins all of that change' (Winkley, 2004, 10).

To deliver on these expectations, the government is engaged in a number of planning reforms. These reforms include re-scaled development planning, the growth of spatial planning and a greater emphasis on public participation. A key part of the policy context has been an emphasis on the speed of decisions in planning (Gwilliam, 2002), yet there is also a growing emphasis on public participation in planning (ODPM, 2004b; Scottish Executive, 2004b). The front cover of an ODPM strategy document boldly states:

planning shapes the places where people live and work. So it is right that people should be enabled and empowered to take an active part in the process. Strengthening community involvement is a key part of the Government's planning reforms. (ODPM, 2004a)

However, Scottish Communities Minister Malcolm Chisholm, when setting out targets to modernise planning by both increasing efficiency and inclusion, acknowledged

that ... there are tensions between the two objectives but ... noted that the two commitments responded to the main causes of disaffection and must be the twin pillars of the reform agenda. (Scottish Executive, 2004a, 1)

Shifting governance frameworks are also having significant impacts on the planning system. The most important changes here are devolution (Marinetti, 2001; Allmendinger, 2002a) and the modernisation of local government (Allmendinger et al., 2003; Cowell and Martins, 2003). One of the biggest changes in Labour's programme of local government reform has been the introduction of 'Best Value', with its targets for planning functions (Best Value Task Force, 1999; DETR, 1998). This focus on measuring 'delivery' is associated with a wider shift in the relations between central and local government generally (Davies, 1998), whereby central government mandates leave little room for local government discretion in how to deliver often contentious policy objectives. These changes all involve further pressure being placed on planning,

and, indeed, local authority planners may suffer by association with the negative imagery of local government generally.

The issue of central/local government relations in planning is a salient feature in the current furore surrounding housing provision. Local authority planners across Britain, but particularly in South-East England, find themselves caught in the crossfire between developers seeking greater amounts of housing development (HBF, 2005), resistance to this from pressure groups (CPRE, 2003, 2005), and governmental targets for house-building. There have also been interventions by HM Treasury, not normally the government department responsible for planning policy (Barker, 2004). Government rhetoric about 'Sustainable Communities' (ODPM, 2005a) and increased concern for the 'environment' among the general population has added to this heady mix.

Planning thus has many competing needs and demands to mediate and many issues that will have large impacts on everyday lives to be dealt with. Allmendinger et al. (2003, 276) suggest that the current reforms should not be conceptualised as part of the 'usual longer-term ebb and flow in development planning' but rather as 'substantive changes'. The RTPI concurs that 'the pace of change – social, technological, economic, environmental and political – has never been so fast, nor on such a vast scale' (RTPI, 2001, 2). It is trying to keep pace with this change through its own *New Vision for Planning* (RTPI, 2001). The importance and need for good planning cannot be stressed too highly. As Deegan comments,

the planning system is not about carefully crafted but essentially empty policy statements, but is the means by which society makes hard decisions affecting public resource allocation, and our personal wealth and quality of life. (Deegan, 2002, 86)

The key questions remain – is planning up to dealing with these challenges and is it perceived to be up to it?

Declining trust in professions

Against this background of reform and high-profile debate, there appears to be a long-term decline in public trust in professionals, including planners. Davies (1998) talks of declining confidence in planning in recent decades and Deegan comments that planning has now 'lost its visionary spirit' (2002, 86). This is at least partly a function of wider social changes. Tewdwr-Jones highlights how

the development of British town planning in much of the twentieth century was situated within the modern movement and characterized by the ascendancy of a professional elite who possessed vision, rationality and the desire to bring about change for the good of society. (Tewdwr-Jones, 2005, 2)

Such professional experts are coming under increasing pressure in post-modern times.

Planning has a long history of public participation (seen as long ago as the Skeffington Report of 1969 [Skeffington, 1969]), but recent calls for greater public participation in planning (Thomas, 1996) are a manifestation of something rather different. Along with audit schemes such as 'Best Value', these demands for greater public participation can be linked to a wider decline of trust in professional experts, which, in turn, leads to further demands for less expert discretion and more accountability as part of the rise of an 'Audit Society' (Porter, 1995; Power, 1997). This declining trust of professionals extends far beyond planning to include scientific and medical expertise (as seen in relation to the recent controversy surrounding MMR injections), but in the case of planning, the specialist skills and knowledge that a planner does require to perform well may be less immediately obvious. Thus increased public participation may itself be further demystifying planning and thus feeding a declining image of the professional expertise of planners.

Public image and understanding

Taken together, the wide-ranging impact of planning, the reform currently underway and the crisis in recruitment and retention of planners mean that there is a need for a good public image of the profession and understanding of what planning is and what planners do. However, at the same time I would suggest that most people currently have very little direct (conscious) involvement with the planning system. Of course, planning does actually influence people's everyday lives in multiple ways, but it is only really noticed when things go wrong. Given such a context of low public trust and awareness, people's perceptions of planning and planners are likely to be shaped and amplified by press representation. Talking of planning at a 'crossroads', Tewdwr-Jones suggests that planners need to 'take up the challenge of fighting their corner, by reasserting themselves, their image and their roles in twenty-first-century Britain' (1999, 125). An important consideration in the current reform environment must surely thus be how planning and planners are represented in the public press. Back in 1981, Anthony Sutcliffe wrote that:

Town Planning is now so firmly rooted in British public administration that it has generated a myth of super-competence. 'Planners' are popularly blamed for a range of urban shortcomings which extends far beyond their actual sphere of activity. To arraign the town planner for unemptied dustbins or poor television reception is doubtless a disguised tribute, but such misconceptions make it all the more important to clarify what town planning really means. (Sutcliffe, 1981, 2)

Over twenty years later it is still important to clarify what town planning really means today.

The media: key agents in society

At the root of what town planning really means, there is a need to investigate media representations of planning and planners simply because of the ‘undoubted power of the media in the modern world’ (Thrift, 2000, 493). At its simplest, the power of the media comes through its ability to shape public awareness through the selection of which news and events to report (Burgess and Gold, 1985), but in addition, the media actively construct preferred readings – give ‘spin’ to the news – through their interpretation of events. Arguably, this idea can be developed to suggest that the media is intimately linked to the projection and production of ‘imagined worlds’ (Hay and Israel, 2001). Thus,

the mass media play a profoundly significant role in the appropriation and interpretation of the meanings of social reality. They have the capability to shape conceptions of our physical, economic, political and social environments. (Burgess, 1985, 194)

News stories are essentially a ‘constructed reality’ (Tuchman, 1978).

Allen explains:

many critical researchers argue that news accounts encourage us to accept as *natural*, *obvious* or *commonsensical* certain preferred ways of classifying reality, and that these classifications have far reaching implications for the cultural reproduction of power relations across society ... A newspaper account, far from simply reflecting the reality of a news event, is actually working to construct a codified definition of what should count as the reality of the event. (Allen, 1999, 87; emphasis in original)

Although the journalistic profession may depict itself as delivering ‘the truth’, media communications may actually be

theorised as a circuit of cultural forms through which meanings are encoded by specialist groups of producers and decoded in many different ways by the groups who constitute the audiences for those products. (Burgess, 1990, 139)

Hansen (2000) offers an example of the differing coverage of the decommissioning of the Brent Spar oil rig, which was framed in strikingly different ways by the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Telegraph*. In a sense, each newspaper promoted a slightly different version of reality.

Even if this powerful argument about the role of the media in shaping our very conception of the world is not accepted, the media should be of interest with relation to planning simply because of the number of people consuming media products

everyday: ABC figures for January–February 2005 show that national newspapers alone sell more than 13.5 million copies a day in the UK, which of course ignores any copies that are read by more than one person (ABC, 2005).¹ Glover (1998) suggests that as much as 90 per cent of the UK adult population reads a local paper of some sort.

Thrift (2000) highlights a lack of direct work on the media and geography; the same can be said of the media and planning. There is some work linking environment and the media (Burgess, 1990), some work linking urban areas, place, and fear of crime (Lees and Demeritt, 1998), which may be of interest to planners and even be related to planning discourse, and planning and the media are mentioned more directly by Eversley (1973), Sutcliffe (1981) and Tewdwr-Jones (1999), but even then it is only in passing and with little or no supporting empirical evidence. Despite the clear importance of the topic there is an unfortunate absence of work directly addressing how planning and planners are represented in the media.

It may be easy to dismiss negative coverage as misrepresentative and even to laugh off jokes such as that from the *Daily Star* which forms the title of this paper² (*Daily Star*, 2004), but such media representations matter, not only because they help frame how planning is appreciated by the public, but also because the policy process is increasingly driven by those perceptions. Politicians read newspapers and have a complex, symbiotic relationship with the media (Kaniss, 1991). Thus, media coverage of planning reform may not be just about reporting it but may in itself be further driving it.

The research

Given the importance of media coverage of planning, given the current reform environment in British planning and given the lack of empirical work pertaining to the media and planning, a survey of articles relating to planning and planners in British local, regional and national newspapers was conducted covering a one-year period from October 2003 to October 2004. The aim of the research was to explore how planning and planners generally were represented in the British ‘public’ press during a period of reform and change in planning. An equivalent survey of the RTPI’s official journal and newsletter, *Planning*, was conducted over the same period to explore differences between ‘professional’ and ‘public’ coverage and representation. The research focused purely on the printed media due to the fact that planning stories are a significant source of news and features for newspapers (Edwards, 2001) and because newspapers are able to give more detailed coverage to planning matters than

1 ABC is the ‘Audit Bureau of Circulation’ and compiles circulation figures for newspapers and magazines sold in the UK and Ireland.

2 Indeed this was one of the very few times planning was ever mentioned in *The Daily Star*.

other forms of media, which may be constrained by time of need for visual imagery. Nevertheless, there is clearly scope to extend the research by considering representations of planning in other forms of media.

The survey included three major types of newspaper:

- *National papers.* The British national papers were surveyed due to their high readership, coverage of central government related stories and to see the ‘big picture’ representation of planning.
- *Local papers.* Smith felt that ‘the provincial press remains a relatively neglected facet of mass communication research’ (1985, 232), despite it being ‘an agenda-setting form of communication’ (1985, 242) that can ‘set the scene and raise issues for public debate’ (1985, 243). Indeed Adam Burgess (2004) sees local press coverage as key in fanning hysteria over mobile phone masts. Given their avowedly local focus and the primacy of local authorities in planning work, the local and regional press were surveyed to explore the extent to which they provided a different perspective on the operation and impacts of planning in Britain.
- *Professional* The importance of *Planning* as a source was its potential to provide insight into the topics of most concern to the profession itself.

Methodology

The method for conducting the press survey involved use of the ‘Lexis Nexis’ online UK newspaper database and printed copies of *Planning* as the sources from which to draw a ‘corpus’ of relevant articles (Bauer and Aarts, 2000) to be analysed using content analysis. Both ‘manifest content analysis’ and ‘latent content analysis’ techniques (Dunn, 2000) were employed, a methodology broadly similar to that adopted by Myers (2001) in relation to his survey of how Africa was represented in geography textbooks. This involves a quantitative classification of articles on the basis of key words and phrases and also a more in-depth qualitative ‘reading’ of the material to identify underlying themes.

Lexis Nexis offers a database of the text of articles which have appeared in all UK national and selected UK local papers in recent years. This is a rich resource, but

Table 1 British national newspapers searched

• <i>Daily Mail</i>	• <i>Mail on Sunday</i>	• <i>Sunday Express</i>
• <i>Daily Star</i>	• <i>Mirror</i>	• <i>Sunday Mirror</i>
• <i>Daily Telegraph</i>	• <i>Morning Star</i>	• <i>Sunday Telegraph</i>
• <i>Express</i>	• <i>News of the World</i>	• <i>Sunday Times</i>
• <i>Guardian</i>	• <i>Observer</i>	• <i>Times</i>
• <i>Independent</i>	• <i>People</i>	
• <i>Independent on Sunday</i>	• <i>Sun</i>	

Table 2 British local and regional newspapers searched

<p>East Midlands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Boston Standard</i> • <i>Derbyshire Times</i> • <i>Grimby Evening Telegraph</i> • <i>Hucknall Dispatch</i> • <i>Leicester Mercury</i> • <i>Matlock Mercury</i> • <i>Melton Times</i> • <i>Nottingham Evening Post</i> • <i>Spalding Guardian</i> • <i>Stamford Mercury</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 57</p>	<p>East of England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bucks Herald</i> • <i>Bury Free Press</i> • <i>Eastern Daily Press</i> • <i>Hemel Gazette</i> • <i>Luton Today</i> • <i>Lynn News and Advertiser</i> • <i>Peterborough Evening Telegraph</i> • <i>Skegness News</i> • <i>Suffolk Free Press</i> • <i>This is Essex</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 72</p>	<p>London</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Evening Standard</i> • <i>This is Local London</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 124</p>	<p>North-East England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Evening Chronicle</i> (Newcastle) • <i>Evening Gazette</i> (Middlesbrough) • <i>Gateshead Post</i> • <i>Herald and Post</i> (Newcastle) • <i>Journal</i> (Newcastle) • <i>Northern Echo</i> • <i>Sunderland Echo</i> • <i>This is the North East</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 100</p>
<p>North-West England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Daily Post</i> (Liverpool) • <i>Liverpool Echo</i> • <i>Manchester Evening News</i> • <i>This is Cheshire</i> • <i>This is Lancashire</i> • <i>This is the Lake District</i> • <i>This is Trafford</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 148</p>	<p>Scotland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Aberdeen Press and Journal</i> • <i>Evening News</i> (Edinburgh) • <i>Evening Times</i> (Glasgow) • <i>Falkirk Herald</i> • <i>Fife Free Press</i> • <i>Herald</i> (Glasgow) • <i>Scotland on Sunday</i> • <i>Scotsman</i> • <i>Southern Reporter</i> • <i>Sunday Herald</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 268</p>	<p>South-East England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Crawley Observer</i> • <i>Eastbourne Herald</i> • <i>Hastings Observer</i> • <i>Littlehampton Gazette</i> • <i>Mid-Sussex Times</i> • <i>Rye and Battle Observer</i> • <i>Sussex Express</i> • <i>This is Brighton and Hove</i> • <i>This is Hampshire</i> • <i>This is Oxfordshire</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 99</p>	<p>South-West England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bath Chronicle</i> • <i>Bristol Evening Post</i> • <i>Express and Echo</i> (Exeter) • <i>Gloucestershire Echo</i> • <i>Herald Express</i> (Torquay) • <i>This is Dorset</i> • <i>This is the West Country</i> • <i>This is Wiltshire</i> • <i>Western Daily Press</i> • <i>Western Morning News</i> (Plymouth) <p>Articles reviewed: 120</p>
<p>Wales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>South Wales Echo</i> • <i>South Wales Evening Post</i> • <i>This is Gwent</i> • <i>Wales on Sunday</i> • <i>South Wales Echo</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 128</p>	<p>West Midlands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Birmingham Evening Mail</i> • <i>Coventry Evening Telegraph</i> • <i>Leamington Spa Courier</i> • <i>Rugby Advertiser</i> • <i>Sentinel</i> (Stoke) • <i>This is Ludlow</i> • <i>This is Herefordshire</i> • <i>This is Stratford-upon-Avon</i> • <i>This is the Black Country</i> • <i>This is Worcestershire</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 78</p>	<p>Yorkshire and Humberside</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bridlington Free Press</i> • <i>Doncaster Free Press</i> • <i>Halifax Courier</i> • <i>Hull Daily Mail</i> • <i>Scarborough Evening News</i> • <i>This is Bradford</i> • <i>This is York</i> • <i>Wakefield Express</i> • <i>Whitby Gazette</i> • <i>Yorkshire Post</i> <p>Articles reviewed: 98</p>	<p>Sample size:</p> <p>Total number of local paper articles reviewed: 1284</p> <p>Total number of national paper articles reviewed: 364</p> <p>Total number of articles reviewed in <i>Planning</i>: 951</p>

places certain practical restrictions on the survey. To access the articles, key search terms and a date range were required. Trial and error identified the most useful search terms to enter in the database. For example simply searching for 'planning' yielded too many irrelevant results, and searching for more than a year exceeded the maximum number of articles the database could show in some cases. Since I was interested in the representation of planning and planners in the current reform environment, this one-year searching seemed sufficient. The search terms used were: 'planning system', 'town planner(s)', 'town planning', 'planning reform', and 'planning and

public participation'. These same search dates were utilised for a survey of all British national and selected British local papers.³

The national papers searched were those defined as such by Lexis Nexis and listed in Table 1. The local and regional papers surveyed were those available on Lexis Nexis for each standard government region of Great Britain. Where there were more than 10 local papers available for a region (the maximum that can be selected on Lexis Nexis at once), 10 papers were chosen on a spatial basis of covering the maximum amount of that region possible. Table 2 lists the local papers searched, as well as the number of articles reviewed for each type of paper (the sample size, based on the number of relevant articles produced by the searches). These database searches were supplemented by reading through paper copies of the October 2004 editions of *The Croydon Advertiser*, *The Sunderland Echo* and *The St Andrews Citizen*, to confirm that all relevant articles were picked up by the database search terms.

The articles produced by the database searches were then analysed. The manifest content analysis involved 'scan reading' the articles to weed out any that were irrelevant and to categorise the topics covered by each article. This quantitative element helps give an overall picture of the frequency with which topics occurred. For *Planning*, the method adopted was slightly different because no electronic copy was available and because all the articles were considered relevant. The method adopted here was to simply read through the articles in each edition over a similar period (5 October 2003 to 24 September 2004 editions) and classify them in the same way as the newspaper articles.

For both the Lexis Nexis and *Planning* articles, a cross-selection of typical articles and any particularly informative articles were printed out or photocopied for the more in-depth latent content analysis. This more in-depth reading drew on a discourse analysis framework. Fairclough (1995) sees the production of media texts as a form of 'discourse practice'. However, as van Dijk notes 'discourse analysis is an ambiguous concept' (1988, 24). For the purposes of this research, however, 'discourse' is understood as 'a specific series of representations, practices and performances through which meanings are produced, connected into networks and legitimised' (Gregory, 2000, 180). This is important because 'discourses shape the contours of the taken-for-granted world: they "naturalise" and often implicitly universalise a particular view of the world and position subjects differentially within it' (Gregory, 2000, 181), and the media may be understood as part of 'social discourse' (Burgess, 1990). In other words, the media are involved in the formation and circulation of particular representations of the world and as such are key players in our understanding of society. Discourse analysis tries to comprehend and expose these representations, and a more in-depth reading of the selected articles aimed to address this.

3 Northern Ireland was excluded from the survey due to the very different political situation there and the history of having a central rather than local planning authority.

The survey was exploratory and yielded a vast amount of data and results. Here I want to concentrate on a few themes with the aim of building a picture of how media coverage raises a number of issues of concern in the promotion of planning – criticism of planning, planning and housing, differences between the public and professional press, and finally the representation of planners (as opposed to planning) in the media.

Planning and the public press: questions of ideology and politics

The national press: criticism of planning

The overriding impression gained from the coverage of planning in the British press was far from positive. In the national press, planning was typically framed in a critical manner as being too slow and frequently too complex. Common phrases here predictably included ‘bureaucratic’ and ‘red tape’. In one article in *The Times*, we are told that residents of a particular village probably curse the ‘state bureaucracy of the planning system’ (Clark, 2004, 16).

Indeed criticism or ‘tongue-in-cheek’ comment about the planning system, in some cases related to calls for its reform, was the major theme for articles in the national newspapers. The criticism most often centred on the speed of the system, for example the time taken for a development control decision. A great deal of space was given over to the critical comments of businesses leaders, particularly housing developers – ‘according to builder Wilson Bowden, the hidden cost of delays in the planning system runs to nearly GBP 1billion’ (*The Express*, 2004, 6). However, there were also criticisms both from those who believe the system is too anti-development and those who believe it is too pro-development, such as an advisor for Friends of the Earth who is quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* as saying, ‘if the Treasury is serious about promoting sustainable development, then the last thing it should be doing is attacking the planning system’ (Barrow, 2003, 5).

Issues of ideology

Although criticism was the main topic in national papers overall, it should not be surprising, given the strong political persuasions of the British national press (Hetherington, 1989), to learn that the tone adopted in relation to planning differed markedly between the papers. Faludi and Waterhout (2002, 119) comment that planning is ‘an ideological issue in the UK, unlike that of any other country’, and Burgess tells us that, ‘particular meanings are encoded in media texts to support an ideological position’ (Burgess, 1990, 148). This happens because ‘journalists take other people’s accounts of

an event and fashion them into images' (Hay and Israel, 2001, 115).

The rhetoric of the right-wing press was particularly critical of planning. Journalists in *The Times*, for instance, bemoan 'the state bureaucracy of the planning system' (Clark, 2004, 16) and complain that 'Britain's rural planning system is now dysfunctional' (Jenkins, 2004, 22) leading apparently to situations where 'Thirteen years of nimbyism and red tape delays homes on farm' (Lister, 2003, 33). Similarly, Cavendish, writing in *The Times*, suggests that 'one danger of trying to impose a Soviet-style regime of command and control is that you may end up with communist architecture' (Cavendish, 2004, 3), and Bootle, in the *Daily Telegraph*, rants about 'the deficiencies of the planning system' which is 'too slow, and often seems unable to produce transparent decisions which are consistent between authorities' (Bootle, 2004, 4). There were some exceptions, however. For example Clover wrote fairly sympathetically in the *Daily Telegraph* about 'Treasury interference in the planning system' (Clover, 2004, 1), but perhaps this had more to do with an opportunity to criticise Chancellor Gordon Brown than from any great love for planning.

By contrast, the left-leaning press seemed comparatively sympathetic to planning, if by nothing more than the fact that neither *The Guardian* nor *The Independent* ever referred to the planning system as 'Stalinist' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2003, 29). Certainly it was *The Independent*, not the *Daily Telegraph*, which quoted Gordon Brown as saying

the planning system is at the heart of our shared national goal to help give everyone the opportunity of a decent home, and achieve truly balanced and sustainable development and growth in every region and nation across the UK. (Thornton, 2003, 21)

That said, even though it might not have had the venom of the right-wing papers, the left-leaning press was hardly full of praise for planning, with the possible exception of the Communist *Morning Star*, which commented that 'it is only because of the planning system that much of our countryside is safeguarded from development by the rich and greedy today' (*Morning Star*, 2004, 8).

This much more negative framing of planning by the right-wing than the left-wing press may be consistent with a wider opposition to regulation, often cast as 'government interference' with the free market. Nevertheless, given the apparently pro-planning stance of many residents of the Tory shires during the 1980s (Allmendinger, 2001c), one might have expected some more positive comment than was found. Even though right-leaning papers such as the *Daily Mail* seemed to oppose housing development, this was reported more from the perspective of criticising central government interference than giving any positive image of the planning system for trying to control inappropriate development.

One factor in explaining these ideological differences could be the ownership of the particular papers, but Parisi and Holcomb (1994) refute a simplistic link between the ownership of a newspaper and its editorial stance. Instead, ideological differ-

ences among the various papers may be linked to the fact that any journalist's work is 'embedded with certain worldviews, value judgements and preferences' (de Carvalho, 2002, 65) linked to the wider 'social, cultural and political contexts that permeate the activity of journalists ... in multifarious ways' (de Carvalho, 2002, 48). A powerful negative imagery of 'Stalinist bureaucracy' fits well with Allen's assertion that

journalists construct news accounts against a backdrop of assumptions about the social world which they expect the readers to share. It follows that the journalist's orientation to the implied reader, or imagined community of readers, necessarily shapes the form and content of the account. (Allen, 1999, 92)

This follows from the fact that people make sense of events by analysing them with respect to their existing interpretations of the world. Thus, Hall et al. (1978) write that the language used in the press will

be the *newspaper's own version of the language of the public to whom it is principally addressed*: its version of the rhetoric, imagery and underlying common stock of knowledge which it assumes its audience shares and which thus forms the basis of the reciprocity of producer/reader. (cited in Allen, 1999, 88; emphasis in original)

While this seems to fit broadly with the evidence here about how planning coverage varies in the national papers along broadly ideological lines, the idea that the media merely reflect their readership is not uncontested. Schlesinger and Tumber suggest that the media do not just produce texts within pre-given ideological standpoints but also actively help produce ideology, arguing that 'Hall et al. (1978) tended to overstate the passivity of the media as a subordinate site for the reproduction of the ideological field' (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994, 19). Burgess comments that 'many people working in the media industry will acknowledge that they have, at best, only a hazy idea of who their audiences are and what will appeal to them' (Burgess, 1990, 155). Additionally, many journalists seem to like to suggest that they have a role in shaping public opinion rather than merely reflecting it (consider *The Sun's* headline, 'It's the Sun Wot Won It' [*The Sun*, 1992, 1] after the surprise 1992 election victory for John Major). Nevertheless, Burgess and Gold have a good case when they write that 'the content of the media serves to reinforce specific ideological constructions of social realities' (Burgess and Gold, 1985, 5). Burgess highlights the power issues that can be related to these questions of ideology, giving a specific example:

in terms of changes in the countryside ... it is in the interests of the major landholders to perpetuate the longstanding belief that major threats to 'our heritage' come from urban development pressure rather than from their own exploitation of the land resource. (Burgess, 1990, 148)

The ideological issue of how planning is represented is thus of importance, but it is

worth noting that across the political divide, the coverage of planning and planners still tended to be generally negative. It may be that the planning system, by the very nature of what it does, is never going to be popular in the business friendly right-wing press, but given the influence that the media can have, such negative representations of planning are not insignificant.

The local press: planning in action

Ideological issues were much less prominent in the local press. In general, local papers were less interested in business and developers criticising the system and more in the issue of community consultation and participation in the planning system, and on specific plans for urban regeneration and traffic management – planning in action. However, although criticism from business and developers is seen less frequently in local papers than national, there were comments on reform of the planning system and the speed of the system in the local press in all regions. Notably, though, critical comment from business did receive a large amount of coverage in Scotland, but this was mainly related to discussions about whether to introduce a Third Party Right of Appeal – a reform currently under consideration there. Indeed *The Herald* reported the Scottish Executive's review of planning by writing:

this week the Scottish Executive launched two important consultations on how best to reform and update our antiquated and sloth-paced planning system, including the highly contentious question of introducing a third-party right of appeal. (Young, 2004, 22)

It then reported the reaction from the CBI:⁴ 'business leaders last night labelled the Scottish Executive's consultation on overhauling Scotland's planning system an "April Fool joke"' (West, 2004, 27). No positive counter argument was included in the article.

The local press covered the topic of community involvement (a key component of current planning reforms) in a number of ways, for example articles on new public rights to speak at council meetings on planning applications (*This is Oxfordshire*, 2003, 15) or on schemes that have involved public participation 'positive planning ... and public participation have all played a part in securing a sound programme of development' (*Littlehampton Gazette*, 2004, 13). The general framing in the local press emphasised positive aspects of community involvement. The topic was also seen in the national press, but less frequently and the spin was more problem orientated – for example reports of a lack of community involvement in the system. A grandmother was reported in *The Guardian* as saying, 'the local community has no say in anything

4 The Confederation of British Industry, the self-styled 'voice of business' in the UK.

that happens and, as a result, trusts nobody. They've lost all faith in the planning system' (Birch, 2003, 17).

The contrast between the local press and the national press over which topics were most reported upon with regard to planning (as found in the manifest content analysis) and the way those topics were framed (as found in the latent content analysis) was thus strong. This may be explained by the differing scales of coverage, the national press being most interested in planning as a 'system', the local press more interested in planning as something that can impact local communities individually (and indeed the critical comments in Scottish papers actually being in more 'national' papers such as *The Herald* and *The Scotsman* rather than in truly local papers). This leads to the situation where the national press places more emphasis on criticisms of planning, particularly with regard to the speed and 'bureaucracy' of the planning system and its linkages with housing issues. In the local press, we see more of a story of what individual councils are doing, of the impacts of specific developments, and of largely positive comments on community participation initiatives. This can be illustrated with reference to coverage of housing issues.

Housing

A large number of topics were covered in planning-related articles but housing-related articles tended to dominate during the survey period. Indeed, despite some important differences in the political persuasions of the newspapers, it is worth noting that the topics covered in stories relating to planning were fairly consistent between the various papers. For example, in relation to the Barker Review, Sam Lister, writing in *The Times*, quoted a representative of the House Builders' Federation who said that 'the failure of the planning system is to blame for the country's housing crisis' (Lister, 2003, 33), while Peter Hetherington, in *The Guardian*, quoted 'Ms Barker' as saying 'this isn't about tearing up the planning system' (Hetherington, 2004, 22). Thus while the different papers may offer contrasting slants, they are actually writing about the same issue.

The housing coverage illustrates some of the wider issues seen in the press coverage of planning – general criticism at the national level with some differences between the papers along political lines, and differences in the framing of planning in the local as opposed to the national press. A good example is seen in relation to planning and rising house prices. Comment in the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* characterised the situation as the result of 'our appallingly Stalinist planning system, encouraged by a nasty alliance of bureaucrats and Nimbys' (Trefgarne, 2002, 20), while the more left-leaning *Observer* contained the suggestion that planning is a 'scapegoat' and that 'planning redistributes, but does not normally create or destroy, the value of housing' (Golland, 2004, 17).

Often issues surrounding reform of the planning system were dealt with in the national papers in the same articles as those covering housing supply, most especially in the context of the Barker Review. This was generally reported on in terms of the facts of her report rather than opinion pieces about her review, but while a great deal of column inches were given over to reporting her review, almost none were given to any critique of it. This coverage, in itself, can therefore be seen as implied criticism of planning – if a review was needed then surely something must have been wrong in the first place. That her review aimed ‘to deliver stronger and more effective strategies for housing and planning’ (Hetherington, 2004, 22 in *The Guardian*) was a typical comment.⁵ With respect to the local press, the Barker Review was not even among the top 10 most common topics found.

Housing and articles either criticising the planning system and/or commenting on its reform were the primary themes for coverage in the national press. These were seen in both broadsheet and tabloid papers, although the emphasis tended to be more on housing (government targets for housing development and house prices) in the tabloid press. The pre-eminence of housing as an issue is probably of little surprise given the British obsession with the topic and the role of the planning system in managing housing development. The majority of articles in relation to the topic framed planning as the ‘enemy’, suggesting that the planning system is restricting housing supply and so raising prices (although this was disputed in some articles in the left-leaning press). Housing was also a common topic for articles in the local press, but this coverage tended to focus on specific proposed developments or on the government’s housing targets (especially in the South-East of England) rather than issues of housing supply and price. There was also some evidence of housing targets being used to illustrate an imagery of disempowered local communities in the face of oppressive central government overriding the wishes of local representatives. A particularly vocal opposition to this is seen in *This is Oxfordshire*, which aired Mitchell’s worries about where the ‘real power’ lies:

the person with the power to direct precisely where housing will go in Oxfordshire is the man with four houses, three chins, two jags and one brain – your friend and mine John Prescott. He has set himself up as the dictator of the planning system. (Mitchell, 2004, 12)

- 5 Although, consistent with the ideological divide seen in the national press, the article in *The Guardian* was more concerned with the recommendation that social house building must double, a reading of the Barker Review not seen in the more right-leaning press.

Table 3 The 10 most common topics covered by planning related articles in the planning professional newsletter and public newspapers compared

<p>'Planning': top 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban regeneration • Public transport • Housing development • Roads/traffic management • Retail development • Urban design • Leisure development • Sustainability • Reform of the system (in general) • Wind farm developments 	<p>National and local newspapers combined: top 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • = Housing development • = Urban regeneration • Community involvement/consultation • Speed of system • Roads/traffic management • Affordable housing • Urban design • Reform of the system (in general) • Articles about particular planners • Mobile phone/TETRA masts
<p>National papers combined: top 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed of system • Housing price/supply • The Barker Review • Complexities of the system ('red tape') • Reform of the system (in general) • Community involvement/consultation • Urban regeneration • Affordable/Key-worker housing • Housing development • Articles about particular planners 	<p>Local papers combined: top 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing development • Urban Regeneration • Community involvement/consultation • Roads/traffic management • Urban design • Affordable/key worker housing • Mobile phone/TETRA masts • Retail development • Reform of the system (in general) • Speed of the system

Planning, the press and the profession: questions of identity

One of the many striking differences that emerged from the press survey was the contrasting presentation of planning emerging from the public newspapers as opposed to that in *Planning*, the newsletter of planning professionals.

Just in terms of the manifest content analysis, there was a difference between the public press in general and *Planning*, and in particular between the national press and *Planning*, as illustrated by Table 3 and Figure 1. Beyond such quantitative measures, there was a much deeper qualitative difference in coverage.

One of the most immediately noticeable things coming out of the content analysis of *Planning* was the large range of topics covered. The image was of planning as important, relevant and highly topical. Unlike the national newspapers, the focus of articles in *Planning* tended to actually be about planning in action rather than (perhaps unsurprisingly) coverage of criticism of the planning system. Articles tended to report on specific developments and schemes across Britain, particularly with relation to

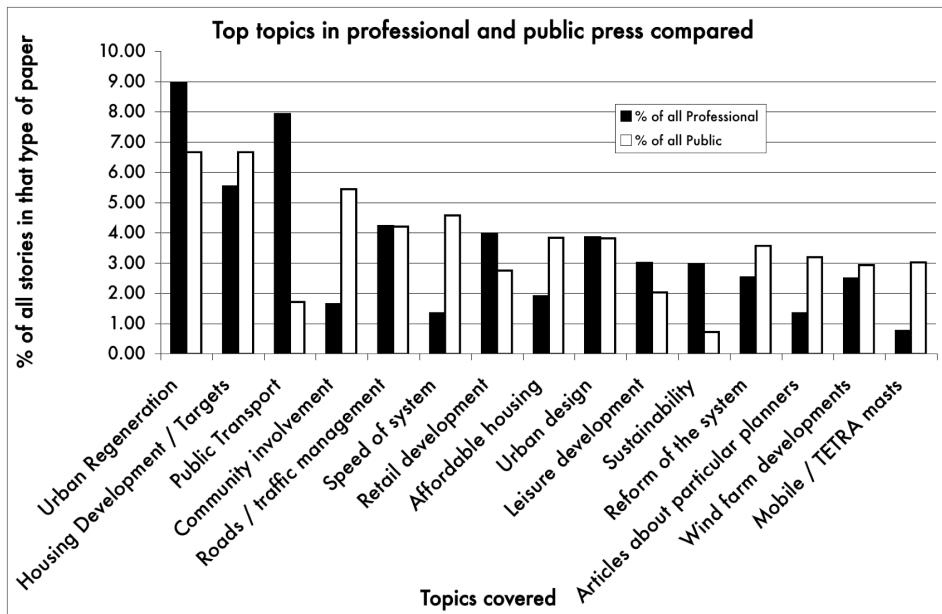


Fig. 1 Graph showing the most common topics covered by planning related articles in the professional (*Planning*) and public (national papers and the local papers combined) press compared, showing the number of stories covered by each topic as a percentage of the total number of stories surveyed in that type of paper

urban regeneration, but also focusing upon retail and leisure developments and the growing controversy surrounding wind farm development applications. Coverage of housing development was also widespread, with slightly more emphasis on government targets and comment in addition to reports of particular developments.

Public transport received much more coverage in *Planning* than in the newspapers (in connection to planning). This contrast suggests that while the public may blame planners for traffic management they are ignorant of planners' interest in public transport issues. A whole page in each edition of *Planning* is devoted to public transport issues, although these tend to be more reports of government policy than of specific developments. Another major issue not covered much in the public press but receiving a great deal of attention in *Planning* was that of sustainability. This probably reflects that the planning system is now seen as a key vehicle for delivering 'sustainable development' (ODPM, 2005b; Scottish Executive 2003; Welsh Assembly Government, 2002) but that it is a term causing some confusion to the public more generally and so less likely to feature in the public press.

In terms of reform of the system, there are a number of large articles reviewing the reforms in England, Scotland and Wales, for example Donati (2004c). The Barker



Fig. 2 A tongue-in-cheek comment on relations between central government and the profession from *Planning* (*Planning*, 2004, 11)

Source: reproduced under licence from Newscast and with kind permission of Huw Morris from *Planning*

review received both ‘factual’ reporting in *Planning* as well as reports about groups criticising the review – ‘Green lobby disparages Barker review’, exclaimed one headline (Ellis, 2004, 4). A particular focus for some articles seemed to be in characterising central government control in a negative light – Morris writes about ‘Whitehall meddling’ (Morris, 2003, 8) and Donati on ‘authorities’ target anguish’ (Donati, 2004a, 8). Figure 2, which appeared in place of the regular cartoon in one edition of *Planning*, presents a fascinating insight into opinion in the profession. No doubt the RTPI would be quick to say that this did not represent official institutional policy, but its presence in the official newsletter and journal of the British planning profession is noteworthy because it suggests a certain degree of cynicism and fatigue among local authority planners with central government documentation. It also offers an intriguing contrast with the ‘Stalinist’ image created in certain sectors of the national

press – planning might be viewed from the outside as a tool of governmental control but from the inside the view at the local authority level is perhaps one of disenchantment with government control.

It was also interesting to see how the topic of community consultation was covered in *Planning*. This was the third most common topic in planning-related articles in the newspapers surveyed (see Table 3), particularly in the local press, but received much less coverage in *Planning*. Where there was coverage, it was often framed as something difficult for planners to do, for example articles entitled ‘How to survive consultation’ (Shillam, 2004, 16) and ‘Help at hand to win public’s patronage’ (Smulian, 2004, 16). One of the regular cartoons by Cowan (2004) offered a tongue-in-cheek yet informative image (see Fig. 3), suggesting a certain scepticism – or perceived scepticism – about public consultation among planning professionals. Although there is anecdotal evidence that some planners do not like the image created in this cartoon, its message is in accord with the wider image of public participation created in *Planning*. Indeed, coverage was also given to research that found that those members of the public who responded to planning applications were unrepresentative of the population as a whole in an article headed ‘Research hits out at nimby agenda’ (Dewar, 2004, 3). However, there was also an article about Jon Lord, Young Planner of the Year, who received his award largely due to his work ‘giving local communities an effective voice in planning’ (Donati, 2004b, 13), so the reaction to community consultation in the professional press was not all negative.

There was a marked difference between the public and professional press not just in what topics were covered but also in how those topics were presented. Obviously the style of a professional weekly will differ somewhat from that of a public newspaper, but the comparison between the public and professional press did suggest a slightly dated and fixed view in the public press of planning – a view of planning that might be termed ‘planning at large’. This public view fails to appreciate the full range of activities that planners are involved with (and, incidentally, are not involved with) and the political constraints upon the role of the ‘technical expert’. This problem is noted by Tewdwr-Jones when he commented ‘town planning is suffering from a severe albeit outdated image problem’ (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999, 125). He goes on to suggest that

the public’s perceptions of town planning are stereotypical and at least 25 years out of date. This imagery and representation have done little to boost the confidence of planning practitioners. (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999, 132)

Perhaps this negative public image is indicative of a certain lack of credibility for the profession, something that public participation may be aimed at tackling. However, good public participation surely relies on a good public understanding of planning.

The dated public image of planning may prove hard to shift. Burgess and Gold

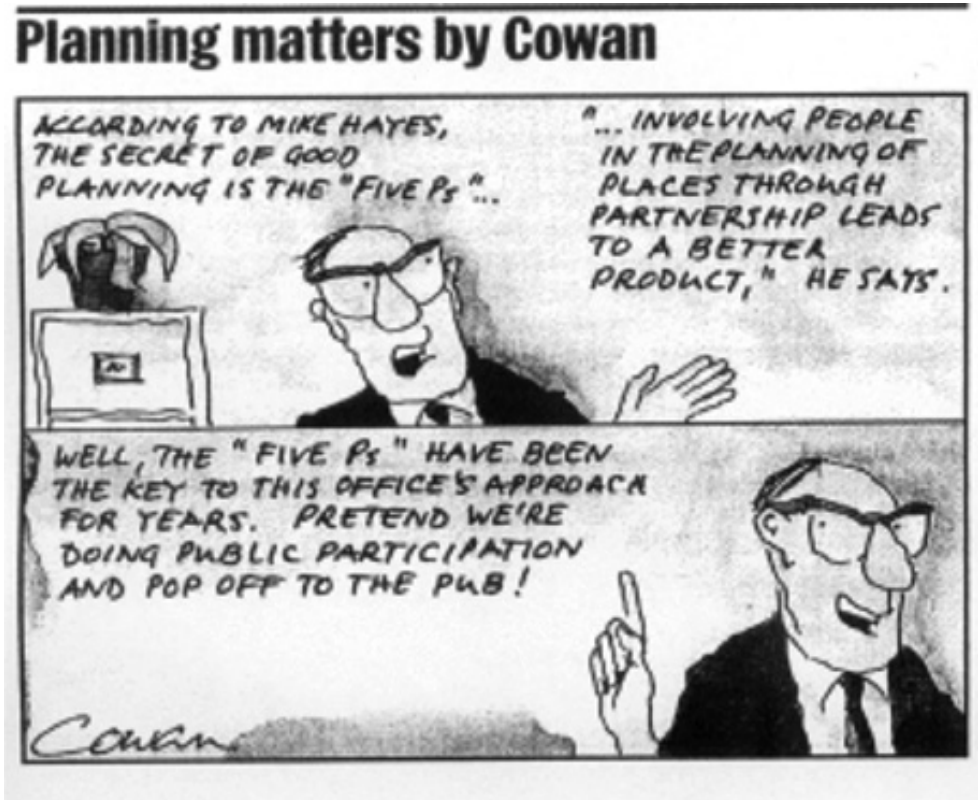


Fig. 3 A tongue-in-cheek comment on the view on community consultation from within the profession (Cowan, 2004, 11)

Source: reproduced by kind permission of Huw Morris and Rob Cowan of *Planning*

(1985) give two interesting examples of the persistence of negative stereotypes – in one example Godley (1974; in Burgess and Gold, 1985) found negative media stereotypes of the British New Towns in strong contrast with the views of actual residents of those towns; in another example Burgess traced the persistence of negative views of the city of Hull and found that ‘the national newspapers used the external stereotype as the framework for news’ (1978; in Burgess and Gold, 1985). Although stereotyping may be considered an ordinary cognitive process (Guirdham, 1999), stereotypes do not necessarily have to be negative. Yet clearly the stereotype of ‘town planning’ is negative and a defining characteristic of stereotypes is, unfortunately, their longevity.

Planners and the press: questions of image

The negative stereotype of ‘town planning’ found in the survey also applied to ‘town planners’, and further interesting issues arise when we look at the stories about planners in the press. Questions of scale again arise, with planners generally framed quite differently in the national compared to the local press. Overall, the image of the planners in the national press is generally quite negative, where it is present at all. Thus the planner is often seen as a ‘humble bureaucrat’ as illustrated in *The Guardian* – ‘ministers ... want the humble town planner to become a key figure in delivery of the government’s ambitious housing and regeneration programmes’ (Brindle, 2004, 8). The ‘humble town planner’ – this image of the planner as bureaucrat can be further developed, and is especially prevalent in the right-wing press. For example, in *The Times*, we are told that residents of a particular village ‘curse planners as a bunch of jobsworths, frustrating the liberties of the free-born Englishman’ (Clark, 2004, 16), while the *Daily Telegraph* refers to planners as ‘narrow-minded pen pushers’ (Edghill, 2004, 5).

However, many criticisms were more ‘tongue-in-cheek’, commenting on poorly designed traffic management systems or the many brutalist developments dating from the 1960s. An interesting example is seen in *The Times*:

We are disinclined to trust anyone who says they can predict the future, and with good reason. The desire to know what happens next is nothing new, and the kind of people who until recently have set about fulfilling this need – necromancers, gazers into crystal balls, science-fiction fantasists, not to mention town planners – don’t inspire much confidence. (Collard, 2003, 22)

Such coverage draws heavily on stereotypes, and this is a theme which has received plenty of academic attention, for example Burgess and Gold, who cite Karlins et al. (1969) – the media ‘create a vast cultural matrix in which images can develop and persist irrespective of the reality they are supposed to represent’ (cited in Burgess and Gold, 1985, 10). Even if planning has moved on, the media image of ‘the planner’ has not.

The main exception to such largely critical commentary was in articles that mentioned particular planners. However, these were usually articles about planners in the past, for example obituaries such as that of Sylvia Law, first female president of the RTPI (*The Times*, 2004), or articles about nineteenth-century visionary planners such as Sir Ebenezer Howard or Sir Patrick Geddes. Such articles also generally gave positive commentary on the ‘utopian visions’ of the Garden City movement. We thus have a situation where in the national press the overall impression left is one whereby the only good town planner is a dead one.

In general, however, the more striking feature about planners in the national press

is that they are usually conspicuous by their absence. The planner is depicted not simply as a faceless bureaucrat but as an invisible one. For example it was common to see comment about delays in the planning system without any mention of the people in the system or how those delays might be due to shortages of skilled planning professionals in many local authorities. One of the few exceptions was in *The Guardian*, where Pandya writes that the ‘trouble is, there aren’t enough town planners around to do the work’ (Pandya, 2004, 2), but that was in the context of a careers section trying to encourage people to do planning courses (and was quite atypical). There are probably also many articles concerning planning-related topics in which planning is not mentioned at all, but the nature of the search terms utilised in this research makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Nevertheless, I would suggest that all too often planners are simply not mentioned in articles connected with such big issues as urban design, environmental protection, or sustainability.

The situation in the local press was slightly different. In common with the national press, planning is again often discussed without reference to the planners responsible for carrying it out. Stories about particular developments frequently contain no comment from or about local planners. When there was comment about a particular development, it was much more likely to be from a local councillor than a planner. For example reaction to a proposed regeneration scheme covered in the *Sunderland Echo* came from the Council Leader commenting that ‘plans like this show that people have confidence in the city and how Sunderland is moving forward’ (Clark and Wicking, 2004, 3), rather than from the planners responsible for drawing up the plans. This feeds into an image of planners as ‘faceless bureaucrats’. Such a situation may reflect on the relationship between politicians and the press and indeed, how in the ‘play of knowledge and power, some parties [are] more successful than others in obtaining access to and coverage by the news media’ (Hay and Israel, 2001, 114). Nevertheless, planners are slightly more likely to appear in local press stories, and when they do appear it is nearly always as someone quoted about a particular development. In relation to a proposed housing development, for example, the *St Andrews Citizen* quoted the Fife Council Head of Planning as saying ‘a whole range of issues surrounding St Andrews and its environment are thrown up by news of the proposal’ (*St Andrews Citizen*, 2002, 1). Planners are also mentioned in relation to some subjects of contemporary lively debate, such as wind farm developments. This topic received coverage in all regions and looks set to become an increasingly controversial issue in the planning system. In one opinionated piece in the *South Wales Evening Post*, Jenkins comments, ‘British town planners have no experience or concept of the possible dangers’ (Jenkins, 2003, 14).

In this light, the planner is seen as a technical expert (whether that expertise is being utilised or seen as lacking), probably of most use to the local media when their expertise can be used in support of that paper’s editorial stance. This can be explained

by the fact that ‘journalists do not simply describe events. They rely on the cult of the “expert” and situate stories within established stereotypes and themes’ (Hay and Israel, 2001, 115). Hay and Israel then further comment that:

Journalists seek credible and authoritative sources. They seek people who have been authorised both politically and socially to give an account and who have the resources to do so professionally ... Journalists use sources that have appropriate information, whose availability and quality of performance are predictable, and who may be called upon repeatedly. (Hay and Israel, 2001, 119)

Perhaps then the planner’s expertise most shines through at the local level since it is at this scale that the impacts of development are most readily seen, and thus a negative framing of the planner was much less common in the local press. Additionally, given the current emphasis on audit and accountability in society, it is interesting to note that no single article was picked up relating to particular instances of corruption during the search.

Thus in the national press the planner is either conspicuous by their absence or a figure of fun, and in the local press a technical expert occasionally commenting on particular developments. Unsurprisingly, the framing of the planner in *Planning* is quite different. There are explanations about the shortage of skilled planners and articles about planning education and even a whole section on ‘moves’ about which planners have moved to which local authority. This may be seen in the light of a professional organisation trying to protect its territory by saying that there is something that makes its members special but certainly gives a contrasting view of planners and planning to that seen in the public view of ‘planning at large’.

Discussion and conclusion

Planning’s image

The image of planning suggested by the public press is something that should be a matter of both interest and concern to anyone involved in planning. Myers (2001) found textbook representations of Africa could be characterised by what he termed ‘Afropessimism’. ‘Planning pessimism’ seems to be the norm in the national press. Despite some important ideological differences between the newspapers, planning is often represented in a very negative light, and planners framed as faceless bureaucrats or figures of fun. A particular focus is criticisms of planning for being too complex, slow, causing high house prices or somehow being bad for business (a framing that ignores the fact that a good-quality environment is surely an advantage in attracting high-quality global investors). In the local papers, the focus is more on planning in action. The problem for planners with local media coverage is more a tendency for

some misunderstanding surrounding planning issues and for councillors to be quoted in relation to planning stories rather than planners. This may reflect local guidelines and priorities about contact with the media and indeed may be how some planning officers are happiest, but probably does not do much to help the public image and understanding of planners.

The image of planning created in the professional press serves to highlight just how outdated, stereotypical, and generally negative the image in the public press can be. In contrast to this, planning in the professional press appears much more exciting, relevant and topical. When compared to this image of planning from within the profession, it therefore seems even more of a shame that there is not a better picture of planning and planners in the media.

Of course, this press survey only provides an exploratory ‘snapshot’ of one year’s coverage in the media, but given that this period was one of reform and high hopes for what planning could deliver, there is all the more reason for this ‘planning pessimism’ to be a cause for concern. The roots of the negative coverage of planning in the media certainly go back a long way. Eversley traced the discontent to the 1960s, commenting that:

It is only since the late 1960s that planning has begun to be recognised as an activity affecting much wider issues. As it has done so, ‘The Planner’ has become a monster, a threat to society, one of the most guilty of the earth rapers ... That his [sic] aims are precisely the opposite to the consequences which are attributed to him, denotes a number of crises in education and communication. (Eversley, 1973, 14)

Tewdwr-Jones places the roots of discontent even earlier:

As the scourge of public hatred, town planners are continuously lambasted for their overt bureaucracy, their ‘toy town’ outlook, and for their destruction of Britain’s heritage. This tendency for the public to criticise town planners for the state of the nation is not a particularly recent phenomenon. If anything, it is an ongoing love–hate relationship ... The origins of this criticism go way back to the post-war period. (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999, 126)

Whatever the precise origins of the problems, planning has moved on – and is moving on – yet media coverage seems fixed on out-of-date stereotypical images and jokes.

Perhaps this is partly because planning is still seen in the public eye as inextricably linked to the modernist period, a relic of the post-war welfare state. Certainly there are plenty who would agree with Tewdwr-Jones when he comments that ‘the rebuilding of the urban areas after 1945 and through to the early 1970s, during the modernist era, was planning at its height’ (Tewdwr-Jones, 2005, 8), yet we are now in a post-modern period in which there is a general distrust for those professional experts who like to think that they know best. That said, there is a great need for expertise, for visionary

planning, to tackle issues as diverse as urban regeneration, environmental degradation and sustainable development. Expectations are high and many are trying hard to meet them. It is therefore all the more unfortunate that planning is so negatively framed in the press because, given the power of the media, this negative framing can have a number of important consequences.

Importance of media image

Clearly the media play a central role in modern society. While there is plenty of academic debate about how to conceptualise its influence (Smith, 1985; Burgess and Gold, 1985), its importance cannot be overestimated. Why else would politicians spend so much time worrying about 'spin' or advertisers invest so much money in using the media to promote their products? The role of the media in shaping the public perception of planning must therefore be an important topic in which we can further develop our understanding. While it is unsurprising to see that the language of the press 'is full of reference to commonsense understanding and stereotypical phraseology' (Burgess, 1985, 195), the image of planning that this creates must be a cause for concern. As Barthes suggests, 'myth ripens because it spreads' (1972; in Burgess, 1985, 192). Indeed, Eversley suggests the media is at the root of people's negative perceptions of planning and planners:

The media have been a powerful instrument in increasing the discontent. Sometimes with good intentions, but usually because it is good for circulation, they have singled out the planner as the personification of bureaucracy, meanness, corruption and downright professional incompetence ... much [of this] is destructive ... it is one of the chief explanations why the whole planning process has fallen into such disrepute. (Eversley, 1973, 131).

Such a prejudiced view of planning can have very real world effects for the way the planning system and planners are treated. If coverage focuses on the negatives rather than the real world advantages planning can have, this must surely have implications for how people respond to planning and planners. As Gwilliam noted, the 2001 Planning Green Paper (for England and Wales) failed to recognise that

the planning system in this country has some singular achievements. The comments in the Green Paper are almost entirely negative and I believe this does a disservice to the image of planning and the hard work of the many thousands of people involved. (Gwilliam, 2002, iii)

Similarly, representations of planners as incompetent bureaucrats does a disservice to many people, can poison public participation exercises from the off, and poses problems for attracting new recruits to the profession. Indeed, even over thirty years

ago, Eversley suggested that negative press coverage ‘affects the quality of entrants to the profession’ (Eversley, 1973, 259).

Perhaps the very nature of planning as an activity, which essentially tells people what they can and cannot do, means that it will never be loved by the public, a stance that media representations merely reflect. This may be compounded by the fact a tool of government control linked to the welfare state is unlikely to be embraced by the right-wing press in Britain, and by the fact that journalists tend to believe bad news attracts audiences and actively seek negativity (de Carvalho, 2002). Nevertheless, the planning system’s role in producing and maintaining high-quality environments is surely something that can be embraced by even the right-wing press. Given the importance of the media in shaping opinion and promoting agendas, a more media savvy planning may be needed in order to try and promote a more positive public engagement with planning and planners, surely necessary given the number of high-profile issues that planning is, and should be, involved with in contemporary Britain. There is thus a pressing need to ‘face up’ to this negative imagery, but as Tewdwr-Jones (1999) notes, this does not seem to have happened so far. It seems that commentary about planners from the 1970s still holds true in this regard:

Since almost everything he [sic] does is lampooned or condemned outright by all manner of critics, so he may respond either by growing a thicker skin and carrying on as if nothing had been said or by increasing inactivity. Neither attitude constitutes a solution. (Eversley, 1973, 259)

Tackling negative imagery

An interesting parallel can perhaps be drawn with architecture. Although largely independent of the public sector, and so perhaps less constrained in their media relations, architects until quite recently also suffered from the legacy of 1960s brutalist developments and searing attacks, including those from the Prince of Wales in the 1980s. Yet things have moved on since then. A number of British national newspapers have dedicated architecture correspondents but not dedicated planning correspondents. This may then reinforce the better image of architecture over planning, which is covered variously by architecture, economics and environment correspondents, among others, as and when necessary and possibly with less understanding of the issues involved. However, beyond this, the leadership of RIBA has probably played a key role. RIBA has appeared keen to engage with critics and deal with the media. A simple glance at the RIBA website illustrates this commitment. There is even a special ‘Media Matters’ kit downloadable to help architects in their dealings with the media (RIBA, 2004). All this appears to be in stark contrast to the RTPI.

Of course, planners may have good reason to be weary of the press. Relations

with the press can be fraught with difficulty. Retired Planner Ted Kitchen gives an interesting story of a difficult situation in which ‘what the press coverage undoubtedly did do ... was to make what would in any event have been very difficult, several times more so’ (Kitchen, 1997, 164). Similarly, Hay and Israel give an example of difficulties involving press coverage surrounding some of their research but comment that ‘while geographers may ignore the media... the media do not ignore geography’ (Hay and Israel, 2001, 117). This leads them to suggest that:

Geographers need to find out how journalists and the media actually operate. Not only might that deepen our understandings of the ways in which the media fabricate or constitute the worlds in which we live, but application of that knowledge should also help embed geographical understandings within media worlds. (Hay and Israel, 2001, 118)

While engaging with the media may be fraught with difficulties, there may be a number of practical steps that could be taken and there is an urgent need for concerted action at all levels. The RIBA advice notes that ‘the regional media is much more likely to tell “good news stories” than the national press’ (RIBA, 2004, 1), and there is clearly room for good coverage of planning and planners at the grassroots. For local authority planners, there will often be issues with local authority rules about relations with the media and indeed a preference for letting elected members deal with the media, but some more proactive action will surely help. Indeed anecdotal evidence suggests some concern among local authority planners about their image but a feeling of unease and lack of skills and time to tackle it. Harrison (1998) notes that there has been a deskilling of local journalism in recent years and so journalists themselves may not fully appreciate the nature and scope of planning work. Given these conditions, it may be helpful for senior planners to ensure that they work closely with their authority’s PR department to ensure that suitable information is provided to the local media and that authorities are more proactive in courting the local media where and when they can to highlight good work being done by planners. For the growing planning consultancy sector, meanwhile, there is an obvious business case to be made for good media coverage, and the parallel that can be drawn with architecture is all the more applicable. Some larger practices are already quite proactive in dealing with the media but more could be done by working closely with the RTPI and local authority planners to ensure positive coverage at all levels.

In both the local authority and private practice cases, advice from the RTPI along the lines of those issued by RIBA would be helpful, as would tackling the issue in planning schools. The national media may be trickier to deal with, given their predisposition towards negativity, but given the importance of the national media in agenda setting and the political process, they cannot be ignored. Leadership by the RTPI will be necessary here. Indeed, it would be helpful for the RPTI to be more forward in

promoting planning in an exciting and relevant way, linking the activity and profession to 'sexy' topics such as environmentalism, sustainability and urban design. Furthermore there is a need to be prepared to stand up for planning when faced with the all-too-frequent negative comments about planners from architects, politicians and developers, among others.

There are probably no easy solutions to the long-standing negative imagery of planning and planners in the British press. But given the importance of planning, which comes across quite well in the professional press, engaging with the public press must be a vital concern for all those involved with and interested in planning.

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