



Original article

Harnessing the power of the press with three indices of sustainable development

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of research designed to explore reporting of three indices (Corruption Perception Index, CPI; Human Development Index, HDI and the Ecological Footprint, EF) in the UK national press between January 1990 and December 2009. Reporting of the indices was assessed by: (a) the number of articles published each year mentioning the index at least once (b) a weighting of (a) allowing for the different circulation between newspapers (c) the diversity of newspapers having articles mentioning the index (using the Shannon Index). Results suggest that the EF scored highest across all three measures whereas the CPI was lowest. The EF was also more likely to be reported in terms that implied a sense of ownership as well as a concept and not just an index. Unlike the CPI and HDI, there is no single methodology for the EF with various groups having their own approach. These features appear to have aided the relative popularity of EF within newspaper reporting. Finally, there was typically little if any description within the articles of the methodology or assumptions that rest behind the indices. Hence they are usually presented as a 'black box' to provide authoritative support for statements.

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1. Introduction

In a seminal paper on social learning published in 1993 Peter Hall defined it as:

"a deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience and new information. Learning is indicated when policy changes as the result of such a process." (page 278)

Hall was referring specifically to insights gleaned within the field of macroeconomic policymaking in Britain between 1970 and 1989. As part of his analysis he distinguished three distinct kinds of 'changes' in policy, the first of which is change in instrument settings as a result of "*experience and new knowledge*" while overall goals remain the same. But what comprises "*experience and new knowledge*" and how that is assimilated into such 'First Order' change in policy has been the subject of much research and debate (see Boezeman et al., 2010 for a recent discussion and example in the field of environmental policy). Given the pressing need of the world to achieve sustainable development there is undoubtedly an urgent need to help facilitate policy change in that direction, and in recent years there has been a rise in the creation and promotion of indices as a tool to help achieve this goal. Indices (sometimes referred to as 'composite indices' or just 'composites') are defined as amalgams of a number of individual indicators. The amalgama-

tion can be relatively simple, as for example an average of a few indicators (e.g. the Human Development Index), or more complex perhaps involving dozens of indicators brought together with different weightings (e.g. the Environmental Performance Index; EPI). Whatever the methodology, indices have but one reason for their existence; they present complex data in the simplest way possible and thus aim to provide a feed into such 'First Order' change by allowing non-specialists to absorb complex datasets (Hezri and Dovers, 2006).

However, while much is known about the more technical aspects of such indices, notably the assumptions made behind their creation, problems associated with those assumptions and the pressing need for good quality data, there has been little research as to how they can feed into the policy process. This is complicated by the fact that indices are often formulated to have a wide target audience in mind, comprising politician, the media and indeed the general public. Hence the publication of an index by their owners is often associated with the release of colourful and attractive reports and 'press packs' designed to attract attention for the cause being promoted by the index. The assumption is typically that the media will 'use' the indices in their reporting and thereby raise attention for the cause that is being promoted amongst the public, politicians and others. A good example of this is the publication of the 'Living Planet Reports' by the World Wildlife Fund within which are 'league tables' of Ecological Footprint. However, an interesting question to ask at this point is the extent to which such reporting within the media actually occurs given that this is one of the assumed starting points for engendering interest and influence? If it does, are there differences in both scale and style between the reporting of indices?

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Table 1
The three indices employed in the research.

Facet	CPI	HDI	EF
Creator	Transparency International	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel at the University of British Columbia, Canada
Issue being captured	A non-governmental organisation	International agency	Academic work later picked up and adapted by a number of agencies
Reporting Organisation	Corruption Annual report (1990 on) Transparency International (an NGO)	Human development Annual Report (1995 on) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the global reports	Consumption Biannual report (2000 on) Global Footprint Network (GFN) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) for the global reports
Reporting scale	Nation state	Nation state Variants exist for some regions spanning a number of countries and states within a single country	Nation state Many scales, even to the level of the household and individuals
Units Components	None Based upon the results of various corruption surveys (all based upon perception of corruption)	None Three components: 1. Life expectancy 2. Education 3. Disposable income (proxied by GDP/capita).	Yes – global hectares (gha) Latest version of the EF used by WWF has the following components: 1. Crop land 2. Grazing land 3. Forest land 4. Fishing 5. Built-up land 6. Carbon uptake land
References	Morse (2006) Andersson and Heywood (2009)	Booyesen (2002) Morse (2003) Lind (2004)	Fiala (2008) Venetoulis and Talberth (2008) Siche et al. (2008)

The latter is a logical expectation given that indices are linked to different ‘issues’ and one would therefore expect to see them being reported in different ways. These questions, and the paucity of publications that deal with them to date, prompted the research behind this paper.

The research reported here focussed on the reporting of three indices in the national newspapers of the UK over a 20 year period (January 1990–December 2009). The three indices selected for the research were the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Human Development Index (HDI) and the Ecological Footprint (EF). These three indices have been selected as they cover three quite different, yet inter-twinned, aspects of sustainable development, namely economics (CPI), quality of life (HDI) and resource consumption (EF). They are also well-established indices in the sense that they have been around for some years (HDI since 1990; CPI since 1995; EF in various forms since the early 1990s), and each has a powerful backer such as the World Wildlife Fund in the case of EF. Other alternatives, such as the EPI referred to above, tend to be younger or have an exposure more limited to the academic literature rather than having a wider audience in mind.

It should be noted that a focus on reporting of these indices in the printed forms of national newspapers cannot hope to encapsulate all of the exposure that they may have attracted within the UK given the range of other media outlets that are available. Similarly, a focus on the national newspapers of one country inevitably generates results that are specific to that country. Also, there is the increasing importance of ‘press agencies’ and ‘public relations’ firms to consider. Many outlets (broadcast and printed media) now source their news from a relatively small number of such sources and as a result some have questioned the degree of independence that journalists now have as a result of this overlap (Lewis et al., 2008). Even so, the use of newspapers as the basis for exploring reporting of indices has advantages. Firstly, if indices are deemed by journalists and their editors to have value or if journalists think that their readership will be interested in them then they will be reported (used) otherwise they will not. Secondly the printed newspaper articles are archived in ways which are readily accessible and analysable via text search engines. Thirdly the textual nature of newspaper articles allows for

an analysis that extends beyond a simple cataloguing as to whether an index is mentioned in an article by encompassing the context of the reporting – the ways in which an index may be described or used. Lastly there is already an extensive literature on the adoption and reporting of important issues in the national newspapers of various countries that can be built upon. For example, contentious and complex topics which have been explored within the UK national and local press over the two years include climate change (Nerlich and Koteyko, 2010), genetic modification (Augoustinos et al., 2010), voluntary childlessness (Giles et al., 2009), maternity provision in the National Health Service (Thomson et al., 2008) and asylum seekers (Finney and Robinson, 2008). There is also a literature on the influence that newspapers have on policy makers, politicians and the formulation of ‘public opinion’, although findings are often mixed and contradictory as policy makers in turn try to influence the press (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001; Mortensen and Serritzlew, 2006; Walgrave et al., 2008). Thus given this background it seems reasonable to hypothesise that the three indices will be reported by the UK national newspapers although it is possible that there may be differences between the indices in terms of the extent to which they are employed and also the ways in which they are ‘used’. It should be noted that ‘use’ in this context is limited to that made of the indices by the journalists and does not necessarily reflect ‘use’ in terms of any change in instrument settings by policy makers.

2. Materials and methods

Some background on each of the three indices is provided as Table 1. The newspapers that formed the basis for this research were those classified as ‘national’ in the NEWS UK database (www.newsuk.co.uk) and comprises the publications listed in Table 2.

In the NEWS UK database ‘National’ newspaper equates to a newspaper that is sold throughout the UK although coverage may be patchy. Hence some newspapers may have a regional focus (Scotsman, Scotland on Sunday) but are available at national scales. Also shown in Table 1 is the classification of each of the newspa-

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