

Urban Political Economy, 'New Urban Politics' and the Media: Insights and Limits

KEVIN WARD

Abstract

This essay considers how a particular set of urban political literatures have dealt with the role of 'the media'. I argue that they have tended to concentrate on 'local' newspapers and that the role of the media — rather than just that of local newspapers — remains under-theorized.

Introduction

Within the US urban political economy tradition — broadly defined — there is a history stretching back to the early 1960s of research into city politics. From the seminal contributions of Dahl (1961) and Banfield and Wilson (1963) through to those made more recently by Logan and Molotch (1987), Cox and Mair (1988), Harvey (1989) and Stone (1989), political economists have grappled with how best to explain the governance of cities. Within this body of work the last 20 years have witnessed an emphasis on what Cox (1993) terms the 'New Urban Politics (NUP)' — 'a focus on the local politics of business and the importance of local elites', according to Cochrane (1999: 111). Most centrally, urban growth coalition and urban regime theories have sought to capture the means through which different groups unite to form governing alliances, echoing earlier community power debates around 'who governs?'. In this short essay I consider how this particular set of literatures has dealt with the role of 'the media', which has been primarily through its focus on 'local' newspapers. This emphasis is understandable, reflecting as it does the particular US context at the time, with many cities being host to large independently owned newspapers. While I acknowledge the insights from these literatures, I also argue that the role of the media — rather than just that of local newspapers — remains under-theorized, as do the consequences of changes in the production of news for the practicing of urban politics.

Urban political economy, 'New Urban Politics' and the media: insights

Urban political economists interested in the governance of cities and the politics of development have sought to answer the question 'who governs?' through examining the underlying rationale behind the formation of territorial alliances and the way they are held together. Against a backdrop of geographically uneven development, this work has questioned the emergence of particular modes of governance as part of the expansion of the capitalist system. One aspect of this work has considered the roles played by local newspapers as they unite alongside city government, property developers and others to

capture and retain flows of capital. For example, in their classic study of US city politics, Banfield and Wilson (1963) highlight the two functions of the metropolitan newspaper. On the one hand, they argue, it performs as a political institution, involving itself in a myriad of ways in various aspects of local decision-making. On the other, it is a business that employs workers and has to manage a payroll, in many cases being accountable to shareholders. In their view, to understand the civic role played by the newspaper it is necessary to keep these two functions in mind, although they do not always work in unison. In some cases tensions become apparent.

As to why local newspapers involve themselves in the urban politics of growth, Cox and Mair (1988: 307, original emphasis) have argued that local newspapers are *locally dependent*, by which they mean:

The *idea* of local dependence . . . signifies the dependence of various actors — capitalist firms, politicians, people — on the reproduction of certain social relations within a particular territory . . . local dependence . . . provides a basis for the suspension of conflict in favour of a solidarity within each locality: a solidarity that can then be turned against the locally dependent in other localities.

The notion of local dependence — or of a degree of spatial immobility — is argued to stem from a range of factors, from the relative immobility of built environment investments to the relative non-substitutability of localized exchange linkages. It provides the abstract underpinnings of both the urban growth coalition and urban regime theories, explaining why, in both cases, a range of actors come together to protect 'local' interests and values (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989). Cox and Mair (1988: 309) argue that:

The local newspaper company, dependent on the brand loyalty of readers and advertisers and operating in a set territory, is one of the clearest cases of a firm that is locally dependent as a result of geographically limited and non-substitutable commodity exchanges.

This sense of being territorially embedded is also advanced by Logan and Molotch (1987: 70). They argue that 'most newspapers . . . profit primarily from increasing their circulation and therefore have a direct interest in growth' and that 'the newspaper's assets in physical plant, in "good will", and in advertising clients are, for the most part, immobile'. Within territorial alliances that form to protect the interests of the locality, the involvement of the newspaper is argued to be like no other. Rather than being interested in the 'specific patterns of growth' (*ibid.*: 70), the newspaper is understood to be motivated by growth *per se*. This is its only 'axe to grind', but one that, according to Logan and Molotch (1987: 71), 'holds the community elite together'. It supports, in the words of Swanstrom (1985: 35), a 'growth ideology', through evoking notions of civic pride, passing off political issues as technical ones and focusing on symbolic rather than distributional issues (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Thomas, 1995).

In terms of the types of roles newspapers perform in territorial alliances, much of this work has argued that they have an interest in growth *per se*:

A newspaper's essential role is not to protect a given firm or industry . . . but to bolster and maintain the predisposition for general growth (Logan and Molotch, 1987: 72)

This is in contrast to being for or against particular patterns or types of growth. As a result this affords them 'a statesman like position in the community' (Logan and Molotch 1987: 71). This involves the construction and maintenance of a set of stable, longer-term relationships to deliver 'more properly planned growth' (*ibid.*: 71). The local newspaper also plays a unique role *vis-à-vis* mediating between the growth strategy and the various publics, from local residents to property developers. Particularly, according to this work, it plays an 'invaluable role in coordinating strategy and selling growth to the public'

(*ibid.*: 72). It is thus involved in representational politics, mediating an alliance's strategies in such a way as to mobilize a support consensus.

Urban political economy, 'New Urban Politics' and the media: Limits

The urban political economy conceptualization of the place of the media in the New Urban Politics has generated a whole series of insights. It is not without its limits, however, and I want to highlight two. First, the literature tends to focus squarely on the local newspaper, in no small part due to the emergence of this work in a context in which the city newspaper was an important political actor in US cities. While this may still be the case in some places, there is now a need to rethink understandings of 'the media'. A range of media technologies plays a role in the construction and reporting of news in a way that wasn't the case 25 years ago. Second, the literature tends to have sidestepped issues of how the news gets made. And yet changes within the media industry over the last three decades have rendered this omission highly problematic. What changing ownership patterns in the newspaper industry mean for how 'local' managers in wider corporate networks relate to the place in which they are located has yet to be analysed. And the changing conditions under which professional journalists work cannot but have had a number of consequences for the type of 'news' they produce, which is likely to be bound up with changing definitions and understandings of what is newsworthy (Burgess, 1985), and hence, the representation of urban politics.

Conclusion

Urban political economists working on issues of politics and power in the city have conceived of the local newspaper as one of a number of actors involved in territorial growth alliances. This work has generated a series of insights into the newspaper as a political institution. It has revealed their embedded nature and their role in pursuing growth strategies and in the capturing of capital. There is, though, more to 'the media' than the newspaper, more to 'urban politics' than the politics of growth. My sympathetic critique has highlighted how a more expansive conceptualization of 'the media' might inform future work into urban politics from a political economy perspective.

Kevin Ward (Kevin.ward@manchester.ac.uk), Geography, School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.

References

- Banfield, E.C. and J.Q. Wilson (1963) *City politics*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Burgess, J.A. (1985) News from nowhere: the press, the riots and the myth of the inner city. In J.A. Burgess and J. Gold (eds.), *Geography, the media and popular culture*, Croon Helm, London.
- Cochrane, A. (1999) Redefining urban politics for the twenty first century. In A.E.G. Jonas and D. Wilson (eds.), *The urban growth machine: critical perspectives two decades later*, State University Press, Albany, NY.
- Cox, K.R. (1993) The local and the global in the New Urban Politics: a critical review. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11.4, 433–48.
- Cox, K.R. and A. Mair (1988) Locality and community in the politics of economic

- development. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78.3, 307–25.
- Dahl, R.A. (1961) *Who governs?* Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Harvey, D. (1989) From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B Human Geography* 71.1, 3–17.
- Logan, J.R. and H.L. Molotch (1987) *Urban fortunes: the political economy of place*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Stone, C. (1989) *Regime politics: governing Atlanta 1946–1988*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.
- Swanstrom T. (1985) *The crisis of growth politics*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Thomas, H. (1995) The local press and urban renewal: a South Wales case study. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 18.3, 315–33.

Résumé

Ce travail porte sur la façon dont un ensemble donné de textes de politique urbaine a traité le rôle des 'médias'. L'auteur montre que ces textes se sont plutôt attachés aux journaux 'locaux' et que le rôle des médias – mais pas seulement celui des journaux locaux – reste peu théorisé.