URBAN TRANSPORTATION AND THE PRESS: A SURVEY OF EDITORIAL OPINION*

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ABSTRACT

The editorial opinions expressed in the news press can provide information on which issues are currently prominent concerns of the public, and on how public opinion may be aligned on those issues. A survey of all urban transportation-related editorials appearing in a sample of 155 U.S. newspapers during a period of 19 months in 1973-74 revealed that a number of issues related to transit financing, transit and highway investment, bicycles, and the transportation planning process were currently under debate in the urban press. This paper presents the survey's findings regarding the incidence and viewpoint of articles on these and other issues. Transit financing concerns clearly emerged as the most frequently discussed, and some agreement in editorial viewpoint was also found. The paper concludes with the authors' subjective observations on the scope and style of editorial discussion of urban transportation issues.

Introduction

It is generally agreed that the last decade has witnessed the growth of a movement to make urban transportation planning more responsive to public opinion and to changes in public needs. There are, however, distinct barriers to increased public participation in the local planning process. One major barrier is the genuine difficulty which planners have in communicating their often quite esoteric (if not always very sophisticated) analytic procedures to the general public — and sometimes their reticence in volunteering the assumptions and uncertainties inherent in those procedures. Another barrier is the problem of identifying sources which reveal the true concerns and values of the public at large, rather than merely the most vocal viewpoints. Moreover, in populations as heterogeneous as those found in many of the

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nation's metropolitan areas, we might reasonably expect there to be little consensus on transportation issues.

This paper presents an examination of public attitudes toward urban transportation issues as found in one source of articulated opinion - the editorial pages of the news press. It is not clear the extent to which press editorial opinion either reflects or influences the attitudes of the public at large. However, several studies of opinion formation have found the mass media (and newspapers in particular) to have a strong influence on public opinion. According to one recent study (Graber, 1971), "... even for those who neither read, watch, nor listen themselves, the mass media are crucial because they furnish most of the opinion-shaping information which is passed on through personal contacts." Thus, while the relationship between editorial content and public opinion has not been extensively explored, it does seem safe to assume that the opinions expressed by a newspaper bear an important relation to those of the general public.

An Overview of the Survey

Our survey covered a total of 264 editorial articles appearing over a period of 19 months from January 1973 through July 1974. The sample of 155 newspapers surveyed comprised the 92 general circulation daily papers and the 63 other news-oriented publications which are indexed on a continuing basis by Update, a microfiche news file concerned with urban topics. While this sample does not appear to have been randomly selected to represent a cross-section of either all newspapers or all urban areas, we do believe that it has a sufficiently broad and unbiased coverage (in terms of geography, city size, and political viewpoint) to be considered generally typical of the nation's urban news press. There is some possibility, however, that suburban viewpoints may be underrepresented. (More details about the sample of newspapers are presented in the Appendix.)

Some common characteristics were readily apparent throughout the sample of editorial articles. Similarities were found not only in attitudes and opinions, but also in certain styles of editorial expression. Common to most editorials were an absence of factual content and reasoned support for the positions adopted on issues, and also a failure to consider counterarguments. Background information, which could help explain the causes and interrelationships of the city's transportation issues, was often restricted to an account of stands adopted by local political leaders. The rationale for positions taken on issues was often couched in such amorphous terms as "the public interest" and "making our cities livable." While editorial opinion may both reflect and kindle public opinion, the process does not always appear to require light.