

# The Print Media and Planning

by R. Christopher Edey

## Introduction

Who shapes planning policy in Canada? The short answer would be the planners, politicians and public(s). But in the interrelationship between these three groups of actors, what role do the media play? It is an important question, yet an understudied one.

The media force attention to certain issues over others; build up public images of political figures and current events; and influence what individuals should think about, know about and have opinions about. In general, the public discovers what is important and needs to be addressed on the basis of how much emphasis the topic in question is given.<sup>1</sup>

Through a variety of processes, including agenda-setting, narrative templates and unseen evidence, the media shapes the

public agenda. This article seeks to examine the interrelationship between the print media and planning, using examples from a study of the media's role in Ontario's Oak Ridges Moraine planning debate.

## A note on the study

The Oak Ridges Moraine (ORM) acts as the headwaters for over 35 rivers and streams in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). While the continued growth of the GTA has regularly pitted developers and conservationists against one another, the conflict and the attendant media coverage has rarely equaled the scale witnessed in the ORM debate.

The *Toronto Star* boasts the largest circulation of GTA (and Canadian) newspapers, with over 450,000 copies printed daily and a daily readership of over one million people.<sup>2</sup> To determine

## Summary

The role that media play in decision-making in planning is an understudied topic in the planning literature. The media play a crucial role in defining what issues we think about, and occasionally how we think about them. This article explores the relationship using a study of Ontario's Oak Ridges Moraine planning debate.

## Résumé

Le rôle des médias dans la prise de décisions en planification urbaine est un sujet très peu abordé dans les publications du monde de l'urbanisme. Les médias jouent un rôle crucial face aux sujets qui nous préoccupent, et, à l'occasion, face à notre perspective sur ces sujets. Cet article se penche sur cette question en étudiant le débat qui porte sur la moraine d'Oak Ridges, en Ontario.

what impact the *Toronto Star* had on the Oak Ridges outcome, a content analysis of the *Toronto Star's* ORM coverage, and long interviews with six participants in the debate itself were conducted. Content analysis involves the systematic examination of communication or message, in this case using pro-conservation and



Oak Ridges Moraine map.

**TABLE 1 – TORONTO STAR ORM COVERAGE BY TYPE**

| Type          | Frequency  | Average Score | Pro-Conservation | Neutral   | Pro-Development | Percent of total content |
|---------------|------------|---------------|------------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| News articles | 139        | 1.45          | 87               | 32        | 20              | 59.91%                   |
| Columns       | 30         | 3.93          | 26               | 3         | 1               | 12.93%                   |
| Editorials    | 16         | 3.69          | 15               | 1         | 0               | 6.90%                    |
| Letters       | 45         | 2.16          | 37               | 7         | 1               | 19.40%                   |
| Other         | 2          | 6.00          | 2                | 0         | 0               | 0.86%                    |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>232</b> | <b>2.10</b>   | <b>167</b>       | <b>43</b> | <b>22</b>       | <b>100.00%</b>           |

an equal number of pro-development categories to score the articles. A summed article score above zero indicated a pro-conservation tilt, while a negative score showed the reverse.

**Agenda-setting**

Agenda-setting is the key topic in any discussion of the media’s power and role with regard to public opinion and policy outcomes. First level agenda-setting is defined as “the selection of object or issue for attention” (what to think about) and second level as “the selection of attributes for thinking” (how to think about it). “Attributes are the characteristics and properties that detail the images of each object or issue.”<sup>3</sup>

The ORM debate offers a clear example of both first and second level agenda-setting. A total of 232 articles dealing with the Oak Ridges Moraine were identified and analyzed,<sup>4</sup> and an overall bias that was significantly in favour of conservation was discovered. Sixty percent of the total articles were news articles and of those, 63 percent were pro-conservation, 23 percent were neutral and 14 percent were classified as being pro-development. Each type of coverage is summarized in terms of bias and frequency in Table 1.

The *Star’s* news coverage was notable for the discrepancy between the space given to development opponents and proponents to state their respective cases. In general, those opposing development appeared much more frequently than those arguing for it.

When an issue is given so much prominence by the media (telling the public *what* to think about), and then presented in such a one-sided manner (pushing people towards a certain way of thinking *about* the issue), it is unsurprising to discover that an April 2000 poll of Moraine-area residents

found 89 percent in favour of “protecting” the Moraine,<sup>5</sup> and that 81 percent of Ontarians were found in support of the *Greenbelt Protection Plan* in a November 2004 poll.<sup>6</sup>

**Framing and narrative templates**

In the transmission of information to a wide audience, a certain amount of detail and depth are lost, which makes simplicity and the framing of an issue essential to successful transmission through the media. Journalism often uses “narrative templates” to accomplish this transmission. One of the most common templates is that of the villain, the victim and the hero. Any story that can be arranged into this format will get media attention, often without a great deal of scrutiny as to whom, exactly, the respective players are, and by which criteria they were assigned their media roles.<sup>7</sup>

In the Oak Ridges case, development opponents were successful in changing how the issue was framed in the print media. Despite its known importance to the GTA’s ecosystem and the strong development pressures, the Oak Ridges Moraine was not prominent in the media for the long period leading to the 1999 spike in coverage (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the media spotlight was not attracted to the Oak Ridges issue solely because of development pressures. A vital moment in the development of the media coverage was the allegation of scandal surrounding a former Ontario Municipal Affairs Minister that surfaced in October of 1999. The Minister was accused of inappropriate behaviour in regard to several development applications on the Moraine. When this story broke, it naturally attracted media attention, which presented a major opportunity for the groups already active in working

to protect the Moraine to get their views aired to a larger audience. According to one such activist:

“It was then strategic to turn this political scandal into an environmental issue, and then [we] kept hammering at this. Each press conference, each press release was again just hitting those main points... Suddenly it was like bang! It becomes an environmental issue.”

The pro-conservation groups were effective in their efforts to push their agenda into the passing spotlight of the media. The issue of urban development on the Moraine, which was first defined by the inappropriate conduct of a politician, quickly became framed in environmental terms. This development greatly advantaged the environmental groups working to stop development on the Moraine as the debate was now being contested on their territory and in their language.

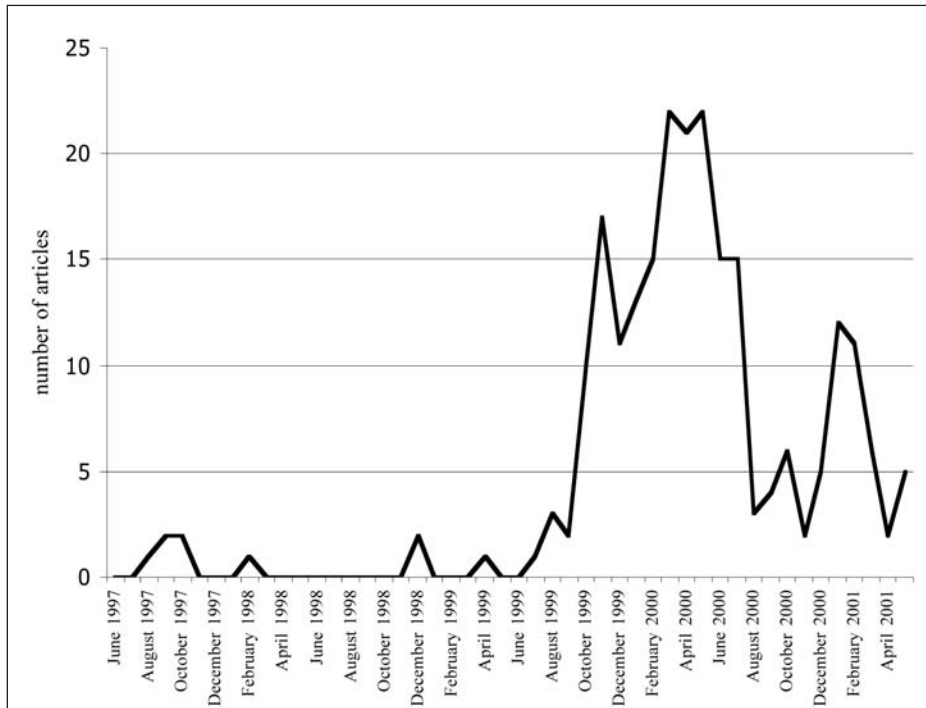
The framing of the issue continued to develop as time passed. The *Star’s* Moraine coverage gradually moved from a discussion of an environmental issue to a broader discussion of urban sprawl, urban growth and the current model of new greenfield development in general. A community activist noted:

“The *Star* made the connection [between the various issues] and did a wonderful plan view of the sprawl. That allowed us to launch into hitting the government that this is now a political situation on their hands... The environmental groups set the agenda and used the media, and the media was excellent to help bring that campaign to a successful end.”

**Unseen evidence**

The importance of which facts manage to fit themselves within the chosen narrative template is exceeded only by

**FIGURE 1 – NUMBER OF ORM ITEMS IN THE STAR THROUGHOUT THE STUDY PERIOD**



those that do not make the grade. The trader and essayist Nassim Nicholas Taleb writes, "...we have a natural tendency to look for instances that confirm our story and our version of the world – these instances are always easy to find... You take past instances that corroborate your theories and you treat them as evidence. For instance, a diplomat will show you his 'accomplishments', not what he failed to do."<sup>8</sup> Unseen evidence is an old problem, but especially pernicious in public policy journalism, because it severely constricts the reader's understanding of the issue to only those facts that fit the narrative.

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, the *Toronto Star's* coverage of the Oak Ridges Moraine and its ongoing coverage of planning issues is more notable for what it excluded rather than included. For example, when the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan was announced on June 16, 2006, the *Star* dedicated the entire front page (and another within the paper) to the matter, running it under the not exactly nuanced headline: "4 million more people, but without the sprawl: Ontario plans bold new rules to promote compact communities where people can live and work without cars". The article

Painted a bright future where farmland would be protected from suburban sprawl and people would walk from their medium to high-density residences to work. What it did not include was any mention that limiting the supply of land available for development would make developable land more expensive, and that 87 percent of those looking to purchase a home still prefer a single detached unit.<sup>9</sup> None of the above is intended to criticize the Growth Plan itself. Rather, the point is that if all these massive changes and desirable end-results are going to come to pass, there must be costs somewhere for someone, trade-offs, winners and losers. But one would never know it from how the *Star* reported the issue. During the Oak Ridges Moraine debate, only 10 of the 232 articles studied mentioned the economic benefits of land development.

The complete absence of the voice of a key stakeholder cannot be ignored. This missing voice was that of the future homeowners within the contested developments. This group of people does not have an organized group to speak on its behalf (unlike existing homeowners and environmental activists of various bents) and it is unlikely that its members would ever conceive of themselves as an interest

group in the first place. Yet, the ORM debate had a definite impact on the variety, availability and affordability of their housing options. Given that many developers avoid conveying their messages through the media, and are likely to be framed as being purely self-interested when they do, future homeowners were left with no credible voice to articulate their interests via the media.

## Conclusions

When the media portray an issue in an unambiguous way with dramatic, convincing and clear evidence, public attitudes are more likely to change.<sup>10</sup> The existing literature suggests that the print media is not an impartial actor. Through its agenda-setting abilities, the media can affect the relative salience of the issues on the public agenda, and to a lesser extent, can affect the importance of the key attributes of the same issue. In short, the media transmits information about policy matters to citizens, who in turn pressure officials to act on their concerns and priorities.<sup>11</sup>

The interviewees felt that the *Toronto Star's* coverage of the ORM issue was instrumental in shaping public opinion on the issue, putting pressure on various levels of government to act. From a planner at a provincial ministry:

"I think that media had a large role... While we may have gotten a Moraine Plan of some sort... it would have been a lot weaker than what it is and allowed a lot more development than it does."

## Looking forward

What lessons can be drawn about the interaction between planning and the media? First, a convincing narrative matters. Stories simplify the issues and assign roles, and as John Forester writes, "Before problems are solved, they have to be constructed or formulated in the first place."<sup>12</sup> Whoever constructs and formulates the narrative through which the planning problem at hand is debated will have an advantage in pushing the debate towards their preferred solution. In the words of one interviewee, "When it comes down to it, people don't want to hear all the 'ins' and 'outs' of planning... if they're angry about something... Boiling it all down to 'Save the Moraine' is a great position to take because people can get behind it, even if they

don't know exactly where the Moraine starts or stops."

A second key lesson is that interpersonal relationships matter. On Oak Ridges, not only did the development opponents strike up a very profitable relationship with the *Star's* lead columnist on the issue, they also became the default "conservationist" voice in many news pieces. Most reporters do not have specialized planning knowledge, and someone will always be waiting in the wings with their prepared – and preferred – narrative template. Municipal planning departments may want to re-examine their relationships with local reporters to provide them with more knowledge of local planning issues. This could serve to mitigate the tunnel vision that narrative templates tend to impose. ■

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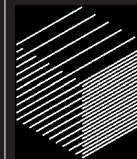
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