

Perestroika and the Town Hall Pravdas

A code limiting the frequency of council publications has brought some local papers and local authorities closer together. Jon Slattery looks at a few of the success stories

The regional press has won a resounding victory in its battle against newspapers and glossy magazines produced by councils – the so-called ‘Town Hall Pravdas’.

Communities secretary Eric Pickles has championed the regional publishers’ claim that some council publications were masquerading as local newspapers and taking advertising revenue needed to support an independent press whose job it is to keep an eye on council affairs.

Pickles has introduced a new code that restricts the frequency of council publications to just four a year.

Now the local press has won the war, the question is can it win the peace? Or, at least, a healthy piece of revenue by running branded council pages, special supplements and statutory public notice ads?

The opportunity of picking up revenue from councils at a time when classified adverts are under threat from the internet could be a vital lifeline for the local press.

The relationship between councils and the local press is not always an easy one.

It was claims of constant negative reporting by the local press that led some councillors to back their own publications in a bid to show councils in a more positive light.

The Newspaper Society, which ran a campaign to restrict the scope of council publications, says it doesn’t have any specific guidelines on the issue of council material being placed in the local press and claims it is a matter for each newspaper and their local authorities.

NS communications director Lynne Anderson says: “The new Local Authority Publicity Code allows the majority of responsible councils across the country to continue to communicate with their

taxpayers using their own newsletters or publications issued up to four times a year, or working in partnership with their local paper to produce properly branded council supplements or sections that appear within or alongside the local paper.”

One of the biggest turnarounds in relations between the local press and a council is the partnership deal achieved by Trinity Mirror’s Fulham & Hammersmith Chronicle and Hammersmith & Fulham Council after the authority axed its controversial H&F News.

The fortnightly H&F News had been highlighted in the campaign against council newspapers as the type of publication that too closely aped the local press by carrying features such as what’s on pages and sports news.

The Chronicle had even launched a campaign against H&F News, called ‘Proper Papers Not Propaganda’, saying it was designed to look like an independent newspaper but was written by spin doctors.

In April, the Chronicle agreed a £75,000-a-year, six-year deal with Hammersmith & Fulham Council to publish public notices and other material in the paper.

Despite the ‘previous war of words, Hammersmith & Fulham council leader Stephen Greenhalgh says: “This agreement is a positive step forward for the borough’s

“There are clear dangers in failing to distinguish between independent and paid-for editorial”



residents as we have secured an effective way of communicating our news, while delivering real value for money. It illustrates our commitment to supporting a vibrant independently produced newspaper.”

Not everyone agrees. Labour MP for Hammersmith Andy Slaughter has complained some council material in the Chronicle is not clearly identified as advertising, that guidelines on the frequency of publication were being breached because council advertorials were appearing every week and has alleged the council’s large advertising and communications contract is impacting on editorial independence.

Responding to the criticisms, Hammersmith & Fulham Chronicle editor Adrian Seal told Press Gazette: “We take very seriously our role as an independent newspaper. Our reporting team are clear they report without fear or favour in the interests of the community we serve.”

The Southwark News has also had to defend itself, after Lib Dem councillor Jeremy Clyne “called in” the decision allowing Lambeth Council to go into partnership with the paper. He claims the council will “gain a substantial degree of control over the operations and policies of the company, and guarantee favourable coverage of its policies and actions”.

Southwark News joint managing director Kevin Quinn said of Councillor Clyne: “He has got slightly confused. It’s not editorial;



it’s advertorial and will clearly be marked as advertorial.”

Despite such deals, it is not all sweetness and light between local councils and regional publishers. According to the NS, many councils still produce publications more often than quarterly, and it claims at least 25 councils are publishing 10 times a year or more, in defiance of the new code.

Although the code doesn’t specifically ban third-party advertising in local authority publications and websites, the NS argues that the Government’s clear intention is to stop local authorities from competing unfairly with independent local newspapers by regulating frequency, content and appearance of local authority publications as well as websites. The NS plans to raise this issue with Eric Pickles.

Peter Barron, editor of the Northern Echo, says there are new opportunities for the regional press but editorial independence must be safeguarded. “There is a way forward here as long as the editorial independence of newspapers is preserved,” he says. “There are clear dangers in failing to distinguish between independent and paid-for editorial. Newspapers will need to be very clear that the pages involved in any deal are paid for by the local authority. It will also be important that it is restricted to pure information, rather than being politicised.”

“But we are in challenging times and new ways of thinking will have to be

Hammersmith & Fulham Council axed H&F News (far left) and has agreed a deal to have public notices and other material published in Trinity Mirror’s Fulham & Hammersmith Chronicle

adopted. What is clear is that councils can’t go on competing with their local papers by putting out glossy magazines full of political propaganda, distributed with the help of taxpayers’ money, and soaking up diminishing advertising revenue. It is right that the councils are reined in and it is right to look at how they can work with local newspapers instead of against them.”

A period of glasnost and perestroika between the regional press and the one-time publishers of the ‘Town Hall Pravdas’ could help sustain local newspapers in the future and their vital role in covering council affairs. But how ready will the councils be to feed the watchdog that bites them?

Neil Benson, editorial director of Trinity Mirror Regionals, says: “The trend of co-operation should be good for all concerned. Councils will benefit from a more effective means of reaching the public, publishers will make an honest buck from providing a service we are uniquely well-placed to offer and the public will see their money is being spent more cost-effectively. They will also be able to identify what is paid content and what is not, which is clearly a much healthier situation than we had until recently.”

“Of course, it is essential that newspapers are careful to separate the commercial relationship from their ‘watchdog’ role, but that isn’t new territory for us.

“As any advertising director will tell you, there are numerous examples of editors running stories that show high-spending commercial clients in an unflattering light. The same rules will apply to the arrangements with local authorities, as has already been demonstrated since our titles struck their deal with Hammersmith & Fulham Council.”

Jon Slattery is a freelance media journalist who blogs about journalism at jonslattery.blogspot.com

How local press and councils are co-operating

Hammersmith & Fulham
Contract with Trinity Mirror Southern for Fulham & Hammersmith Chronicle to carry branded council news, plus council advertising that was previously going into the council’s fortnightly H&F News – now closed down.

Southwark
Council paper Lambeth Life closed down. Independent local paper the Southwark News’ Weekender title carrying council news in a deal said to be worth up to £1 million.

North Yorkshire
North Yorkshire County Council has axed its monthly NY Times and is considering various options, including a trial with Newsquest and Johnston Press to publish council information in weekly titles and the Yorkshire Post.

North Lanarkshire
Lanarkshire Extra has a contract with North Lanarkshire Council to publish a council newspaper supplement nine times a year.

St Albans
St Albans District Council publishes its Community News up to six times a year as a wrap around the Herts Advertiser.

Blackpool
The Blackpool Gazette has created supplements for Blackpool and Wyre Councils.

Doncaster
The Doncaster Free Press, in conjunction with an arm of the local council, launched the monthly Doncaster at Work promoting examples of Doncaster people and their success stories after becoming self-employed.

East Sussex
Two press and council partnerships, “Get the Eastbourne Buzz” and “Hastings – We Can Do It”, involve editorial support of council and social initiatives. This has led to talks of Eastbourne Borough Council’s bi-annual newspaper being published as an Eastbourne Herald insert.

Preston/Burnley
Partnership formed between local paper and Lancashire County Council, illustrated by a joint campaign giving advice for people to get back into employment. Lancashire County Council cut publication of council newsletter from 12 editions per year to two.