

# **Framing the Carbon Tax in Australia: An investigation of frame sponsorship and organisational influence behind media agendas**

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requirements for the award of the degree

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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## CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Darryl Nelson, declare that the work in this thesis document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution or any other degree.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Until then, this thesis is dedicated lastly (but by no means least) to all those who currently work and strive to redress the widespread detrimental effects of corporate greed and unethical consumerism. Your efforts are vital, in the face of unequal power relations, and together constitute what RFK described as tiny ripples of hope, whereby “crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

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## i. Abstract

Framing has been extensively studied in relation to media and public discourse. However, this dissertation examines a dimension of framing theory that has long been acknowledged but not adequately explored – the influences of sources on media news stories and the concept of framing sponsorship.

Frames and framing have typically been identified as media artefacts and practices, with suggestions that editors and journalists unilaterally frame issues of debate in the public sphere. Comparatively little attention has been paid to examining how frames are created externally to the newsroom, to influence the emphasis or content of media stories, other than some studies of public relations (PR) that have mostly been undertaken for functional purposes (e.g. to identify the effectiveness of PR). However, research reported here shows that the influence of sources on the newsroom process is increasingly sophisticated and pervasive.

Using triangulated data from media content and textual analyses, source interviews and a public opinion survey, this study examines how the Carbon Tax was framed in its first three months as a policy direction in Australia. First introduced in February 2011 by the Gillard government, considerable effort was mobilised by supporters and opponents of the policy in attempts to influence the public debate in relation to the tax. As a result, media agendas and frames were set more by key organisations with vested interests in the success or failure of the tax than by media editors or journalists reporting on the issue.

This study shows that, while the debate was characterised by both pro and anti-Carbon Tax voices, opponents such as BHP Billiton and other industry and minerals sector organisations were able to dominate the discourse compared with policy supporters such as the Climate Institute. By examining the framing process by which that was achieved, these findings reveal the activities and significance of what this thesis calls *frame sponsors* – the often hidden and largely ignored sources of influence behind media frames, public opinion and policy.

In summary, this thesis indicates how framing theory needs to pay further conceptual and empirical attention to the forces that influence the presence of

frames in the news. By considering the framing relationship between agenda-setting by media and agenda-building by external sponsors, this study contributes to framing theory by revealing how the latter are able to strongly influence the former, when their vested interests are at stake. Together, the findings of this study offer three contributions to theory in relation to media, the public sphere and framing in particular. First, this analysis shows that the primacy given to newsroom actors in framing must be questioned and not taken-for-granted. For too long, such a default position has helped obfuscate the potential relevance of other key frame influencers.

Second, this research provides examples of how framing sponsorship occurs and the strategic methods and level(s) of proactive influence that are evident in those sponsor processes. Through well-honed strategies and communication practices, competing organisations central to the Carbon Tax debate gained considerable input, both directly and indirectly, into how the policy issue was framed in media narratives. In the current global wave of falling trust in western democratic political systems, the need for greater clarity on how frames carry what Entman has called the 'imprints of power' cannot be overstated.

Finally, by confirming and further defining a specific type of frame – sponsored frames – a new analytical direction is suggested. More recently, framing theory has started to examine how meaning is formed not by a static, standalone frame but by the complex interplay of frames within the relevant wider culture. The recognition that there are various frame types helps build on these ideas, to further suggest that future research might establish a more nuanced understanding of frame types – perhaps a taxonomy of frames. In a media context at least, narrative frames start somewhere; but not all frames are created equally, since some are a lot more successful at gaining salience than others.