Long-term Media Framing and Stadium Subsidies: A Case Study of The Miami Herald’s Coverage of a New Marlins Stadium

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Stadium subsidization (the use of public funds to pay for the construction and maintenance of spectator sport facilities) is an issue that directly connects sport and community. This highly debated phenomenon has prompted the development of a body of research literature examining its implications. Many of the studies focus on evaluating the economic or quality of life benefits (or lack thereof) of professional teams and stadiums (Coates & Humphreys, 2008; Johnson & Whitehead, 2000; Siegfried & Zimbalist, 2000). These economic studies have been joined by research examining the urban governance structures that affect subsidization (Beaver, 2001; Delaney & Eckstein, 2007), including the role of local media (Turner & Marichal, 1998).

One such way that media affects public perception of subsidization is through the use of frames. Entman (1993) proposes that “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote particular problem definitions…” Previous studies using media frame analysis to examine subsidization debates have focused on the relationship between media framing and subsidy initiative success (Delany & Eckstein, 2008), the conflict of frames from competing groups (Schwirian, Curry, & Woldoff, 2001) and the use of common frames such as economic development, civic pride, civic priorities, and financing (Buist & Mason, 2010). This paper adds to the literature by extending the subsidization frame analysis by examining the evolving stance of a single paper in high-resolution over a period of 12 years.

The construction of Marlins Park in Miami serves as a prominent example of the stadium subsidization debate. Built from 2009-2012 as a new home for the Miami Marlins, the stadium ultimately used more than $500 million of public money to finance construction, a source of fierce local controversy. During this period The Miami Herald, a prominent local newspaper, extensively covered the debate surrounding the construction of the stadium and use of public funds. The framing and tenor of the Herald’s editorials and reporting evolved during this time period. A long-term frame analysis of Herald coverage allows for an examination of frame evolution through all phases of stadium construction. Knowledge of frame evolution adds to the body of literature by providing deeper context for determining the role of local media in subsidization movements.

Method

Forty-eight articles concerning the construction of a new Marlins Stadium appearing in The Miami Herald from 2003-2014 were collected using the Newsbank database resource. Keywords concerning the construction of a new Marlins Stadium were searched for using the database and all relevant articles, columns, and editorial pieces were then qualitatively reviewed and coded to identify evolving media frames.

Results and Discussion

The results show that The Herald used many of the familiar frames of civic status, economic development, civic priorities, and financing. During the development of the stadium plans (2003-2009) The Herald was a “hybrid” supporter of the stadium, with the editorial staff consistently pushing the need for a new stadium under the auspices of civic status and economic development while several prominent columnists wrote staunchly anti-subsidy pieces using the frames concerned with misplaced civic priorities and financing issues. As unfavorable details of the financing deal emerged, The Herald became increasingly skeptical in both columns and editorials. These negative articles framed the issue in terms of the team’s failure to win and the magnitude of the subsidy as a negative reflection on civic status.

The examination of The Miami Herald’s evolving use of frames demonstrates the context dependence of media analysis in subsidy debates. Media framing of stadium debates is not static, and the time period from which the media is extracted will affect results. Furthermore, the frames employed by media entities will shift to account for
emerging sentiment about financial details of the subsidy and the team’s success. Going forward, these factors may be useful for tracking changing media framing. Further research can be done to assess the impact evolving media frames in other markets, such as those that get “good deals” for stadiums or where the team enjoys improved on-field performance.

References


