



The agenda setting power of news media in framing the future role of tourism in protected areas



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Historical formulation of tourism in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney.
- Leximancer software to identify themes in community responses to Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust Masterplan.
- Visualized stakeholder network presents a clear network of each stakeholder's perceived position in the debate.
- Placement of newspaper framing of tourism in an urban protected area sustainability context.

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper examines the agenda-setting and framing role of news media in the ongoing development of the Draft Sydney Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust Master Plan. The paper will argue that the publication of the Masterplan and ensuing public commentary has drawn into stark focus future challenges in juxtaposing the frames of public use, commercial tourism and scientific/cultural values in the sustainable management of protected areas. Agenda setting and framing theory provides the theoretical foundation for the paper. Guided by critical discourse analysis, the analysis of the paper is supported through the use of Leximancer and Gephi software for visually illustrating the relationship between different framing perspectives. This paper contributes to a fresh understanding of the complex nature of the sustainable management of protected areas in urban spaces.

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1. Introduction

For more than two hundred years botanical gardens including the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew (United Kingdom), the Cairo based Orman Gardens (Egypt), Bartram's Garden in the United States and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney have been seen by some as the epitome of a nation's cultural attainment. Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens, which are the subject of the present paper were developed initially in 1816 by Governor Macquarie as part of the so called Governor's Domain (Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, 2015). Protected by a gubernatorial proclamation from the excesses of the colony's early convict population and from

the use of the land for the grazing and feeding of cattle of any kind; the gardens were to be reserved for the use of that respectable class of inhabitant for innocent recreational purposes (Endersby, 2000).

Since their inception botanical gardens over the world have played an important role in colonial expansion (Brockway, 1979; Ginn, 2009), horticulture and conservation (Avery, 1957; Desmond, 1998; Maunder, Lyte, Dransfield, & Baker, 2001; Waylen, 2006) and medical research (Heywood, 1991). The focus of the present paper is with their use as a site for tourism and recreation (see Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2008; Connell, 2004; 2005 for previous coverage of botanic gardens based tourism in the Journal of Tourism Management). Globally, botanic gardens and arboretums have been estimated to attract more than 250 million visitors per year (Ballantyne et al., 2008). It is this earning potential that has made tourism an important player in the debate over the interplay of neoliberalist and natural resource discourses in protected area management (Darcy, 1995).

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Tourism interests have played an important role in defining the future of the Sydney Royal Botanic Gardens during the development process for the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust (hereafter RBGDT) Masterplan. The Masterplan was designed “to ensure the exceptional heritage, scientific and cultural aspects of the Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney and Domain are maintained or enhanced for public enjoyment, education and recreation. It also emphasises the Royal Botanic Garden’s core values of horticulture and science” (Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, 2016, p. np). For all of its potential benefit, however, on June 10 2016 an article was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter SMH) under the banner headline “Win for Sydneysiders as Royal Botanic Garden Masterplan shelved on its 200th birthday” (Dumas, 2016).

The focus of the present paper is to develop a further understanding of the effect that media (the third estate) has on the setting of agendas and framing the management of complex protected area locales, which tourism is often an important component.¹ Through the use of Leximancer and Gephi software and co-stakeholder network analysis we will examine four exemplar articles from the SMH, which were published in 2014 shortly after the RBGDT Masterplan process began. In addition to representing a cross section of different types of newspaper reporting on this particular issue (opinion piece, news piece etc.), the sample articles also encapsulate the framing of a number of disparate and influential stakeholder groups in the debates. Framing occurs through new media comments that accompany the traditional online newspaper articles. Leximancer and Gephi software are used to graphically illustrate the links between the framing (and framer) of the article(s) and ensuing community commentary that was evidenced on the SMH. In the next section we will consider theoretical issues surrounding the notions of strategic planning, agenda setting and the role of the media in framing protected area debates, which will serve as a precursor to a detailed discussion of the site, our methodological approach and our empirical results.

2. Tourism planning and the role of the media in agenda setting and framing in contested protected area locales

Rational comprehensive approaches to decision making are premised on the idea that policy makers will make decisions on the basis of due consideration of all possible courses of action and all available information. As Dredge (1999) has noted, rational comprehensive approaches to planning have long been seen as a strategic management ideal and have for many years influenced the planning of tourism destination regions. Rational comprehensive planning approaches follow a ten step basic structure from settling on terms of reference, and determination of planning approaches to monitoring/evaluating and feedback. Since their inception, however, there has been a realization that the innate complexity of rational comprehensive approaches make it challenging to operationalise (see for example Hostovsky, 2006). Innes (1996) has written on the way in which processes of consensus building can assist with the operationalization of the rational comprehensive. Consensus building she notes is premised on notions of a “collective search for common ground”, the power of subjective knowledge and active stakeholder engagement (Innes, 1996, p. 463).

In the present paper we will consider the role of the media as

facilitators of consensus building in heterogeneous protected areas. McCombs (1997) has written on the ways in which the media is able to promote consensus in communities through their ability to ensure the salience of particular issues and frame our perspective on aspects of those issues that deserve ongoing community attention. For example, writing on the interplay of national media organizations and environmental protests over the proposed damming of the Tasmanian Franklin River (Australia) in the early 1980s (see also Brookes, 2001; Law, 2001; Sewell, Dearden, & Dumbrell, 1989), Hutchins and Lester (2006) identify an emerging disconnect between the motivations of news media and protestors over the cause of the conflict. Whilst initially showing tacit support for the positions of environmentalists taking part in the Franklin River Blockade (see Law, 2001 for a history of the Franklin River Campaign); news media were identified as being increasingly unsympathetic to what the media viewed as the stage-managed actions of environmental campaign groups and the apparent hijacking of the media’s attempt to manage the flow of information around an important national resource management issues (Hutchins & Lester, 2006).

The ability of news services to function as agenda setters requires the moderation of objects, attributes and frames (McCombs, 2005). Together these three concepts of objects, attributes and frames encapsulate the central building blocks of the theory of agenda setting in the media that was begun more than four decades ago in McCombs and Shaw’s influential study of voter intentions for the 1968 US Presidential Election (see McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The essential premise of the theory of agenda setting is to understand how “the popular agenda of the media affects society and attempts to explain why mass media has gained so much power over the thoughts of people everywhere” (Adams, Harf, & Ford, 2014, p. 2). Since its inception a number of works have been published which have tracked the evolving theoretical and application of agenda setting concepts (e.g. McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1993; D. H.; Weaver, 2007). At the time of writing there has only been limited uptake of agenda setting principles in tourism (e.g. Hall, 2003; de Araujo & Bramwell, 2002).

Objects represent the basic building blocks of agenda setting scholarship, representing topics of investigation (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Agenda setting scholarship has tended to view objects in terms of the political sphere through examinations of political candidates and related public policy issues. However, more and more the scope of agenda setting scholarship has expanded to grapple with a range of socially constructed “wicked problems”² (see McComas & Shanahan, 1999; Pralle, 2009). Tourism is not immune to these issues, with Hall et al. (2015, p. 5) identifying that sustainability is a “wicked or meta – policy problem that has led to new institutional arrangements and policy settings at international, national and local levels”. Botanic gardens of the type discussed in the paper exist in a complex urban environment, frequented by a range of stakeholders including recreational visitors with different issues, motivations and concerns (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Connell, 2005). The partially industrialised nature of the tourism system have been described by Hall (1999, p. 276) as a “meta problem which represent highly interconnected planning and policy messes”.

Such messes manifest themselves in attributes, which form the second core component of agenda setting scholarship. Attributes refer to the various characteristics and traits that stakeholders can use to describe an object (McCombs, 2005). Denzin illustrated the

¹ For context it should be noted that the original aim of this project was to examine the various formal public submissions made to the RBGDT as part of the Masterplan process. When the Masterplan process was delayed by reasons internal to the RBGDT we then made the decision to shift our focus to consider the agenda setting power of news media, drawing on documents that were already in the public domain.

² A wicked problem can be defined as those types of social problems that cannot be definitively described and for which there is no universally agreed perfect solution (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

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