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Tourism issues, agenda setting and the media

Recent international events such as those of September 11, 2001, the Bali bombing, the American-led invasion of Iraq and the SARS outbreak in China have highlighted the perceived impact of crises and /or instability on tourism. Such issues have long been recognised as a factor which influences tourist decision-making (e.g., Hall and O'Sullivan, 1996) but, critically, they also highlight the role of the media in influencing public opinion and perception of events. Therefore, critical to an understanding of the likely longer-term pattern of response to issues which affect tourism is an understanding of how the media deals with such concerns and how this, in turn, may affect tourist perceptions and policy making.

Public perceptions of the relative importance of an issue are largely determined by the news media (Wood and Peake, 1998) whether directly to the receiver of the media communication or by word of mouth. The media interprets issues, giving them more or less significance through the amount or type of coverage provided. The amount of media coverage of an issue may not reflect its actual importance in real terms. In the case of tourism, the recent SARS outbreak while an important health issue, arguably pails into significance each year when compared to the number of deaths from diseases such as dengue fever or malaria carriers of which also travel back to their home country.

The media, particularly television news, also focus attention on specific events through this same interpretive function (Iyengar & Kinder 1987). However, not only does the media influence general public opinions, it also plays a major part in informing consumers images of destinations and transport modes, their relative safety and security, either directly in terms of being read, heard or watched, or indirectly through the advice given by friends, relatives and other sources of "word of mouth" information (Fodness & Murray 1997). Moreover, with global communication events can be played out live on the television screen, there is the potential for having an even greater impact on the viewing public. Yet the media serves to filter which events are shown and which are not.

These issues highlight the importance for understanding the means by which tourism-related issues and events get onto media or policy agenda. Agenda-setting research focuses not on the opinions surrounding issues, but on issue salience. Cohen was the first to state what has become the central public agenda-setting hypothesis: the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (1963, p.13). Following from Cohen's discussion, public agenda-setting work demonstrated that increased issue salience for the media leads to increased issue salience for the public – in agenda-setting terms, that the media agenda has an impact on the public agenda, where an agenda is a ranking of the relative importance of various public issues (Dearing and Rogers, 1996).

Relatively little research has been undertaken on this topic from the perspective of tourism, yet such research may shed important light on how tourism is perceived in policy or issue terms. For example, in a study of the 1999 New Zealand general election Padgett and Hall (2001) reported that tourism was generally considered by candidates to be a very

important election issue. However, in the context of all issues, it ranked poorly. When asked directly about tourism's election issue significance, candidates rated it as only somewhat important. Results suggest that, because candidate knowledge of tourism policies was low, it would be unlikely that issues could be successfully debated, thus leaving tourism out of the election campaign. Indeed, a content analysis of the four major New Zealand newspapers during the period of the election campaign revealed that tourism rarely featured as an election issue (only four articles were recorded in the survey). Tourism, therefore, attracted insignificant media attention compared to its economic significance. Indeed, an observation regarding news stories on tourism at the international or national media level is that they generally tend to be negative although local media reporting often contains more positive stories regarding tourism development.

Several hypotheses have been put forward with respect to the agenda setting and issue salience. One of the most significant concepts in understanding the relationships between the media and the issue agenda is the concept of the 'issue attention cycle' (Downs, 1972). According to Downs, modern publics attend to many issues in a cyclical fashion. A problem "leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then, though still largely unresolved, gradually fades from the center of public attention" (1972, p.38). Originally applied to an understanding of social and environmental issues, the notion of an issue-attention cycle has also been found to be extremely important in explaining the relationship between domestic and foreign policy decisions, the media and the level of public interest in certain issues (Cohen, 1963; Walker, 1977; Peters & Hogwood, 1985; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

The issue-attention cycle is divided into five stages which may vary in duration depending upon the particular issue involved, but which almost always occur in the following sequence:

1. The pre-problem stage
2. Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm
3. Realizing the cost of significant progress
4. Gradual decline of intense public interest
5. The post-problem stage

Hall (2002) applied the issue-attention cycle to understanding the policy agenda and related consumers perspectives on travel security following the terrorist attacks of September 11 and argued that these stages not only described recent efforts with respect to travel safety measures and policies but were also indicative of wider public opinions towards issues associated with travel safety. Noting in particular that travel security problems were clearly recognised by experts prior to September 11 but that they had a low media profile and that it took the events of that day for them to become an important policy issue.

Other significant hypotheses regarding agenda setting include Zucker's (1978) "obtrusiveness" hypothesis in which he suggests that the more obtrusive an issue is, i.e. the more likely individuals' experience it directly, the less potential there is for media effects on public opinion. Similarly, Yagade and Dozier, (1990) argued that "concrete" issues should be more open to media effects than "abstract" issues. Arguably this may at least be a partial explanation for the importance of perceptions of health and safety as a determinant in travel decision-making as opposed to other "crises" in destinations which may be economic or financial in nature. Other authors, such as MacKuen and Coombs (1981) and Wanta and Hu (1993), have argued that issues that involve dramatic events or conflict should also increase the potential for media attention and have consequent effects on public opinion.

Regardless of the factor behind issue salience it is apparent that the carrying capacity of the media means that the ecological competition between issues leads to a situation in which new issues arise replacing the other issues in terms of extent and quality of coverage. Media coverage becomes diminished and routinised over time with only sporadic review or anniversary stories which mark the effects of the original event on policy and administrative processes. As issues move towards the media horizon they also decline in importance as a consumer concern (Hall & O'Sullivan 1996). Given such a situation it is apparent that unless a crisis continues for a substantial length of time then it is extremely unlikely to have permanent impacts on destination perceptions or policy and issue agendas. As Hall (2002) observed, concerns over travel security have had high prominence before the events of September 11 only to fade over time as a policy issue and they will undoubtedly do so again. The challenge facing those who have to deal with the implications of certain issues and concerns being salient in the public or policy mind is do they have strategies in place to influence media presentation and ranking of issues. Arguably, having a positive media relationship may be far more important in influencing public perceptions of tourism and tourist destinations than cultivating relationships with politicians who are often mistrusted anyway by the wider public. Finally, it is important that the tourism industry develop a far better understanding of the processes behind issue salience and agenda setting than has hitherto been the case if they are to have greater influence on the agenda themselves.

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