

Newspaper Framing and the Stadium Subsidy Debate

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The public subsidization of professional sports stadiums is a contentious public policy issue facing many urban centers in North America (Brown and Paul, 1999, 2002; Crompton, 2004; Fort, 1997). While the construction of stadiums to attract or retain a Major League franchise has been framed as a popular method of urban (re)development generating substantial economic benefits for host communities (Chapin, 2004; Danielson, 1997; Euchner, 1993; Rosentraub, 1997), most independent empirical research has found the tangible economic benefits of this strategy to be suspect (Baade, 1987, 1994, 2003; Baim, 1994; Coates and Humphries, 1999; Quirk and Fort, 1992). Thus, proponents increasingly shift the focus of the debate to 'non-measurable endpoints' (Delaney and Eckstein, 2003: 200), and argue that communities may capture intangible economic benefits from stadium development including increased status and psychic income (Crompton, 2004). Despite the widespread debate regarding the issue, communities continue to allocate significant public funding towards the subsidization of professional sports stadium development (Baade, 2003).

An investment in a professional sports stadium is an expensive proposition for urban centers. Swindell and Rosentraub (1998) reported that some U.S. cities have invested over \$500M in sports facilities. In order to raise the funds necessary for such an investment, city officials are often obligated to hold a referendum to gain voter approval for measures such as tax increases to support bond issues. These events represent political contests where competing groups attempt to legitimize their position on the issue. The local newspaper plays an important role in the contest for legitimacy as it provides a platform for the various interested civic actors to argue their position on the stadium subsidy issue (Turner and Marichal, 2000). Research has outlined that the local newspaper is a growth oriented civic actor (Cox and Mair, 1988; Molotch, 1976) and as such, stands to benefit from stadium developments (Friedman and Mason, 2004; Rosentraub, 1997; Sage, 1993).

The framing and agenda setting literature has found that the media plays an important role influencing public opinion (Cohen, 1963; Entman, 1993; Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Kinder, 1998; Lippmann, 1922; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Experiments conducted by Tversky and Kahneman (1981) suggest that decision outcomes can be influenced by frame manipulation. As frames serve to "produce meaning and organize experience" (Carragee and Roefs, 2004: 216; cf. Gamson, 1992; Goffman, 1974; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978) they are thought to be an essential component of the democratic process (Zaller, 1992). Thus, given their power to influence public opinion, the way in which the media frames the stadium subsidy debate is worthy of consideration.

To explore this issue, we examined the Gateway Project referendum held in Cleveland, Ohio, on May 8, 1990. By focusing on the 1990 referendum, we are able to investigate a 'critical discourse moment' (Chilton, 1987; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) where the stadium subsidy issue is highly salient in the local media. Cleveland provides an interesting site to examine the media framing of the stadium subsidy debate as the city is serviced by only one daily newspaper, The Cleveland Plain Dealer. The Plain Dealer boasts the highest circulation of any newspaper in Ohio, and is ranked in the top 20 for circulation in the United States (Editor & Publisher International Year Book, 2004). Since 1982, it has been the only metro daily newspaper operating in the Cleveland and surrounding area (Encyclopaedia of Cleveland History, 2006 online). Thus, the frames promoted by the Plain Dealer represent the dominant newspaper frames received by the local community. Furthermore, previous research has found that the local newspaper is an important source of information regarding local issues (Deephouse, 1996; Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Palmgreen and Clarke, 1977; Stempel, 1991). The site is also appropriate for this study as the construction of professional sports facilities has been a major component of Cleveland's urban (re)development strategy (Rosentraub, 1997). As such, the stadium subsidy debate represents a prominent local public policy issue in Cleveland.

Data for the study were collected via searching microfilm copies of the Plain Dealer for pertinent contextual and stadium subsidy specific coverage during the 1990 calendar year. Results of this search yielded 216 newspaper articles, 20 editorials and 93 letters to the editor. Content analysis and inductive coding allowed the researchers to delineate the frames promoted by the Plain Dealer concerning the stadium subsidy debate, which are discussed. Results from this study provide insight into the way in which the local newspaper frames the stadium subsidy debate, and how it represents the various interested civic actors and their arguments in the discourse surrounding this highly contested public policy issue.

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