

## Chapter 3

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### **A pragmatic partnership: politicians and local media**

The relationship between TDs and the media in Ireland is little studied, with existing analyses tending to focus on general election campaigns (Brandenburg, 2005, 298). This narrow focus fails to acknowledge that in the era of the ‘permanent campaign’ what happens between elections also merits scrutiny. In Ireland, national parliamentarians are strongly embedded in the life of their constituencies. Therefore, having a high profile in the constituency is *expected* of TDs and a strong presence in the constituency is vital for TDs who wish to retain their seats. In this sense, local media represent the most effective conduit through which TDs can communicate to their electorate that they are out there in the ether working hard for the interests of the constituency. Local media allow them to articulate their policy positions, their views and what they consider to be their achievements. Moreover, because the media may be viewed as neutral, publicity in local media implies that a gatekeeper (an editor or head of news) has deemed the work of the TD to be worthy of mention. By contrast, a TD’s newsletter may be considered as simple marketing.

This chapter examines the interaction of TDs and the local media in the period between general elections using a series of face-to-face interviews with seven TDs as well as parliamentary assistants, newspaper editors and heads of news at local radio stations in two case-study constituencies. The interviews, granted on the basis of non-attribution, were conducted in 2007 with a view to establishing the approaches to, attitudes towards, perceptions of, and the practices inherent in the models of political

communication that exist at local level. The chapter begins by outlining the perceived importance of local media to TDs by reporting the views of TDs, their Parliamentary Assistants (PAs) and local media editors / heads of news. It then considers the personal relationships that exist between TDs and local media personnel and the particular paradigm that this creates. The capacity of TDs to agenda-set in the local media is also considered and the journey of a press release from origin to publication / non-publication is examined in this context. Finally, the issue of bias in the media is analysed from both the political and media viewpoints.

### **The importance of local media for TDs**

Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, 216) define the contemporary political communication epoch as ‘the third age’ – an era demanding for politicians and journalists due to the accelerated news cycle, more news outlets and increased competition. An increasingly adversarial politician – journalist relationship has led politicians to seek to bypass the national media and use alternative means of political communication including the favouring of regional press. Negrine (2005, 109) and Franklin (2004, 157–58) point to the advantages of the local media for politicians in terms of achieving name recognition among voters, of creating a perception that the politician is working and in getting coverage that the national media would never give them. Negrine’s research suggests that for British MPs in the early stages of their careers the national media is not a priority concern, unlike local newspapers, which are perceived to be read by constituents. In Ireland, where multi-seat constituencies mean that the relationship between TDs and constituents is closer, high visibility in the constituency is considered essential for election and re-election. Local media can provide this visibility; 58% of Irish adults tune in to their local or regional radio stations on an

average day (JNLR, 2012/13) while almost 40% of the population buy regional newspapers, increasing to 57% when Dublin and Cork cities are excluded (JNRS, 2011/12).

In interviews, the TDs felt that it was vital to have a presence in the local media as this provided the most effective mechanism for communicating with their constituents. TDs perceive a presence in the local media to be necessary in terms of attracting political support and believe that their constituents want to see evidence of their ongoing attempts to resolve salient local issues. The following quotation from a TD is illustrative:

Absolutely essential [to have a presence in the local media] and the reason why is that, when it comes to politics, if you don't have a presence in the local area . . . then you're not likely to get support – so I would say . . . local media . . . creates a perception of somebody who is in touch, somebody who is capable of identifying what the issues are, and somebody who is working to resolve those issues – so perception is hugely important in politics and the local media is a central element of creating that positive perception.

When asked whether they thought it is important for TDs to have a presence in their local media, the responses of media professionals revealed that they recognise the dependency of TDs on local media. One newspaper editor observed:

It's hugely important. I think the desire to get re-elected seems to be there from once they enter the Dáil . . . and they need to have the link with what's

going on in Dublin and the relevance to [the constituency] . . . they won't get [that coverage] in the nationals.

Here, reflecting Negrine's (2005) findings, the editor acknowledges three reasons why he believes TDs perceive local media to be important: that media coverage at local level is inextricably linked to the desire to be re-elected, that the local media offers a channel through which TDs can make sense of the link between their position as a national legislator and a defender of the interests of a particular constituency, and that TDs simply will not get the volume or style of coverage in the national media that the local media generally affords them.

TDs and PAs were asked whether local media or national media was more important to them. Three of the seven TDs interviewed expressed the view that local media was more important while the rest stressed the need for a balance between targeting local and national media. The priority for TDs appeared to depend on the stage that they have reached in their careers. The research suggests that TDs, in their public relations with the local and national media, are targeting two distinctive audiences. At a local level the target audience is the electorate and the purpose of the political communication is to encourage the electorate to vote for that TD at the next election. At a national level the audience is often the party hierarchy: for a backbencher the message to articulate is: 'promote me'. The national audience can also be what can loosely be described as 'opinion leaders'; this would include, for example, newspaper columnists. The aim for TDs is to establish themselves as people capable of being significant players on the national scene as the following observation from a TD suggests:

[The] national media would be very, very important so for a young TD aspiring at some stage to holding ministerial office, commanding high ground on the national level is very, very important because it's not just sufficient to be well known in your own constituency, you have to try to broaden that . . . you're demonstrating a capacity to be able to command high ground on a particular subject which means you're noticed – you're noticed by higher civil servants, you're noticed by editors of the paper, you're noticed by people in politics so there's a wide range of things . . . I'm connecting the national media with promotion, with ambition, with higher office and all that kind of thing.

In contrast, all of the PAs expressed the view that local media coverage is more important than national media coverage for their TD. As one PA observed:

For a TD, I think it's without doubt the local media and the local stories, the stories which are specific to certain areas will go down better than trying to put out the message of a national issue which is probably at times too wide.

This finding may reflect the fact that political party press offices usually handle national media while PAs usually liaise with local media. The PAs interviewed stated that between 70% and 90% of their media attention is focussed on local press releases. A majority of the TDs interviewed indicated that their offices spend a significant amount of their media time (75%) on local press releases each week, with an average of four press releases issued weekly, the vast bulk of which targets local media.

## **Local radio, local newspapers and social media**

Under the Broadcasting and Wireless Telegraphy Act 1988 radio stations are required to dedicate a minimum of 20% of their output to news and current affairs. This creates a demand for news that has served politicians very well at local level. Local radio has been heavily targeted by the bigger political parties from the 1997 general election onwards (Holmes, 1999, 46; Collins, 2004, 207). Both media and political interviewees were asked which was more important for TDs in coverage terms: local radio or local newspapers. Of the TDs who addressed this question, three felt radio was more important, one asserted that local radio and local newspapers were of equal importance and one felt that print media was more important. The TDs who argue that radio was more important cited a number of reasons, including that it is easier to get one's message across on the radio; the resonance of a sound-bite; and, the fact that unlike most newspapers, one could listen to the radio for free:

What I notice about local radio . . . is that you get your name on it by issuing a statement, but the one thing that I have noticed consistently is there are a number of people that would say 'I heard you on local radio this morning' – your voice is coming across and that is the chord with local radio.

Print media professionals seemed aware that they have fallen down the list of political public relations priorities for TDs since the introduction of local radio. As one newspaper editor observed:

Local radio is their [TDs'] first port of call now. If there's a big announcement, they're straight onto the local radio and sometimes if it's late

on, close to printing time, you could end up recording what they're saying on local radio and using that . . . We know we're down the line in terms of priority. The priority now is local radio.

The sole TD who believed print media was more important provided the following rationale:

[When] something is written down it can be read a second and third time and can be read by a number of members of the family who didn't hear the radio so the paper then has this advantage . . . I suppose for the elderly population, certainly, the attachment to the [local newspaper] and to local media is very strong – they tend to read the whole paper.

For many TDs, particularly those who have a concern about political bias in the local media, radio is viewed as a fairer medium. As one TD put it:

I think you can represent yourself possibly better on local radio. At least what you say is what you mean whereas print media can change a story and they don't often represent exactly what you mean.

As the above illustrates, there is a concern that politicians are misrepresented in the print media; this is somewhat unusual given that the majority of political interviewees conceded that it is relatively easy to have press releases reproduced verbatim in newspapers. It appears that politicians feel they have more control when they are speaking live on air; however, some asserted that with radio the stakes can be higher

compared to the print media. Political interviewees observed that an interviewer can sometimes catch out an interviewee and it is not always clear who will be brought on to counter the politician's views:

TD: [The public] tend to be pass-remarkable about the performance of somebody on local radio. In other words, if you're on it, you're up there and people do scrutinise what you say and how you perform. I think people are more critical of your performance on local radio. For instance, they'd see something on your local paper and they read it and they don't seem to care as much about it, so from that point of view, the local radio is more important.

PA: With the content for radio, you've got to make sure that you're way more accurate [because] you're going on straight away and it's going out to a wider public who can ring in and can ring a forum to publicly disagree with you so you have to be more careful with radio. Local radio is far more important than any of the others . . . That is what we would feel – certainly what [the TD] would feel.

To measure the importance of local newspapers and local radio in an era where social media is growing in importance as a political communication tool (Wall and Sudulich, 2011), in 2012 TDs from the same case-studies constituencies were asked to rank, in order of importance, a series of political communication tools including local radio, local newspapers, leaflet / information drop, Facebook, Twitter, and other (to be specified by the interviewee). The results confirmed the pre-eminent place of local radio in TDs' public relations priorities. Five out of seven TDs identified local radio



as the most important tool for ongoing political communication with constituents while the remaining two TDs placed it in second place or third place. Local newspapers continue to be considered very important for a majority of TDs (four of seven placed local newspapers in first or second place in order of priority). While Twitter was at the bottom of the list of priorities for the majority of TDs, three out of seven TDs placed Facebook ahead of local newspapers in order of priority. All three stated that local newspapers were politically biased. While social media undoubtedly provides a useful, unmediated political communication tool for TDs, questions remain as to the extent to which social media is a valuable tool for communicating with constituents, whether it provides too great a platform for opponents to publicly attack TDs, and whether the amount of time that social media can take up is merited in terms of the political support it yields (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2013; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011).

### **The relationships between TDs and local media**

It is important to recognise the ‘local’ nature of the milieu that local journalists and national politicians from the same locality inhabit. Both journalist and politician are part of the local community and this produces particular outcomes. Neveu (2002, 53–54) argues that local journalism cannot be considered a variant of national journalism; rather it occupies a distinctive territory and is ruled by a relationship of dependence between journalists and their sources. Such journalist–source relationships produce ‘comprehensive’, often friendly coverage of events, as long as this does not trigger the opposition of powerful challengers in the local arena. Murphy (1976) argues that politicians and local journalists tend to have a relationship of trust as local journalists

frequently rely on politicians, among others in the community, to act as official sources. Similarly, Franklin (2004, 157) states:

Locally, politicians and journalists seem to be locked in an exchange relationship in which ‘insider’ political information is traded for access to editorial space to disseminate messages congenial to a particular candidate, policy or ideology . . . Each side gains from this exchange and has a clear interest in sustaining collaborative rather than conflictual ways of working. In this sense, news becomes a negotiated outcome of this carefully packaged exchange between politicians and journalists.

The interviews suggest that, in all cases the editors were very well acquainted with the TDs in the local area, often knowing them for many years. Many TDs work hard to cultivate a positive relationship with local media personnel for two reasons: firstly, they hope that this will help to increase their access to favourable coverage; secondly, having a good relationship with senior local media personnel allows politicians to telephone them when they are unhappy with their levels of coverage and ask that perceived imbalances in coverage are addressed. As one TD put it:

I would have placed a lot of emphasis on having a good personal relationship with the key journalists. I think that they need to know you as an individual; they need to trust you . . . and I think that you’re also more likely to get favourable coverage if you’re on a one-to-one with them.

Cultivating a positive relationship with local media can benefit a TD in a number of ways. The interviews indicate that when a positive relationship is in place, the TD can persuade a journalist to carry his/her statement. It also suggests that politicians can use the media to discredit an opponent. One editor stated that half the time, TDs telephone the media organisation with news that could discredit an opponent and the other half of the time, TDs call to promote their own statements. The interviews also indicate that TDs do not hesitate to engage directly with media personnel if they feel they are being treated unfairly. They believe that they must do so given what they perceive to be the media's significant power at local level. The media generally react positively to such reprimands. Neveu (2002, 53–67) highlights the pressure that local journalists are under not to antagonise powerful local voices upon whom they are highly dependent for news. The following statements are revealing in this context:

TD: If there's a problem from time to time I do call up the local editor or the local radio station . . . I believe that it's important to address the problem if there is one rather than actually being in confrontation with the local distributors of information.

Newspaper editor: [We] do tend to even put [slightly irrelevant press releases] in boiled down versions because if you don't the phone starts to ring and this kind of 'oh, we're not getting coverage, he's getting more coverage' begins.

Thus the personal relationships that TDs cultivate with local media personnel provide them with a mechanism to exert a certain pressure to ensure that their press releases are carried by the local newspaper / local radio station. This is a huge advantage

where TDs wish to agenda-set – that is seeking to prioritise some stories while de-prioritising others. Bennett (1996) has found that the routine practices inherent within journalism allow skilful political communicators to set the agenda.

### **The importance of press releases**

The primary tool in a TD's agenda-setting arsenal is the press release. In 2005, TDs were given the option of appointing a Parliamentary Assistant (PA); this allowed them to employ a staff member with competence in a number of areas including media and public relations. This important development facilitated the professionalization of public relations activities by TDs within their own offices and resulted in a steady stream of press releases flowing from TDs' offices to local media. As already noted, the PAs interviewed indicated that they spend 70 – 90% of their media time working on local press releases issuing an average of four each week.

Press releases are a highly effective mechanism for attaining local media coverage. In an analysis of one local newspaper in a constituency during the 1992 UK general election Franklin (1994, 166–72) found that 29 press releases from the Labour Party generated 28 stories in that local newspaper. The newspaper published at least one story based on a press release every day of the campaign. Journalistic revision of these press releases was minimal – in fact one third was reproduced verbatim and one fifth was published with modest revisions with between 50% and 75% of the original text remaining. As McNair (2003, 131) notes, this dependence on press releases is a huge asset for politicians as it constitutes free advertising but disguises their authorship role, instead placing editorial responsibility on the journalist. Franklin (2006, 13) suggests that local journalists are 'no longer engaged in critical or

investigative journalism'; rather they are on low-pay, over-worked and reliant on tools such as press releases for news. Within this context, political communications experts have identified the most effective way of attaining favourable political coverage in the local press: statements are written in a journalistic style and constructed as a news story incorporating the political party's spin on the subject. This allows newspapers to print the press releases verbatim under the by-line 'local journalist' or 'political correspondent' (Franklin, 2004, 156).

The timing of press releases differs depending on whether the TD is a member of a government or opposition party. Government party TDs have privileged access to news of departmental announcements in advance and therefore can always be first in with the news. While this gives them a huge advantage with the media as they are able to supply bona fide fresh news, in constituencies where there are a number of government party TDs this can lead to a race to be first into the radio with fresh news. As one radio head of news observed:

[Government party TDs'] offices tend to be very competitive because they will obviously have contact with the various government departments and particularly when there's a cabinet meeting on a Tuesday or Wednesday in the afternoon it's often 20 seconds between the two [press releases arriving].

Generally, the impetus for other political press releases tends to derive from issues highlighted by constituents. In the case of the opposition parties, the press offices frequently circulate standard press releases that can be adapted to fit into the context of the relevant constituency. Press officers were asked whether they issued generic

press releases to their Oireachtas members and election candidates and, if yes, how often? The following statement was among the responses:

We do that at least once or twice a week. We'd send them to our candidates in each of the constituencies. It's generally a national issue though that can be adapted for local use.

However, the success of this approach is questionable, as outlined by Negrine (2005, 103–115) and as illustrated by the quotation below from a radio head of news:

We get quite a lot of generic press releases . . . as in they are personalised from the local TDs but they are basically a press release that fits all and then they just stick the name of the local TD on to it. And they get kind of fairly short shrift from us now really because they're very recognisable, very often they come from the political party.

In the case of Fianna Fáil, in early 2007 the press office preferred to handle or at the very least be made aware of the majority of statements that TDs were issuing to local media. At that time, the Fianna Fáil press office provided a press officer to deal with all the local public relations for Oireachtas members; an approach that the Fine Gael and Labour parties did not adopt during that period. However, the success of the Fianna Fáil approach is questionable as several media interviewees referred to the failure of this strategy by claiming that when press releases were authored by someone who was not 'on the ground' in the constituency, it showed, and these press releases were of far less value than those that emanated from the TD's local office.

Most press releases issued by TDs to their local media make it into the paper or on to the radio news as fillers. Most are not ranked very highly but they serve a useful purpose: for radio they are a useful fall back when nothing more newsworthy is happening in the locality and, for newspapers, they help to fill pages where necessary. The low level of importance attributed to press releases by media personnel explains why, in the print media at least, press releases can make it into newspapers without being altered – editors have no interest in wasting a journalist’s time on such tasks. This may also explain why political press releases are not always given the prominence that politicians feel they merit within a newspaper. Asked what happens when a political press release comes in, the following were among the responses given by media personnel:

Radio head of news: We look at it. We grade it in terms of importance . . . Obviously we want to achieve maximum listenership. We say ‘is this very important to somebody?’ . . . We’d often leave it in the in-tray if we had a good news day . . . I mean, political stories, most of them are ‘in case of emergencies break glass’ . . . to be honest, that’s what they are.

Newspaper editor: First of all . . . I would download them, I would read them, I would decide where they would go in the paper, you know, depending on the nature of what it was. If it was something that I would consider very newsworthy I would allocate it to a specific page, if it was an ordinary kind of thing . . . I would put into a general news file – they may get in, they may not get in.

Thus, TDs can have a high level of control over the content of their media coverage as statements are formatted in a way that requires little journalistic intervention. This gives them the capacity to agenda-set as their statements are generally carried – despite the low level of importance the media attaches to them.

### **Perceptions of political bias**

Semetko (1996) argues that ‘objectivity’ and ‘balance’ demand contradictory practices: to be objective is to let news values determine the coverage an event receives; to be balanced is to give equal coverage to all parties in an event. This is a struggle that journalists must contend with, particularly in the local radio sector in Ireland which is required by law to be impartial, fair and unbiased. Bennett (1996) is critical of some calls for journalists to be less biased, because, he claims, the bias in question is usually ‘in the eye of the beholder’. Schmitt et al (2004) approach bias from the point of view of the reader, concluding that partisans use a process of selective categorisation in their approach to the media and that this results in their conclusion that the media is biased against their partisan point of view.

Local radio in Ireland is expressly prohibited from engaging in political bias under the Broadcasting and Wireless Telegraphy Act 1988 (as amended by the Broadcasting Act 2009), which created regulated independent local radio in Ireland. However, the vast majority of political interviewees felt that the local media was politically biased in a way that diminished coverage of their statements. There were contradictory elements to this assertion as bias was asserted by TDs from different party backgrounds in the same constituencies and, when asked what factors determined



coverage, no politician cited bias as a factor. The following replies were among those given by TDs when asked if they believed the local media exhibited political bias:

TD 1: It is [biased], without doubt. That's why there's so many PR people in place – to spin the message and to get your own share of the airwaves and the print media.

TD 2: [There] are some people in the media who just don't like Fianna Fáil . . . and that's their prerogative.

TD 3: [I] might have very strong views about for example, [a local paper] who [sic] would be . . . very anti my party even though we'd be the dominant party in the country. They would have an ethos going back the other way and they're being challenged now and I can get my point across in other media outlets so I don't have to really depend upon them. Now they have the biggest circulation but they don't dominate and control like they used to.

As is evident in the responses, Fianna Fáil TDs felt particularly aggrieved in 2007. However, when asked to clarify whether they felt the bias was anti-Fianna Fáil in a broad context or whether they felt that they were given a harder time than their Fianna Fáil colleagues, one TD admitted that he felt the bias was more geographical [i.e. press releases relevant to an area where a newspaper did not have a significant readership might be ignored] than political and another TD felt that bias was directed towards individual politicians, rather than political parties:

It's got to do with the person, I think. Some of them . . . have no difficulty coming out and being very supportive to one [fellow Fianna Fáil] TD in our area.

However, Fianna Fáil politicians were not alone in feeling that the media is biased against them as the following response from an editor demonstrates:

[At] the last election [2002] [one Opposition political party] threatened to pull their advertising, their general election coverage, because they felt that some of them were getting a raw deal.

The Parliamentary Assistants also tended to link certain papers with certain political parties:

PA (Fianna Fáil): I would find the [local paper] would be traditionally Fine Gael orientated but it's actually beginning to push a Green agenda as well and very much a Green agenda and if it's not pushing those agendas, editorially, it's certainly pushing an anti-Fianna Fáil agenda.

One PA described how this perceived bias manifests itself, outlining a typical scenario where a press release was sent into the print media and followed up with telephone calls to promote it as important but, rather than being given the prominence the PA felt the statement deserved, it would appear buried on a page with advertisements of planning notices and require real effort to find. However, as already mentioned, from the media perspective, it may be the low level of newsworthiness in

a political press release that results in its relegation to a less prominent location in the newspaper and the sole reason for its inclusion may be because of the personal relationship between the TD and editor.

Media professionals were also asked for their views on whether political bias was present in the local media. The majority expressed the view that bias was not one of the factors that prevented a TD from getting coverage but that TDs did not understand this. They pointed instead to constraints such as news values and the newspaper's size. Interestingly, while five out of six PAs believed that the media is politically biased, when asked to identify what factors determine coverage they often echoed the media professionals' views, citing space constraints, having local content, having controversial content, when the TD last appeared in the paper, and timing. When asked if the local media was biased, media personnel responded as follows:

Newspaper editor: I don't know; it seems to me that to succeed in politics, you basically have to have a very high paranoia and then politics makes you more paranoid . . . they study the media closely, and Fianna Fáil are convinced that I'm a Blueshirt, the Blueshirts are convinced that I'm Fianna Fáil or Green or whatever, they all have their pathetic little theories . . . It's about stories . . . And that's the mistake that the poor old TDs can't quite understand; they think that we're there to give everyone a fair crack of the whip; we're not.

Radio head of news: [We're] driven by news values and in terms of the talk programmes . . . we're driven to some extent by people who are going to be

interesting and are going to say stuff that's interesting but we're always reviewing and balancing and, you know, it's swings and roundabouts.

Radio head of news: We very much strive for balance . . . it's different to a newspaper – a newspaper can take a political stand but a radio station has a licence from the government to provide information and we have to, I take that very seriously and any suggestion of political bias I would take very seriously because I try to be fair.

While radio heads of news pointed to the legal requirement for balanced coverage, the three newspaper editors interviewed gave varied responses. One stated that he tried to be balanced and fair; the other two stated that newsworthiness won out over the need to be balanced. One editor pointed to the fact that newspapers did not have the same obligations as radio to be balanced:

I don't believe a newspaper is there – we're not a public broadcaster, we aren't – thank God – funded by the taxpayer so we've no obligations. If I decided tomorrow that I wanted to pursue a Sinn Féin policy, I would. That's totally my prerogative and the only consideration is whether the readership would get annoyed and leave in droves so, no, if anybody gave us five good stories I would use them. I'm interested in news stories I don't care about their providence.

The point was also made that it was difficult to reconcile being politically balanced when some TDs were excellent and proactive sources of news while others were not:

Radio head of news: [People] who give you particularly good hard information and hard stories and have something to say about it, over the period or a political and a broadcasting year, you'd have to say that if they're creating news [is it fair to limit their coverage?] because to balance it artificially would actually be artificial.

In general, sending in a large number of press releases appears to be a successful strategy:

Newspaper editor: [There] is no doubt that the TDs who put out a regular stream of press releases get much more publicity than those who don't. It's indicative of a mindset you know . . . People who put out press releases, it's indicative of somebody who wants to reach out to the community and naturally that kind of a personality is going to get more coverage than a hermit.

Local news is the currency of local media, a point emphasised by Franklin (2004), Negrine (2005), and Chantler and Harris (1997). All the media interviewees emphasised that the more local a story is, the more likely it was to be printed or broadcast for a variety of reasons, including the role of national media in reporting national news, the news value of local news for local media, and the potential legal and financial risks associated with reporting more controversial issues:

Newspaper editor: You see sometimes we would get a press release on maybe the Taoiseach says something in such-and-such a place – say for example the

Northern thing was going on – we would get press releases from local TDs or Oireachtas members welcoming the announcement of what happened in the North and complimenting Bertie [Ahern] and, to me, for a local paper, that isn't of great news value because that has been paraded in all the [national] papers.

Newspaper editor: Our role is to celebrate the community, to hold a mirror up to it, to inform people about what's going on, and the local panto is just as important and just as likely to move and excite people as the knowledge that a councillor has taken £100. Both belong in the newspaper but, you know, that's what the national newspapers are there for – they have the resources, they have the lawyers to protect them and they have the funds to pay out the outrageous libel amounts that they have to pay out. We don't.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that, even with the advent of social media, local media, particularly local radio, remain at the heart of the local political communication process. TDs view a strong presence in the constituency as a vital component of electoral success and the local media offer an excellent conduit through which TDs can publicise their views on a range of topical issues affecting the constituency and highlight their work at constituency level and at national level when it is relevant to the constituency. Local media constitute a subtle and somewhat covert publicity tool for TDs who, by and large, are able to have their press statements reproduced verbatim in local newspapers. The factors that combine to facilitate this process are: the low level of importance generally attached by media personnel to political press releases and their

concomitant willingness to use them as ‘fillers’ and, the politician’s ability to exploit their knowledge of newsrooms by taking into account factors such as local content, time, newsworthiness and formatting. Politicians demonstrate the value they place on local media by sending in a steady stream of press releases each week. This practice has become consistent and professionalized since the appointment of Parliamentary Assistants in 2005, the majority of whom dedicate a notable proportion of their time each week to public relations with the local media. These appointments, therefore, constitute a key juncture in contemporary political communication at constituency level.

The interviews that I have conducted suggest that politicians are highly attuned to their media coverage and while they recognise the importance of news values, many are convinced that political bias exists in the local print media and that this bias diminishes their coverage. Such sensitivities persist despite there being scant evidence that political press releases are altered by local journalists. Despite the pitfalls of local radio (a difficult interview / an unknown opponent), TDs feel more in control in such immediate media encounters. The importance of local media from the point of view of TDs and political parties generally points to a pressing need to conduct more research into its practices and culture. Transparency in respect of practices and procedures will enhance democracy by facilitating a more informed electorate that is aware that there is often more to what appears in the local newspaper or on local radio than meets the eye or ear.

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