

Urban planning process and discourses in Sydney: positioning social media use within a community group's campaign

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Since the 1950s the dominant paradigm for planning in Sydney has been urban consolidation in the form of medium density housing (Searle and Filion 2002). Successive government arguments for urban consolidation have varied from decade to decade. The main discourse of the 1950s to 1970s centred on the efficient use of existing infrastructure services such as water, sewerage, electricity and roads. Since the 1990s, urban consolidation discourse has shifted to a solution for housing affordability, housing an aging population and efficient use of public transport. Environmental arguments have also emerged and further changes to household demographics such as delaying marriage and children have created a higher demand for higher density housing (Searle and Filion 2002). Throughout this time, urban consolidation has experienced considerable opposition from community's who mobilise various arguments of resistance, including increased traffic, loss of privacy, loss of streetscape and an influx of lower socioeconomic households (Searle 2007; Searle and Filion 2011). This case study is consistent with the urban consolidation paradigm that has been pursued in Sydney for the past 30 years (Ruming et al., 2012), with a strong emphasis over the past decade through planning system reforms that proposed the introduction of up-front strategic planning informed by community consultation (Ruming and Davies 2014; MacDonald 2015). This is a single example of the processes and debates occurring across Sydney.

Using discourse analysis this case study explores the discourses employed by local government, a State planning agency, an independent expert panel, local and

metropolitan media and a self-organised community group to represent their prospective arguments for and against the proposed development. Due to the significant use of social media by the community group and to a lesser extent other stakeholders, this study includes Twitter text in its discourse analysis.

The term 'discourse' within discourse analysis refers to the basic act of speech, but also refers to groups of utterances or texts which appear to belong in a single social domain (Hastings 1999). Van Dijk (1997) notes discourse analysis is interested in how language is being used during discourse events. The particular vocabulary or rhetorical strategies being used, how these are interpreted and what they accomplish. In the domain of urban planning and policy discourse, Sharp and Richardson (2001) advise discourse can refer to any speech or text, which occurs during the planning or policy making process.

To undertake discourse analysis researchers look to highlight two aspects of discourse; firstly, the social context of the discourse and second, the rhetorical organisation of the discourse. Fairclough (1989; 1995) offers a 3 tier framework of text analysis, discursive practice and social practice from which to conduct discourse analysis (Lees 2004). Following Hastings (1999), the use of CDA in this case study is predominantly concerned with how and why language is used by stakeholders particularly the local community, how particular rhetorical strategies are deployed particularly by government agencies, and what the effect of those strategies have on the urban planning process.

Specifically, discourse analysis was conducted of the following texts:

- Planning reports by local government planners.
- Planning reports and media releases by Department of Planning (Department)
- Decision documents published by the Planning Assessment Commission.
- Local and metropolitan newspaper articles.
- Newsletters and media releases produced by the local community.
- Social media data in the form of Twitter text by all interested parties and stakeholders throughout the planning process.

By tracing the discourses this case study demonstrates that peaks in social media usage match those of mainstream media (newspaper, radio and television) at

decision points during a planning process, however, at times when collective action is required, such as a formal public exhibition, social media was the dominant communications channel, while mainstream media interest was relatively low. In this instance, the community group used a sophisticated communications strategy that utilised all forms of media. Discourses also reveal a lack of community understanding of planning processes, which was exacerbated by a failure to communicate the objectives of the appeal process and why it does not include community participation. The Department's guidelines clearly discuss the appeal process as a quick assessment to ascertain if a proposal should proceed to public exhibition (DP&I 2013), however, the community perception was that they were being forced to undertake multiple consultation processes until a positive decision was reached. This was highlighted by the difficulties encountered by the Department's attempt to communicate with the community using social media.

As the community group's knowledge of planning improved, they started making links between the high level rhetoric of planning reform being played out at a State wide level and it's disconnect with detailed planning processes being experienced by the community. This changed the nature of the proposal from a local planning matter, to an example of how the State government was approaching planning reform as a whole.

The open nature of social media allows the community to distribute their opinions to a wide audience, generate collective action and also tap in to the daily functions of government agencies and politicians. This was demonstrated in this instance by the community group's use of Twitter to relentlessly remind the Department and politicians of their situation, however, it also opens up community groups to abusive behaviour by anonymous citizens who may not agree with them. This is not new and social media is just a new channel to force one's opinions on another. In hindsight, the community received the decision they campaigned long and hard for, however, there was no certainty throughout the process which was evident in the public discourses of anger and frustration played out through both mainstream media and social media.

In conclusion, this case study reveals disjointed conversations between the Department and the community using social media and how mixed messages through planning reform and current processes can confuse and frustrate a community and finally, the open nature of social media has advantages and disadvantages in terms of attracting attention to a community group's campaign. Overall, the case study provides an example of how both government and self-organised community groups use discursive strategies to strengthen their respective positions during the plan making process.

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