



Media representations of risk: The reporting of dredge spoil disposal in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park at Abbot Point



Ally J. Lankester^{a,*}, Erin Bohensky^b, Maxine Newlands^c

^a Independent Consultant, 2/48 Cook Street, North Ward, QLD 4810, Australia

^b CSIRO Land and Water, Private Mail Bag, Aitkenvale, QLD 4814, Australia

^c Department of Journalism, College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University, QLD 4810, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The disposal of dredge spoil in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park for port expansion at Abbot Point in North Queensland, Australia, has been a contentious issue receiving extensive media coverage. The media has played a key role in representing different risk perceptions, and potentially influencing policy decision-making. This paper identifies different perceptions of risk portrayed by local, regional, interstate and national print media in relation to the dredge spoil issue from January 2013 until February 2014. Media analysis explored the questions: how is 'risk' represented, who is linked to different risk perceptions, and how has the media coverage of the issue changed over time? Results show that 'risk' to the Great Barrier Reef from the dredge spoil was framed by four main themes: *Environmental Disaster*, *Socio-economic Disaster*, *Equilibrium and Industrialism*. *Environmental Disaster* was the most prominent overall, and often positioned in opposition to *Industrialism*. In January 2013 the dredge spoil issue was mainly covered by local sources and focused on risks to local livelihoods and environments. By February 2014 the issue was covered by sources throughout Australia and represented a range of risks to the GBR, and its World Heritage status, in relation to coal mining and port developments. Insights for communication from this analysis include the importance of using clear language that provides exact and solid examples of risks, especially in light of the media's agenda-setting power and with an issue that the general public does not have direct experience.

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1. Introduction

On the 31st of January 2014 final approval was given to dredge three million cubic meters of the ocean bottom for expansion of coal export terminals at Abbot Point in North Queensland, Australia, and then dispose of the spoil within the borders of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP). The risk to the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) from this development has been a contested issue in Australia.

The concept of 'risk' is often defined technically in terms of the magnitude of potential damage and probability of occurrence of an event. In the context of social-ecological systems, risk tends to be defined as a function of the probability of occurrence of a hazard and the social vulnerability of the exposed system [1]. In this paper, 'risk' is interpreted from a social-cultural perspective as a broader term that encapsulates complex social, ecological, political and economic

processes [2]. As noted by Sonnett [12], the construction of perceptions of risk (i.e. is there a risk? what is the threat or risk? what/who is at risk? how much is the risk?) is a social-cultural process wherein different individuals and groups interpret the world through different 'worldviews' or social, cultural and political lenses that are mediated by social relations [3,4]. In other words, the anticipation of damage from particular actions and the interpretation of the likelihood that a certain event will occur are often subjective and normative processes. An extensive literature on the psychology of individual risk perception addresses this, emphasizing factors such as experience, e.g. [5], as well as value orientations, knowledge, and perceptions of responsibility [6]. Individuals also tend to appraise risk in ways that maintain identity with their cultural community [7]. In addition, recent events and their encoding in social memory can affect risk perception [8,9]. Thus, not all social-ecological problems or dangers become labeled as risks and understandings and judgments of those threats or dangers that become labeled as a risk may vary among contexts, groups and actors [10].

One particularly influential mediator of risk perceptions is the media. The media plays an important role in mediating and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ally.lankester@gmail.com (A.J. Lankester), erin.bohensky@csiro.au (E. Bohensky), maxine.newlands@jcu.edu.au (M. Newlands).

shaping public understanding and debate of the risks associated with social-ecological issues. How and why the media shape public opinion on risk can be understood through the idea of gatekeeping. Gatekeeping, an early concept derived from White's [11] work on flows of information, shows that information passes through several gates before becoming news; each gate is operated by gatekeepers such as editors, owners, advertisers, and readerships who view the information through various political and socio-cultural ideological positions. White [11] observes that gatekeepers do not operate in a vacuum, but work within structures; they are affected by the larger socio-political system.

The media's construction of risk concerning environmental issues has been extensively researched [12–14]. Ulrich Beck notes “news media do not only function in terms of a global focusing of events; rather, the news media adopt a more performative stand, actively enacting certain issues as global risks” [15]. Lidskog and Olausson [16] found that stakeholder claims about the necessity of spraying mosquito and moth outbreaks were legitimized by the media in the case of mosquitos, but de-legitimized in the case of moths. Discursive strategies were used that represented different values and interests about human welfare and environmental protection that downplayed and emphasized ecological risks for mosquitos and moths, respectively. By establishing a frame or context through which to interpret events and highlighting particular risks, the routines of journalism contribute heavily to the production of dominant meaning regarding contested environmental issues.

Media coverage and representations of risks are critical to the public's understanding and perception of an issue [17], which can ultimately influence political outcomes and policy decision-making [18,19]. Public risk perceptions, for example, shaped by media representations can fundamentally compel or constrain political, economic and social action to address particular risks [12]. Images, created by interacting public and media discourse on an issue, carry strong positive or negative emotional ‘charges’ that guide risk decision-making [18]. While media does not tell people what to think, it sets agendas and forges consensus by presenting the public with a range of issues to discuss, reinforcing attitudes and contributing new knowledge or opinion [13–20]. The media regulates what issues become visible, making some issues more prominent in public minds than others. Through this selective process, the media legitimizes and delegitimizes actors' claims, thus, constructing a dominant way of understanding an issue. The media also represents some actors' perspectives more than others' in texts. Particular actors can have the dominant ‘framing power’, or journalist-chosen representation of views and positions in relation to an issue, which is an important form of social influence [21].

The media uses explicit and implicit risk narratives. Risks can be discussed broadly in terms of possible adverse impacts, or more narrowly with numbers assigned to the probabilities of different outcomes occurring and everyday concepts or language of risk like insurance and betting [22]. In the context of climate change, examples of implicit risk narrative include descriptions of the adverse impacts from greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. sea level rise, and more extreme weather events). By contrast, an explicit risk narrative example would be: “There is a 1-in-20 chance—about the same chance as an American developing colon cancer; twice as likely as an American developing melanoma—that by the end of this century, more than \$701 billion worth of existing coastal property will be below mean sea levels, with more than \$730 billion of additional property at risk during high tide” [23]. These risk narratives, coupled with different ideologies associated with different cultural groups, and political and economic priorities and strategies, explain differences in the media's reinterpretations of scientific knowledge, which in turn works to either sustain or destroy the space for particular policy options and action [24].

The media's construction and reconstruction of environmental

risks is a continual process that changes over time as political, economic and cultural contexts change [21]. The ‘circuit of culture’ model shows how issues cycle through media – producing texts that define the issue in the public sphere and how audiences, through their own meaning making, decode the media communications in the context of their everyday lives, leading to new moments of production [24]. Carvalho terms these moments as ‘critical discourse moments’: specific happenings that may challenge the ‘established’ discursive position’. Questions to be asked of critical discourse moments include: Did arguments change because of them? Did new alternative views arise? [21]. In other words, what key moments or events change how we view a particular situation? There is an ongoing dialectical relationship between public and media discourses that change the way issues are constructed over time. For example, Gamson and Modigliani [25] show, through an analysis of media on nuclear power from 1945 until 1989, that media representations of the issue, in combination with changes in events, were influential in the eventual decline in public support for nuclear power. Influential events and factors shaping media on an issue can be identified through analyzing representations of issues between successive points in time.

This paper explores media representations of perceptions of risk to the GBR from dredging activities for port expansion at Abbot Point. Research questions include: what are the different claims and views in relation to the dredge spoil issue and which social actors are linked to these in the media? How, if at all, has media representation and coverage of the issue changed over time? These questions are explored through a structural and thematic analysis of Australian print articles from January 2013, the time of the proposal to dispose of dredge spoil in the GBRMP, until the proposal's final approval in February 2014. The paper concludes with a discussion of the role media played in shaping public opinion and risk perceptions related to the dredge spoil issue in the GBR.

2. Background

The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (GBRWHA) is the world's largest coral reef ecosystem, a national and global tourist attraction and important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives and culture. The GBRWHA covers an area of almost 350,000 square kilometers in the Coral Sea and along the coast of North-eastern Australia, and is managed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) (Fig. 1). The GBRMP was created in 1975 with the enactment of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975 to protect the majority of the reef ecosystem through monitoring and regulating human activities such as fishing and tourism. Each year the GBR contributes over \$5.7 AUD billion and employs close to 70,000 full-time workers to the Australian economy, mainly through tourism activity [26]. A more recent estimate of the collective monetary value of ecosystem services provided by the GBR puts this figure in the range of \$15–20 billion AUD per year [27]. The GBR was declared a World Heritage Area (GBRWHA) in 1981 because of its ‘outstanding universal value’ and unique biological diversity. However, the resilience of the reef is being seriously eroded due to climate change and impacts from agriculture, fishing, shipping, port activities, and urban development [28–30].

In the decade to 2011, rapid growth in Chinese demand for coal and other minerals created an increased demand for mineral exports from Australia; prices for Australian minerals tripled leading to massive investments (e.g. \$80 billion a year from 2010 to 2013 for extraction, processing and transport infrastructure) [31]. Queensland has been one of the Australian states to experience the recent ‘mining boom’ due to its vast coal and gas reserves, particularly in Central Queensland. The mining boom has seen a marked increase in proposals to expand and develop ports and processing plants along

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