

Chapter 9

Inspection and the Media: The Media and Inspection

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Introduction

The power of the media has increased considerably in recent years, perhaps especially where there has been change in the provision of public services designed to enhance consumer choice (Anderson 2007; Opfer 2007). Against that background, media – of different kinds, from social media platforms like mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com) to broadcast media and the popular press (national and local) carry information and discussion of school inspection. In our research, we found the most intense media activity relating to inspection to occur in relation to Ofsted: although inspection featured in the national and local press in Sweden (see Rönnberg *et al.* 2013) and in Scotland, the level of activity was not as high as in England.

Indeed in the UK context, and perhaps especially in England, for some time now, controversy around press/media freedom and the effects on it of governments attempts to ‘spin’ policy have generated considerable debate. Analysis of the use of the media to ‘spin’ policy has a long history in media and cultural studies (Wodak & Richardson 2013), and the activities of the PM Blair’s UK New Labour governments of 1997-2007 provided a considerable amounts of source material, as these administrations were very active in their attempts to manage and use the media (Campbell 2008). Indeed the extent of spin, combined with increasingly sensationalist reporting in a highly competitive market has led in England to lack of public confidence in the tradition of independent enquiry by a free (i.e. unregulated) press, reflected in and added to by the revelations of phone hacking through public inquiries such as Leveson (Leveson 2012).

Indeed the influence of an increasingly sensationalist, celebrity obsessed press on politics and policy has been described as the ‘tabloidization of political communication’ (Holly 2008). Holly’s analysis identifies the colonization of the political by the media system, such that

tabloidization leads to spectacle, dramatization and aestheticization. He argues that ‘depoliticized contexts’ and ‘politainment’ blur the divisions between popular culture and the information content of political news so as to elicit an emotional response rather than an informed one, and thus the potential of the press to contribute to informed public opinion and civic engagement is eroded. In the policy field of education, the media – in its evolving forms, which include increasingly pervasive forms of social media – are heavily involved in promoting and to a lesser degree, evaluating or interrogating policy (Wallace 2007), but as we shall see, this contribution is often unbalanced and uninformative. Moreover recent developments in the use of social media and web-based applications bring new players to the scene; different institutions and agencies are now able to develop sophisticated media strategies that amplify their messages while also attempting to dilute criticism of their operations.

Research on the media’s role in policy is long-established (see for example Fitzgerald & Housley 2009; Gerstl-Pepin 2007; Gewirtz *et al.* 2007; Wallace 2007), but there has not been so much attention to the relationship between inspectorates and media. In this chapter, we argue that inspectorates depend on the media: the capacity of the media to publicise and spread their messages about school success and failure contributes very strongly to their influence. However it also seems to be the case that as inspectorates use and exploit the media to spread their messages about school performance, and thus buttress their authority and greatly extend their reach beyond the education world, they also become vulnerable to media pressure and – to a degree – reliant on media coverage to sustain their authority. In other words, there is an interdependent relationship between inspection and the media, in which media priorities may adversely affect the image of inspection. Thus while Ofsted has become highly visible and a topic of household conversation, greatly increasing its presence in the lives of parents, pupils and teachers, this is especially the case where stories of school success and failure are presented in highly dramatic terms (as victories, defeats, struggles and disasters). There are obvious risks for Ofsted in this presentation of their work: pressure to find stories that will attract coverage undermines attention to the substantial but more mundane aspects of inspection, and creates expectations of powerful inspection effects. Indeed negative media coverage of schools ‘in crisis’ reinforces the demand for political action, and heightens the perception of inspectorates as a force for powerful, effective intervention. There is, moreover, a pre-occupation in the tabloid press with reporting ‘bad news’, so that dramatic coverage of failing schools reinforces public perception of schooling

in crisis and contributes to pressure on inspectorates. Against such a background, it is apparent that the relationship with the media is complex, and that it plays a significant role in our analysis of inspection as a governing practice.

In this chapter we first look at media coverage of inspection (focusing largely on the Press) in all three national contexts, but especially in England, before discussing the use of newer communication forms, especially websites, by inspectorates themselves. In the final section of the chapter we focus on the ways in which incorporation of public opinion is attempted via media channels and the ways in which this is then interpreted by parents and other stakeholders.

[Inspection in the Media in the three national contexts](#)

Here we first focus on the local press in Sweden: there are a very large number of newspapers based in the localities. In an article based on our research focusing on the relationship between Swedish School inspection and these local newspapers, we described the dual and often paradoxical nature of the relationship between inspectorate and these media. We found numerous newspaper articles reporting on the outcomes of inspection, the content of which is based on reports and press releases issued by the inspectorate. The local press in Sweden attempts to both format and re-present inspection data—they did not simply report it as provided to them. The media here act as a gatekeeper to the inspectorate but at the same time also rely on receiving information from the inspectorate in order to do their reporting (Rönnerberg *et al.* 2013). This Swedish inspector explains how this relationship of mutual dependence works in practice, as internal communication strategies are supported by stories in the conventional press:

Media was somehow the ones who helped to direct attention to what really needed to be changed. So media was a friend. (Inspector, November 2010)

In fact, the ability to reach out and to attract media attention is described as a sign of success by the inspectorate:

Different media, that is radio, TV and newspapers have lined up to receive these press releases and shown a great interest in our conclusions. And that of course has to do with education being such a hot topic in Sweden. (Inspector, October 2010)

In England the relationship between the media and Ofsted is, as we indicated earlier, strongly shaped by developments in the character of the tabloid press, faced with transnational competition and the development of social media and its constant search for stories of scandal, drama and disaster to boost circulation, a search which has led to public condemnation of some intrusive and illegal journalistic practices such as phone hacking (see Leveson 2012). This search for sensationalism – requiring ever-more dramatic stories – leads to the presentation of Ofsted reports by the tabloid and even the broadsheet press (nationally and locally) in strident and exaggerated terms. Every good grade becomes a ‘triumph’ or a ‘delight’ while less successful schools face a ‘blitz’ by inspectors (www.independent.co.uk/news/education). As one former journalist told us, ‘whenever there was a bad Ofsted report you knew it would be a good story.’ (EP42). Critical reporting of Ofsted’s work tends to come from the broadsheets and the specialist education press and to focus on issues such as teacher stress, inspector ineptitude and accusations of political partiality (see for example Abrams 2012; Bousted 2012; Coughlan & Harrison 2013).

The Scottish press is a hybrid of Scottish-based national newspapers (3 national papers and 8 regional) along with Scottish editions of UK papers such as the Times, Express and the Scottish Sun (which has the largest circulation in Scotland). Press coverage of inspections and the inspectorate tends to focus on individual school reports, and the language of triumph and disaster is also present here, but without the militaristic references. Discussion of broader issues is largely confined to the specialist press (i.e. the Times Education Supplement Scotland).

The three inspectorates, then, occupy rather different spaces in relation to media reporting of their activities, and this different positioning also affects their capacity to use the media to present policy and the ways in which they, through their work, contribute to policy direction. In Sweden, the Inspectorate’s own ‘very deliberate media strategy’ (Inspector, March 2011) plays an important role in legitimating the agency’s work. As one inspector told us that:

It is particularly important for a new national agency, to legitimate both the commission and position by openly showing what it is doing. (October 2010)

This need to show the importance of their work is echoed by Ofsted, as a senior officer reported to us that:

We have no fear or favour cos we publish everything, but we are consistently aware that what we do publish has to be rigorous and robust. (Senior Inspector, April 2011)

Indeed, in an attempt to ensure that the public understood the work that Ofsted does, a pupil letter was developed to communicate inspection findings to pupils in a form and language that was direct and easy to assimilate. Communicating with a diverse public has challenged the agency as this quotation illustrates:

My husband [a teacher] was recently asked by a parent in a school to explain the [Ofsted] report because she didn't understand it. Well the report was a school that was in a category [special measures] and the parent hadn't picked up on that in the reading of it. (Lead Inspector, July 2011)

The pupil letter is, in fact, often read by parents who find the content of the actual reports too confusing.

The public involvement team, they do research on the reading of the [inspection reports]: who reads them: the pupil letter is read by parents, we know that. (Senior Inspector, April 2011)

The anxieties that inspectorates feel about conveying complex outcomes to a lay audience and also ensuring that inspection judgements are 'transparent' present substantial challenges to all three inspectorates. Considerable resources are devoted to the publication of reports (on the Ofsted website) and to making them accessible to a very wide audience (the database is searchable in a variety of ways). Ofsted has a media centre producing large numbers of press releases, videos and podcasts, and a twitter account (Ofsted news). The Ofsted news site is divided into items tailored for 'professionals' and 'service users', and there is a searchable database of recent news items that covers all the areas for which Ofsted is responsible (i.e. from child minders to further education). There is, then, a very significant investment in dissemination of information through the Ofsted website to a variety of audiences about Ofsted's work. In the next section we shift the focus to the inspectorates' projection of their activities through their websites.

Websites as windows of legitimation

One of the most potent aspects of the inspectorates' communication strategies and concomitant legitimation of their practices is to be found in the ways in which they employ their websites. The growth of the Ofsted website as a communication vehicle began shortly after the inception of the agency in 1992 (Maclure 2000). Early iterations focused primarily on the site as a repository: a storage facility for inspection reports and other documentation central to the inspection process. Figure one illustrates the ways in which the website has developed from being a simple repository in 1998 to the more sophisticated and extensive version of 2005. Figure two illustrates the vast multimedia exercise that is articulated through the present website; its iconographic images and multifunctional approach (Baxter 2014).

[Figure 1 inserted about here]

These changes are not purely a result of technological advance but also reflect the ways in which the interface and structure have changed in order to present the changing role and work of the agency. The web-based articulation of the agency's work began in earnest in 2005 with the implementation of the 'Successful Schools' search facility. Within this, schools judged by Ofsted as successful were presented in searchable form on the Ofsted website. This development also constituted the beginnings of becoming a 'one stop shop' for parents making choices of their children's schooling (a topic we return to below).

This move reflected the growing influence of the agency in creating and disseminating definitions of success and failure, particularly in the light of its extended remit as a result of the Education Act 2005, which widened its brief to include pre-school childcare provision and adult learning and skills (Parliament 2005). Although Ofsted and HMI had produced thematic reports on aspects of education, the topics of these reports from this time onwards became far broader: ranging from standards in care provision, leadership and management to pedagogy in specific subject areas. This approach considerably enlarged the inspectorate's potential audience, as one Senior HMI told us; '45% of people have heard of Ofsted, that's pretty high for an inspectorate' (April 2011).

[Figure 2 inserted about here]

The Ofsted website is constructed as a vehicle of transparency: a fundamental element in public service inspection (Boyne *et al.* 2002; Clarke 2008) but this multi-functional web presence is also central to the way in which Ofsted seeks to persuade a number of target audiences-policy makers, professionals and parents-of the importance of their work, and of its validity as a representation of schooling. The Scottish inspectorate's web presence (at Education Scotland) contrast with that of Ofsted, in that the inspectorate there is framed within the wider setting of Education Scotland, a location that can be seen in the menu bar which places inspection alongside other tabs: curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment, supporting learners and community learning. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education is thus appropriately (in the Scottish context – see Chapter 5) represented as an integral part of education, supporting learning and teaching, it also stands as part of the national framing of Education Scotland, itself projecting, in its very name, an inclusive identity in 'supporting lives through learning'.

As well as providing a platform for domestic self-presentation, the websites also constitute a fundamental element within inspectorates' international communication strategies (Grek 2013). This element of our research analysed the ways in which the Scottish Inspectorate presented its work to a group of Romanian delegates and considers how they frame their work and reference the particular values and assumptions upon which their inspection practices are predicated. As she reports:

This is a story ...decorated with national myths and symbolsEmbellished with Scottish flags and thistles and pointing to a future that is 'not what it was. (Grek 2014, under review)

International projection of particular values also features in Ofsted's use of its website to explain inspection practices to overseas visitors, as one senior HMI describes:

Other countries are fascinated by the public accountability aspect of having everything on a website; the key message here is there is nothing we don't share... They [inspectorates in other countries] can't believe how much is up there. (July 2011)

Indeed, it seems to be the case that following recent stories in the Swedish press highlighting what appear to be inspection malpractice, the Swedish inspectorate is investing more in many of the tools that appear on the Ofsted website in order to promote its message more directly to the Swedish public. Education is a hot topic in all three countries, with public opinion polls indicating a considerable upturn in public interest in education particularly within the period 2000-2013 (see for example HMIe 2011; Rönnerberg 2012; Nelson 2012).

As indicated, websites and online tools provide the opportunity for the inspectorates to publish and promote their work. The apparent openness, sharing and transparency of the websites has considerable governing potential. One illustrative Swedish example is an online interactive tool called 'Check your school' that is aimed at school managers and head teachers. This tool allows a head teacher to 'see how well your school would do in an inspection' as it builds on what is investigated in the current inspection framework.

An even more direct example of use of the web to communicate with the target audience is Ofsted's Parent View (<http://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/>). Parent View, according to Ofsted:

...gives you the chance to tell us what you think about your child's school. Parent View asks for your opinion on 12 aspects of your child's school, from the quality of teaching, to dealing with bullying and poor behaviour. If your child is at a boarding or a residential special school, it also asks for your opinion on five aspects of your child's boarding or welfare. We will use the information you provide when making decisions about which schools to inspect, and when.

By sharing your views, you'll be helping your child's school to improve. You will also be able to see what other parents have said about your child's school. Or, if you want to, view the results for any school in England.

The data presented on this site are supposed to inform inspection decisions, but they are quite difficult to interpret (the number of respondents can be quite small, and data can include such findings as 53% of parents thinking that teaching is good, but 87% recommending the school to others). It seems likely that Parent View exists primarily to legitimate Ofsted, to support its claims to be what UK Prime Minister John Major termed, 'the parents friend' (Major 1991). By constructing this site, Ofsted aligns itself with parents, and of course, constructs a very direct disciplinary force exerted, through parents, on the school. This framing of the parental experience, and its translation into statistical data represents a substantial shift in the way in

which Ofsted frames its communication with parents. By cutting out the medium of schools and Local Education Authorities the agency can deliver direct messages to parents that are framed by the agency's own work.

In Sweden, since the inception of the new Swedish Inspectorate in 2008, the communication with parents increasingly reflects its new legal focus. The new Inspectorate includes what is termed The Children and School Pupils Ombudsman (in Swedish: Barn-och elevombudsmannen-BEO) set up to 'safeguard the rights of children and pupils' (Swedish Parliament 2009). BEO investigates complaints about offensive treatment and can represent individual children and pupils. A former editor of one of the major Swedish newspapers reported this as a move towards seeking litigation rather than collaboration (Bergström 2010). This reflects the powers of the Swedish inspectorate to impose fines and close schools in cases of judgements of performance that fall below standards. Part of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI) website is explicitly devoted to parents who can click a link to file a complaint against a school or a municipality. The agency then addresses that parent directly. Among the examples given of situations where parents can use this facility are instances where: 'you feel that your son is not receiving enough help and support to manage certain tasks at school, or that your daughter is being teased and the staff are not doing anything about it' (Skolinspektionen 2013).

In common with Sweden, Education Scotland has a formal system of issuing a press release following publication of each inspection report. The releases follow a prescribed format, reporting under two sub-headings: 'Key Strengths' and 'What happens at the end of the inspection' (Education Scotland 2013). This approach reflects the emphasis that HMIE places on communicating with its stakeholders in accessible language. The Swedish Inspectorate shares the same ambition, but an important difference is that the Swedish press releases (and inspection reports) do not inform their readers about strengths but only discuss problems and deficiencies in the school's performance.

The Scottish Inspectorate's web communication strategy reflects its developmental approach; rather than segmenting communication aimed at parents and that aimed at professionals as in the Ofsted website, it employs an integrative approach in which terminology, key documents and other reports are expressed in terms aimed at both lay person and professional. This approach is also reflected in the simple and consistent structure of each post-inspection press release. This integrative approach reflects the partnership ethos being promoted by the

inspectorate and the wider Education Scotland and is the result of a consultation carried out in 2010 which recommended far greater levels of parental inclusion in the inspection process (Street 2010).

All three web presences are to some extent complemented by additional social networking devices: Twitter feeds, links to Facebook and other applications are designed to bring these formal and regulatory authorities into the homes and personal spaces of their publics. As an Ofsted media strategist informed us: 'We have 25 thousand followers now on Twitter, and those numbers are growing,' (Ofsted Officer, November 2012). What impact these media will have on the governing work of inspectorates is as yet uncertain.

Spinning

The media strategies of the inspectorates are, as we have seen, a sophisticated mix of multi-media presentations as well as engagement with conventional media outlets. Some of the most powerful of the interventions made by Ofsted are in the form of statements made by successive Chief Inspectors. These occur in various settings, from official reports such as Annual Reports (see for example Wilshaw 2012) to regular newspaper columns, blogs and Twitter feeds. When reported in the broadsheets, official statements are structured to follow the conventions of hard news reporting, they 'begin with a news lead, which presents the information deemed to be most newsworthy, the account then proceeds to structure the remaining details in a descending order of discursive (and usually ideological) significance' (Allan 1999: 83). An official describes how this works in practice:

We produce survey reports on themes or topics, on the curriculum or yesterday the extent to which non-selective schools are developing their most able. Then a national director will comment and we will look to generate wider publicity. (November 2012)

Public commentary by HMCI in England has varied a great deal in both tone and genre since the agency's inception, and has to varying degrees aligned Ofsted with government policy (Maclure 2000). The impact of these news stories depends on a number of factors: the degree to which the values within them appeal to the public, the skill with which the statements are crafted in creating metaphorical links which create ideological alignment between the content and the values of the audience and the context and timing of the story (Lakoff 1991; Lakoff & Johnson 1999). An important factor in the success of these statements which often act as a precursor to policy innovation is what Gewirtz and colleagues describe as 'double coding' or

the ability of the speaker/writer to appeal to both left and right wing ideologies (Gewirtz *et al.* 2004). This interplay of complex political factors is further complicated by the ways in which the story is interpreted by the tabloid press in order to achieve ‘a vocabulary of emotional arousal’ (Holland 1983: 85). Recent HMCI Annual Reports in England have provoked considerable media storms: one example comes from the 2012 report by Sir Michael Wilshaw in which he asserted that:

Academies are now a well-established part of the English educational landscape. More than half of all secondary schools have become academies. In the last year alone, 210 schools converted to become new academies... Sponsor-led academies are delivering a step change in performance for chronically underperforming schools. Academies established in 2007 have narrowed the attainment gap of five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, by eight percentage points. The large majority of sponsor-led academies are members of multi-academy trusts, some of which have performed very strongly. Some trusts, however, are not performing well enough. (Ofsted Annual Report 2012-2013 para 9)

The response to this statement from critics of ‘academisation’ was the subject of intense media coverage in broadsheets, tabloids and broadcast and social media. The issue is important for Ofsted because of growing concern that political pressure has been exerted to ensure that inspection outcomes support academisation: there have been a number of cases where Ofsted’s judgements have changed rather rapidly. For example John Harris, writing in the Guardian newspaper, asks ‘Are Ofsted inspectors following a hidden agenda by harshly penalising primary schools and forcing them to convert to academy status?’ and details the experience of King's Stanley Church of England primary school, which had been rated as ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted but was downgraded to ‘inadequate’ and placed in special measures, the worst possible outcome. There are a number of similar cases, but interpretation of these issues is complex, especially given the changes in the inspection framework (see chapter 6)

The overall proportion of primary schools rated outstanding is falling: in 2008-09, Ofsted inspectors were far more generous with their outstanding ratings – that year nearly 19% of maintained primary schools inspected were rated as outstanding. However it is clear from the media debate that Ofsted’s claims to independence are threatened by the perception of alignment with the forced academicisation project.

Indeed the English press is populated with examples of stories which feed off statements by HMCI many of which accuse the inspectorate of political partiality; of being driven by a government agenda (Coughlan & Harrison 2013; Stewart 2012) This is a particularly uncomfortable issue for Ofsted when the current Secretary of State consistently praises the work of the inspectorate and uses many of its reports as justifications of highly contentious policies; particularly those designed to increase marketization by expansion of the academies and free school programmes (Hough 2013; Mulholand 2012; Schofield 2012; Stewart 2012).

Spin or a 'focus on particular elements of a practice, policy or situation', in order to suppress or occlude other elements is a common tool within the context of educational policy making; extending to all aspects of the process, from the reporting of academic research (Henig, 2009), to the de-contextualising of head teacher statements in order to provoke public reaction. Press releases by, for example the National Union of Teachers and The National Union of Head teachers often link Ofsted to the erosion of teacher morale and attrition as well as undermining of the profession (Coughlan & Harrison 2013; Garner 2012; Stewart 2012; Wooley 2012), Ofsted has responded by providing tabloid headlines such as 'Ofsted Chief: Teachers today don't know what stress is' (Schofield 2012). In this case the statement was released to coincide with the new inspection framework in order to help convince the public that teaching and teachers needed this more stringent regime.

The inspectorates' control over the way in which the public responds to these debates is increased considerably if their messages are delivered directly; that is perhaps why inspectorates are increasingly turning to open-source media to present their position. The Swedish study of inspection (Rönnerberg *et al.* 2013) as portrayed in local newspapers showed that the Inspectorate often manages to drive its version of the story even through conventional media channels. For example: a head teacher in a criticised school was only allowed to speak through the SI report; the information about the school's actions were only taken from the inspection agency, and the reporter made no effort to contact the head teacher and look beyond the Inspectorate's press release and the Inspection report. The Swedish study showed that the local news media (at least at that time) accepted the authority of the SI as a credible source of 'impartial information'. In our interviews with head teachers and municipal officers, many express frustrations and that reporting of inspection in local media was stigmatising, unpleasant and left the head teachers and teachers in vulnerable and fragile positions.

However in Sweden, as in England, these interventions and attempts to manage the media can also result in accusations of political partiality. In Sweden statements by the inspectorate were criticised for being overtly political and resulted in the inspectorate being accused of obstructing constructive and democratic deliberation: a role at odds with the agency's formal media strategy and in direct conflict with its role as a governing instrument (Thomas 2005; Rönnerberg *et al.* 2013: 192). In this case the head of the municipality involved responded with alacrity stating that the agency, 'has no mission to rouse public opinion or create debates against individual municipalities' (ibid: 192). There are, then, considerable complexities in the use of 'spin' by the inspectorates in our study: there is, it seems, a law of diminishing returns in play.

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter we have discussed the ways in which inspectorates seek to use the communication channels available to them, and we have also considered the extent to which the context of media production sets limits or shapes their possible strategies, and perhaps even entraps them in relations of mutual dependence. We have explored the ways in which they may use media tools to frame, to spin and to promote particular positions by colouring and conditioning their communications in order to more effectively reach out to the public. Increasing levels of sophistication within their media strategies may enable inspectorates to use these tools to manipulate traditional media outlets in order to strengthen their authority and influence education policy. But manipulation of the media is a dangerous strategy: in increasingly politicised times it may leave the inspectorates vulnerable to accusations of partisanship. Each inspectorate is positioned rather differently in the political context in which it is located, and this may account for most of the differences (as well as the similarities) identified in this chapter.

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