



Selling sustainable mobility: The reporting of the Manchester Transport Innovation Fund bid in UK media

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how complex transport projects are reported in the media using the Transport Innovation Fund bid for Greater Manchester as a case study. It demonstrates how projects are simplified and distorted in the media in a systematic way. Such distortion is explained by a scheme's perceived newsworthiness, its complexity and the contemporary nature of news media production. The paper has implications for future research in this area and the implementation of sustainable transport policy. It urges transport professionals to both better understand, and engage directly with, the media if they are to maximise the benefits of efforts to shape travel behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Transport policy-makers have become more and more interested in ways of shaping travel demand. What Banister (2008) terms 'the sustainable mobility paradigm' requires that successful cities and successful transport policy address travel demand through both technological and behavioural change. Such behavioural change highlights the need to shape public opinion through specific 'soft measures', public participation processes or through more general information-giving campaigns. Within such efforts, the media plays a vital role in communicating the possibilities for policy-makers and, through selecting what to publish and how to present it can be highly significant in shaping public opinion, intentions and behaviour. Public opinion in turn influences public discourse and determines what is possible in political arenas thus providing something of a feedback loop in determining future policy.

While there remains a debate about the precise, and ever-shifting, relationships between media consumption, social norms and individual intentions and behaviour, it is clear that, "journalism has social effects...it can reinforce beliefs...shape opinions...[or] at the very least [exert] influence" (Richardson, 2007, p. 13). While this relationship is referenced in transport policy discussion there is comparatively little robust empirical evidence to support contentions of bias or influence (c.f. Rye et al., 2008; Ryley and Gjersoe, 2006; Winslott-Hiseli et al., 2009). This paper presents a methodologically robust, empirically grounded study of how one particular transport policy debate was represented in the media to

help address this deficit. The Greater Manchester Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) bid was a large-scale package of transport improvements, mostly funded by UK central government and in the long-term by a road pricing scheme. Its implementation was put to a public referendum and it is the media reporting and framing of the package in relation to this vote that forms the focus of the analysis.

This paper first outlines the nature of the sustainable mobility challenge facing cities in the global North. We subsequently turn to past work on analysing media content to assess what this literature can offer the transport field. The Manchester case is then outlined and analysed before some more general conclusions are drawn.

2. The sustainable mobility challenge

What Banister (2008) terms the sustainable mobility paradigm has been variously emergent in transport policy and practice for some time. This paradigm asserts that it is necessary to take a fundamentally different approach to looking at cities and transport that challenges the basic assumptions on which traditional transport planning is based (Banister, 2008, p. 73). This in turn demands new methods and inter-disciplinary conversations (Sheller and Urry, 2000). Such an approach recognises that travel demand is socially and culturally constructed and situated and responds to the supply opportunities available as well as a range of contextual factors. Sustainable transport planning thus seeks to provide quality travel opportunities while at the same time contributing to wider economic, social and environmental goals, rather than detracting from them. It is clear then that how such possibilities are presented to individuals is crucial in shaping their behaviour and moving

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toward sustainable mobility (Banister, 2008). The media potentially therefore play a crucial role in this process of engagement.

2.1. Transport and the media

The media has two critical roles in public policy debates generally and thus the transport policy arena:

- it sets and perpetuates news agendas: for example transport is now linked in the public mind to debates about public health and to climate change in ways that it wasn't previously;
- it provides information about 'events' that it deems newsworthy in the context of this wider agenda. In doing so journalists and editors will focus on what is newsworthy and relates to their consumers' agendas and values.

What is newsworthy is debated but common features can be identified. Boykoff and Boykoff (2007) talk of how such features translate into first and second order norms, with first order norms consisting of the personalisation of stories, dramatisation (emphasising crisis), and a predilection for novelty (also see Fowler, 2004, Chapter 2). Such norms explain why certain issues feature strongly in the media and others struggle for attention. Complexity and communicability are also significant. Journalists may understandably struggle to convey a complex issue and will therefore often focus upon certain 'graspable' information. Aldridge (2007) notes that institutional complexity arising from marketisation processes in government, of which privatisation processes in transport are a good example, has compounded the difficulties for journalists reporting on public policy issues. Increasing time pressure on journalists in the last two decades has further exacerbated simplification tendencies, as has a decline in subject specialists such as transport correspondents (Davies, 2009) and regional correspondents wherein a particular infrastructure might be located (Davies, 2009; Preston, 2009). These processes make the task for policy-makers promoting complex ideas and policies more difficult and the need for media-savvy practices to increase.

2.2. Selling sustainable mobility

A key 'barrier' to implementing the sustainable mobility paradigm lies in the shaping of public opinion and travel behaviour. Transport policy-makers themselves identify public attitudes as the single biggest challenge to implementing policies and schemes, and note its increasing significance (Hull, 2009). Despite this emphasis there is comparatively little focus on the importance of dialogue and deliberation in transport policy-making (cf. Vigar, 2006) and little empirical work on the reporting of transport issues in the media, a crucial arena for shaping attitudes. In recent years work has begun to at least mention the likely importance of the press in influencing public opinion, especially in debates on pricing (e.g. Schlag and Teubel, 1997). To this end, a number of studies have examined the ways congestion charging is presented in print media. Herein the provision of information, and the perceived effectiveness and efficiency of the scheme in dealing with transport problems (which reflects media reporting in part) are both considered of great significance (Schlag and Teubel, 1997; Thorpe et al., 2000; Ryley and Gjersoe, 2006). The provision of information is thus considered to be a 'cornerstone' of acceptability for pricing proposals and transport demand measures more widely; herein a lack of understanding is said to lead to a lack of acceptance (Schlag and Teubel, 1997, pp. 5–6). It is therefore vital that planners and decision makers seek to understand how the media operate, as it is from them that

the public might generate a greater understanding. The next section presents a methodology that can assess how the media report transport issues, focusing specifically on an analysis of media content.

3. Analysing media content

There is work that has examined how the media represents transport proposals. However, much of this work is either thin on substantive evidence of how the media has portrayed transport debates, or can be rather simplistic in its methodological approach with a subsequent lack of robustness. This paper tries to address these weaknesses through a rigorous analysis of the reporting of a proposal in a range of media sources.

The media play a significant role in shaping public behaviour, understanding and beliefs (Devereux, 2003; Matheson, 2005). While media content does not necessarily equate with social reality, it illustrates how those realities are 're-presented'. Media content is therefore, "a powerful source of meaning about the social world" (Devereux, 2003, p. 117). Media analysis itself tends not to dwell so much on policy areas but on issues such as race, gender and class, where it is clear that the media have a strong influence on public attitudes (e.g. Croteau and Haynes, 2003, Chapter 6; Devereux, 2003, pp. 115–135; Golding and Middleton, 1982; Hannah and Cafferty, 2003; Haylett, 2000; Richardson, 2007). That said, the representation of issues of critical importance to transport planners have received some attention in media studies, notably land-use planning (e.g. Clifford, 2006), the environment (e.g. Hansen, 1991) and climate change (e.g. Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007; IPPR, 2008). That said, there are many forms of media and each displays different characteristics. We might expect the professional transport press for example to represent an issue in a different way than a right-wing tabloid newspaper (Clifford, 2006). We might also expect local media to have different news agendas to national ones, although this is itself under-researched (Aldridge, 2007).

There are a number of established methods used to analyse media content. Generally analyses examine one or a combination of: the production processes that bring content into being; the content itself; or the receipt of the content. We have focused on analysis of the content itself. According to Berger (1998), content analysis is:

'...a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they write, produce on television, or make movies about.' (p. 23)

Content analysis can take a predominantly quantitative or qualitative approach and each has strengths and weaknesses. A quantitative approach allows the comparison of large quantities of data, based on counting the number of instances of predefined words/phrases/images etc. in order to identify patterns over time or between sources. According to Devereux (2003) there are two problems with this method: first, it can struggle to deal with the possibility of multiple meanings and, second, it is not always possible to determine the critical context in which the chosen words are used (see also Richardson, 2007; Matheson, 2005). For example, while the use of quantitative techniques counting the coupling of the terms 'transport' and 'climate change' in a newspaper over time may show that they occur many times, and that this occurrence is increasing, and hence indicate that the subject has been given a high and increasing degree of prominence, these techniques alone cannot determine how these issues are actually being presented to audiences.

To overcome such difficulties more qualitative approaches are adopted. Herein researchers can either examine 'manifest' content or 'latent' content. Manifest content analysis involves determining

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