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The Significance of Local Auditors/Evaluators

Anders Hanberger
Umeå Center for Evaluation Research, Umeå University

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Anders Hanberger

Umeå Center for Evaluation Research, Umeå University

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Mail to anders.hanberger@ucer.umu.se

Umeå Center for Evaluation Research, Umeå University
SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden
Introduction

At present, a great number of evaluation, monitoring, quality-assurance and audit models are in use to help form, consolidate and reform the welfare state (Power 1997; Albaek 1998; Pollit et al. 1999; Johnsen et al. 2001; Stufflebeam, 2001). Even though more and more resources are invested in audits and evaluations (Power, 1997; Pollit et al.1999) the knowledge regarding the affects and influence of all these undertakings is limited.

The significance of audit, evaluation and inspections etc. can be understood as part of the wider question using social research in public policy making (Weiss 1977). There is no lack of assumption regarding the use, impact and functions of evaluation and audit, but few empirical studies have been carried out to probe these assumptions (Johnsen, 2001; Foss Hansen, 2002). Accordingly, there is a need to empirically look into the significance of audit, evaluation and other reviews, particularly at the local level. Local governments have an important role in the welfare state and governance in many modern states, especially in the Nordic countries, but little interest has been shown to the way audit and evaluation work at the local level (Dahler-Larsen, 2000; Jonsen, 2001). Moreover, how audit and evaluation work and function are essential for a vital democracy. To obtain political accountability, informed public debate and deliberation, a well functioning review-system is central.

This paper attempts to develop an integrated framework and methodology to be used for empirical studies on the significance of local reviewers. It is recognized that many actors undertake reviews (controls, inspections, evaluations, audits) of public policies and programs and that (local) reviewers have different roles in the political system. Attention is also given to media’s unique and multi-purpose role related to reviewing. Media is expected to scrutinize those in power, ongoing programs, current policies, report on reviews made by other reviewers, and to provide a forum for public debate. As an example, the manner in which media reports on, and provides space for public debate, can affect the influence of reviews made by other parties. Thus, to give justice to this situation there is a need to adopt an integrated perspective on “the local review system”, and to look into the roles, functions and significance of reviewers for public policy and democracy.

Then, the aim of this paper is to develop an integrated framework and methodology for empirical studies on the significance of local reviewers. The framework is intended to help answering the following questions:

- Who are the local reviewers?
- How do audit and evaluation-systems work at the local level?
- How do the reviewing actors carry out their commissions?
- What significance do local reviewers have for local politics and democracy?

Conceptual notes

Firstly, in order to come to grips with the importance of audit and evaluation there is a need to refer to these undertakings jointly, that is, we need a concept that takes into account all review activities. Here the term ‘review’ and ‘reviewer’ is applied for that purpose and refers to audit, evaluation, inspection, quality assurance, and other types of inquiries of governments, public administrations and policies.
Secondly, the terms “inspections”, “audit” and “evaluation” are ambiguous terms, and in part overlap each other in connotation (Johnsen 2001; Chelimsky and Shadish 1997; Power 1997). Evaluation is, in this paper, understood as the systematic examination of public policy and program, as well as the consequences involved. Audit refers to control and examination of (local) governments including public administrations. Two forms of audit – financial or control and performance audit - are covered by this term. Inspection is used for controls of rule-compliance made by state inspectors. However, the meaning of the terms overlap each other. As an example, evaluation can include performance audits and inspections. But the latter terms are associated with a control or efficiency perspective. In contrast, evaluation can also include an element of empowerment and/or development as well as a learning or knowledge perspective. Eleanor Chelimsky (1997) identifies three general evaluation perspectives: evaluation for accountability, development and knowledge.

Thirdly, the reviews discussed in this paper are reviews of local public policies and power execution. Local policy refers to local policy, ongoing and temporary programs, project and experiment undertaken by local government or by central or regional government in the municipalities.

Local reviewers

To examine the significance of local reviewers and how a local review system works, there is a need, as a first step, to identify existing reviewers and their commissions. It is recognised that at least eight reviewers can be identified as actors undertaking certain types of reviews relating to the execution of local power and policies. These eight actors comprise the reviewers that operate in most local political systems in modern democracies at present time.

The reviewers can be expected to act and function differently due to the commission they are given or take on. In Table 1 the local reviewers, as well as the focus of each review, are summarized. In as much as both credibility and accountability is at stake a distinction needs to be made between internal and external reviewers.

Table 1 Local reviewers and their centre of attention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local reviewers</th>
<th>Centre of attention</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>executive boards and committees</td>
<td>Local administration’s actions and implementation of policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opposition party(s)</td>
<td>Implementation/results of local government’s policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internal evaluators</td>
<td>Implementation and results of specific policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auditors</td>
<td>Efficiency and internal control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mass media</td>
<td>Power execution and local policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>state/EU inspectors</td>
<td>Implementation of state and EU policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external evaluators</td>
<td>Specific policies, programs and projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs/citizens</td>
<td>Power execution and specific policies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Internal reviewers**

Broadly speaking there are two types of reviewers – internal and external. Internal reviewers and review institutions differ from external in that the former are carried out within the political-administrative system. For example, the municipal executive board and the committees have a formal commission to control the administration’s implementation of a decision or policy (Local Government Act Ch 6:1-2) whereas the opposition is expected to continuously examine and criticize the local government’s (the majority’s) actions or inactions. Most frequently, the opposition carries out this commission prior to elections, but political assessments are also made continuously. Administrators/internal evaluators are commissioned to execute political decisions and to follow up, provide information for monitoring and to undertake evaluations, first and foremost related to specific policies and with focus on stated goals.

In addition, municipal auditors have a formal commission and responsibility, on behalf of the local councils, to initiate and undertake audits of committees and local administrations, including the programs decided (Local Government Act Ch 9:7; Lundin 1999). However, this commission is not all that clear due to the fact that no standards of practice have been developed. The commission is based on a general claim to follow local government audit customary practice. However, no customary practice has been formalized. In practice two forms of audit, financial and performance, are undertaken by local auditors (cf. Johnsen et al 2001 for the Finnish and Norwegian cases). Local audit is a form of internal review when it is carried out by public audit organizations and external when an audit company is commissioned to undertake the audit. Although Swedish auditors stress their political independence, the freedom of choice is somewhat limited. Local Swedish auditors could be positioned on the border between internal and external reviewers.

**External reviewers**

Competent internal review institutions and reviewers are crucial elements of a democracy, but external reviewers are perhaps more important for political accountability and legitimacy. Certain external institutions are integrated parts of democracy whereas others have evolved in response to a perceived need. Mass media has accepted a general commission to scrutinize all parts of a democracy and is a natural cornerstone in modern democracies. Special attention is given to how those in power carry out their commission and to temporary and ongoing (local) policies. Generally, this mission is carried out on behalf of citizens (Hadenius and Weibull 2002). There is no formal regulation for this commission but it is supported by all parties and in line with the dominant mass-media discourse. The way mass-media implement its commission is most often under debate, but nobody seems to question the commission as such.

The state has a formal commission to undertake inspections and controls of local governments and state policies implemented through local administrations. In Sweden, various state institutions are commissioned to do this. For examples, the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsman, administrative courts and sector-administrations have the responsibility to carry out inspections (cf. Lundin 1999). EU-inspectors also undertake controls in the cases where EU funding has financed projects (ibid 1999:141-143). Inspectors’ commissions are prescribed in acts and instructions whereas the other external commissions are more or less voluntarily initiated.
External evaluators are now and then commissioned by local governments to undertake evaluations. Most often they are asked to evaluate specific policies, ongoing programs or experimental activities. Evaluations can be requested in order to meet political/administrative needs or be more open-ended. Generally, they have different purposes and respond to one or several needs of stakeholders.

Finally, NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) and citizens sometimes undertake reviews of local governments. In these instances, the focus of attention includes specific policies or service deliveries. For examples, pension organisations examine old-age care and environment organizations review environment policies. When citizens participate in elections they undertake review of those in power and a pre-assessment of political alternatives. A type of review which is not given attention in this paper is when an individual, for example a public service user, appeals against a formal decision or when an official is perceived not to act properly.

As indicated internal and external reviewers have different and often overlapping commissions. In order to understand how a local review system works one could pay attention to all these actors, that is, how they interact with those in power, including officials and street level bureaucrats, as well as how the reviewers affect one another. However, to examine how all reviewers act and interact is a demanding task. For the purpose of this paper not all reviewers are given equal attention. The paper at hand concentrates on external reviewers, that is, the more independent reviewers. This is not to say that internal reviewers and review institutions are considered less important for democracy, but discussing such actors/institutions deserves a paper of its own. Therefore, I suggest that internal reviewers, except local auditors, be excluded from empirical examination. Auditors’ semi-independent role in the political system is the key argument to include them here.

How to study the significance of local reviewers

Generally, a better understanding of the significance of local reviewers can be attained by illuminating the following: 1) basic conditions for reviews, 2) prevailing review roles, 3) their functions and 4) influences on local policies and democracy. The searchlight can be on different conditions and aspects. Here an eclectic approach is applied in order to identify conditions and matters relevant for undertaking empirical studies on the significance of local reviewers.

Basic conditions

For whom a review is carried out, including whose questions attention is given and the purpose of the review, indicate what information and knowledge is sought in a review, as well as the importance given to one or several of the needs of stakeholders. It also indicates the intended user and use of the review. Empirically, one can differentiate between the following stakeholders for whom a review is undertaken: EU, the state, regional government, (local) majority party(s), opposition party(s), the local administration, professionals/street level bureaucrats, NGOs, public service users and ordinary citizens. Among all possible purposes, four such purposes are sufficient to account for in this context: accountability, development, knowledge and strategic purposes.

Adequate resources are important for undertaking reasonable reviews. The allocation of sufficient resources indicate that the object of review has been deemed important and that a
determining pre-condition for implementing a high-quality review has been established. Three
types of resources are accounted for: time, money and competence. In addition, these
resources can be more or less sufficient for attaining high-quality reviews.

The above conditions and orientations are central characteristics of reviews designed to search
for a comprehensive understanding of the significance of local reviewers, and for empirical
inquiries of local review systems. In addition, the political-administrative order, local-state
conditions, the policy style and democratic orientation are vital conditions for reviews. These
conditions are discussed later on in this paper and also include the relation to possible review
influences on public policy and democracy.

Review roles and functions¹

Viewed from an organizational perspective, various reviewing roles can be identified. For
examples, a reviewer can act as a political commentator, an expert, inspector or advocate, a
mediator or facilitator. Mass media and opposition parties can take on the role of e.g., a
political commentator while auditors and evaluators can act as experts.

Evaluation and audit are assumed to help increase effectiveness and rationality in
governments and public policy. The function of evaluation as a rational analysis has been
described by Donald Campbell. In what he refers to as “the experimenting society” evaluation
is a means of arriving at reliable information and knowledge on what works (Campbell 1988;
can be developed as a political-administrative means to enhance efficiency and goal-oriented
rationality. Viewed from a positivist, rationalist or social engineering perspective evaluations,
inspections and performance audits can be understood as filling a rational feedback function
in the political system. The good society is built step-by-step by social engineers. To arrive at
evidence-based public policies, policy makers demand value-free information and knowledge.
Although this perspective has met extensive theoretical and empirical critique, policy makers
and experts still finds it very attractive.

Without doubt, audit and evaluation are embedded in political contexts and according to Carol
Weiss (1973b) political considerations intrude evaluations in three major ways: evaluations
are politically decided, evaluations are meant to feed into decision making and “evaluation
itself has a political stance”. The same point can be made for performance audits and state
inspections; most reviews are politically loaded. From a political perspective, some would say
irrational perspective, it seems ‘rational’ to feedback knowledge and information selectively,
and take into account other conditions, sources of information and endeavours. Accordingly, a
review can be used in support of, or as a critique of, current practice and policy, that is, as
political ammunition. Selective use of social science, evaluation and audit are common

From a cultural perspective the growth of audit and evaluation can be understood as a
response to a fundamental organizational need – a need to associate an organization with
meaning and rationality (Albaek 1996). This understanding of reviews can be referred to as a
symbolic or ritual function (ibid; Dahler-Larsen, 1998). Policymakers, officials, auditors and

¹ For the discussion on functions I rely partly on Erik Albaek’s (1996) three organizational perspectives on
evaluation (the rational, political and cultural perspective).
evaluators could work in the same direction, i.e. to use reviews to create meaning and images of rationality in current practices. Most likely, if a reviewer is independent (economically, socially and organizationally) he or she will be less inclined to “collaborate” to promote a symbolic use.

“Seen from a cultural perspective, the function of evaluation research is not primarily – and perhaps not at all – to assist in decision making. Instead, its function is to create the image of a serious, responsible, and sensibly managed organization” (Albaek 1996).

Similarly, one can understand audit and evaluation as a response to declining trust in modern states (Day and Klein 1987; Rose and Miller 1992; Power 1997). Regimes and public organization use some kind of audit and evaluation system to (re)create political legitimacy.

“Audit has become a benchmark for securing the legitimacy of organizational action… not merely to provide for substantive internal improvements to the quality of service but to make these improvements externally verifiable via acts of certification” (Power 1997:10-11).

Evaluations, audits and inspections are means to (re)create trust and legitimacy. The fact that an evaluation is decided upon, is underway, yields expectations which can add legitimacy to ongoing programs, new policies or experiments (Hanberger, 2002). In the end, however, that which matters the most is the result(s) of the review. If misuse or obvious inefficiencies are unfolded, the actual function of the audit may very well be opposite to the initial goals. Thus, the function of audit, evaluation and inspections could be legitimatising or delegitimatising those in power, and ongoing programs and policies (ibid).

Furthermore, there seems to be a universal need for control and accountability vis-à-vis those in power, the political and administrative elite (March and Olsen 1995). In times of rapid change, when new modes of governance are introduced and when the political administrative roles become unclear, the demand for making decision-makers and organizations accountable increases. To attain accountability demands a mix of techniques, such as politicians controlling the bureaucracy on behalf of the voters, managerial techniques which focus on the performance of professionals delivering services (Day and Klein, 1987:51). All reviewers discussed in this paper can have a control or accountability function.

The meaning and function of local reviews can be captured and viewed in more ways. For examples evaluation, in particular, can have an enlightenment function (Weiss 1977), a conceptual function (Peltz 1978), or a learning function (Preskill and Torres 2000).

In addition, reviews can stimulate public debate in different ways. Review findings can be discussed openly in media or at meeting-places where different parties meet eye to eye and discuss review findings and future actions. Accordingly, to enhance public debate can be an explicit review function.

Influences on local policies

At this point, how to assess the significance of local reviewers for local politics is discussed explicitly. In the evaluation and policy literature the significance of evaluation and audit is discussed in terms of “use”, “utilization”, “influence”, “outcomes” and “impact”. In order to understand and empirically assess the significance of local reviewers one could search for
direct influence on local policies. Generally speaking, a policy can be affected in four major ways: policy innovation, succession, maintenance and termination (Hogwood and Peters 1983; cf. Dahler-Larsen, 2000).

Another way of looking at influence is to view influences (of evaluations) in terms of result-based and process-based influence (Kirkhart 2000). Such influence could be accounted for in relation to most types of reviews.

Furthermore, influence could be searched for in the eyes of those in power and how a public organization integrate and make use of information/knowledge. The influence can also be searched for in terms of whether reviews introduce new perspectives to existing problems and solutions and whether reviews bring problems and current problem solutions to public debate. Hence, direct affects and influences are correlated to actual functions of reviews. In other words functions and influences are intertwined.

The content and quality of reviews usually affect the political-administrative significance. Critique could affect the use and influence of reviews. Most likely the content and review critique will make a difference regarding impact and use. Critique could be either positive, negative or a combination of both.

As underscored, media has more roles to play in relation to the political system. Obviously, the influence of reviews and reviewers are partly affected by how media present and report on results presented by other reviewers, and whether media provide space for public debate or not.

**Implications for democracy**

In addition to the direct affects of reviews on public policies/programs one could look for implications for democracy. In doing so, the policy style and democratic orientation/environment in which reviews operate could be understood as institutional conditions for review activities. Generally, reviews could either promote existing practice or give way to new modes of governance and strengthen one or the other type of democratisation (cf. Hanberger, 2001b).

Democracy is primarily associated with the will-formation and how to come to public judgment. But for a democracy to function well there is also need to look into the review function of democracy. Different notions of democracy may fuel and fit different review endeavors or the other way around, a review can promote a specific policy style or democratic practice. Democratic theory is in short supply concerning this matter (Ahlbäck, 1999). Accordingly, there are theoretical and empirical motives to look into the review side of democracy. For the purpose of this paper I suggest separating between three notions of democracy and argue that it is an empirical inquiry as to how the review function works in different situations, that is, in different manifestations of democracy.

It is recognized that a democracy can vary in regards to whether democracy is made for, by or with the people (for a more elaborative discussion on democracy and evaluation see Hanberger, 2001b, 2002). According to elitist democracy citizens are only encouraged to influence the general direction of public policies and programs by choosing between political package deals in elections. In contrast, participatory and discourse theories suggest that
citizens need to participate more often and in different ways for a regime to be called
democratic (Deleon, 1997; Dryzek, 1996, 2000; Fischer, 1993, Healey, 1993; House & Howe,
1999; Khakee, 1999; Premfors et al., 1994). Besides elections, participatory democracy
endorses such means of participation as referenda, and discourse democracy endorses these
plus new meeting-places/forums for public debate.

If a policy (or program) is made and designed for the people, by the mandated elite and
implemented by civil servants, and if citizens are excluded from the policy (or program)
process and are treated as consumers of public services, the policy (or program) then supports
an elitist democracy. In addition, an evaluation, audit or state inspection may be designed for
and indirectly promote an elitist democracy. *The need for control and accountability is
assumed to be strong and the need for public learning weak in elitist democracy* (see Table 2).
The elite may well focus more on what is best for the state, or them, rather than on what is
best for the people. But this is an empirical question. On the other hand, when citizens are
included and encouraged to participate in a policy making (or program development) process,
and when citizens are viewed and treated as active recipients of services and goods, then a
participatory democracy is being strengthened. *I suggest that the need for public learning is
strong and the need for control is somewhat weaker in a participatory democracy.* The need
for public learning is supposedly greater when citizens are more actively involved and the
need for control weaker when the elite delegate freedom of choice.² If citizens are yet more
intimately involved, it may be assumed that a discourse democracy is being promoted by the
policy (or program). This policy discourse views citizens as active, competent, reflective, and
responsible individuals. Moreover, citizens are looked upon as collaborators in practical
reasoning in the context of planning and implementation. They are expected to contribute
towards practical knowledge in the search for practical and legitimate solutions in meeting
public needs with scarce resources. This notion of democracy also encourages citizens to
assess and adjust public services and institutions, and thus to participate in the policy learning
process. *In a discourse democracy the need for control, I assume, is modest whereas the need
for public learning is stronger.* Thus, different notions and manifestations of democracy are
assumed to vary regarding the need for control and public learning; and the need for reviews
is assumed to vary in the same way.

Table 2 Assumed need for control and learning in three notions of democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democracy</th>
<th>Need for accountability</th>
<th>Need for public learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Strong</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Framework

The ambition of this paper has been to develop a framework for empirically examining the
significance of local reviewers. It is now time to weave these threads of thoughts together. An
integrated framework should take into account conditions and aspects discussed so far.
However, not all matters can be given equal attention. In Figure 1, the suggested framework is
illustrated, while Table 3 specifies the conditions and aspects for empirical inquiry.

² Proponents of elite democracy may argue the other way around, i.e. that there is a greater need for control when
power and freedom of choice has been hand over to citizens.
Figure 1 takes into account five local reviewers crucial for understanding a local review system and for assessing the significance of local reviewers. The double-edged arrows illustrate the relations between the various reviewers and local government. The arrows also represent those conditions and matters specified in Table 3. The triangle illustrates that local government is a hierarchal organization and includes local policy and the policy process. As pointed out, mass media has in addition to undertaking reviews, several obligations. Its task is also to report on reviews made by other reviewers, and to provide a forum for public debate on reviews. The broken arrows illustrate media’s further roles and tasks.

Figure 1: Local reviewers’ significance for local politics and democracy

Table 3 provides a checklist of conditions and aspects for empirical examination. The Table can tentatively be filled in advance, based on assumptions made in this paper, or used as a blank sheet for empirical inquiry. It provides basic information on local reviewers in a political system. Gathered data can be used to assess the significance of local reviewers. In addition, the information can offer some explanations and interpretations as to the manner in which local reviewers and the review system works, as well as to the significance of local reviewers.

Table 3: Key issues for empirical examinations of local reviews/reviewers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local reviewers</th>
<th>For whom</th>
<th>Review purpose</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Critique</th>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Influence on policy</th>
<th>Implications for democracy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal auditors</td>
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<td>State inspectors</td>
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<td>Mass-media</td>
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<td>Evaluators</td>
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<td>NGOs/Citizens</td>
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</table>
Table options:
For whom: (EU, the state, regional government, local majority party, local opposition, local administration, professionals, NGOs, service users, citizens)

Purposes: (accountability, development, knowledge, strategic)

Resources: (money, time, competence; sufficient or insufficient)

Roles: (political commentator, expert, inspector, advocate, mediator, facilitator)

Review critique: (primarily positive, primarily negative, both positive and negative)

Influence on policy: (innovation, succession, maintenance, termination)

Review functions: (rational feedback, (de)legitimatising, control/accountability, political ammunition, symbolic, learning, enhance public debate)

Implications for democracy: (strengthen elite, participatory or discourse democracy)

Assumptions about the significance of local reviewers

The conditions and issues paid attention to here can be reduced to an overall assumption or working hypothesis:

The significance of local reviewers is related to the commission, resources, democratic orientation, political and local-state conditions, review critique, and media’s attention to reviews.

The overall assumption is based on:

a. the review commission and amount of resources devoted restrict the review to one or several of the needs of stakeholders.

b. The policy style and democratic orientation held by commissioners and decision makers are strengthened by different review roles e.g. expert-oriented reviews strengthen technocratic policy style and elite democracy.

c. the function of local reviewers is confined by conditions listed in assumption a and b.

d. The impact of reviews is linked to the general attitude held by those in power to use knowledge in policy making, the general policy direction, political and local-state conditions, the review quality, and media’s attention.

These assumptions could be used in two ways. One could undertake empirical studies to probe and refine the assumptions. Some of the aspects given attention to here could be excluded later on and perhaps give way for new important aspects, identified empirically. Another use could be more prescriptive. That is, to work out guidelines for how different reviewers should operate. Then a clear division of labor between the roles and functions of reviewers in the political system and democracy could be prescribed.

No matter what roles and functions one would stipulate for local reviewers, empirical knowledge about local reviewing is useful. Not only for local reviewers and those under review; such knowledge is relevant for all concerned with how democracy works and changes.
References


**Local Government Act** Ny Kommunal lag. SOU 1990:24


