



Everywhere and nowhere: Theorising and researching public affairs and lobbying within public relations scholarship



Scott Davidson*

Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester, Bankfield House, Leicester LE1 7JA, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 September 2013

Received in revised form 19 February 2014

Accepted 21 February 2014

Available online 24 March 2014

Keywords:

Public affairs

Lobbying

Public relations theory

Discourse

Relationships

Campaigns

ABSTRACT

Public affairs and lobbying is a high status and strategically vital public relations specialism. It is a field of PR practice that generates high levels of both scholarly and public concern in regard to its perceived role in supporting corporate power and the associated impact on the functional legitimacy of democratic institutions. For this paper a content analysis was conducted of academic journals (between 2000 and 2013) to provide insights into how public affairs and lobbying have been theorised and researched within public relations scholarship and to ascertain to what degree wider public concerns have been addressed. Findings include an empirical confirmation of the low level of research activity on public affairs; that stakeholder and rhetorical theories have been the most widely used theories, but are far from constituting dominant paradigms; that scholarship has privileged functional objectives over civic concerns; and that published work originates almost entirely from institutions in Europe and the US with the Global South invisible. The paper also discusses future directions for research in public affairs and advocates the placing of discourse into definitions of public affairs, and that academic public relations should assert responsibility for this field, but in a manner that more equitably balances organisational and societal concerns.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Background

The centrality of the public affairs function within public relations in combination with the ongoing concerns regarding impacts on democratic decision-making, as well as popular assumptions of routinely low ethical standards present a strong normative case for this field to be a priority for theorising and research. While definitions of public affairs may still be in a state of flux, scholars who have explored this function have tended to agree on its significance as a specialism. Zetter mischievously nominated public affairs as constituting “PR for grown-ups” because of the “huge rewards for getting it right – and major consequences for getting it wrong” (2008: p. xiii). Public affairs has been observed as higher status strategic work (L’Etang, 2008), and that specialists are more than “mere technicians” but professionals who wield influence in shaping internal and external realities for an organisation (de Lange & Linders, 2006: p. 133). In Europe lobbying has been identified as one of two recognised management functions for communications professionals Beurer-Zuellig, Fieseler, and Meckel (2009), and Harris and Moss (2001) have argued that public affairs practitioners need to engage in forms of dialogue at governmental and societal levels that generally require more complex solutions than those required in carrying out market-related promotional campaigns.

* Tel.: +44 0 116 252 3863.

E-mail address: sd310@leicester.ac.uk

Alongside the strategic significance of public affairs as a function has been the ongoing global growth in demand for its services. There has been recent and rapid growth in interest group participation in policy making in Australia (Ward, 2009) and in Italy a new emphasis on creating stakeholder dialogue in public administration has resulted in large increases in public affairs related revenue for the public relations industry (Valentini, 2009). Additionally Macnamara (2012) found that government relations and public affairs were the third most prominent fields of practice discussed in text books adopted on university courses on public relations.

In a similar fashion to public relations more widely, there have been ongoing debates that have yet to reach an established consensus on a definition of public affairs. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) concluded that there was no consensus among scholars on what they meant by lobbying and more recently McGrath, Moss, and Harris (2010) observed that public affairs is often used as a euphemism for lobbying or simply can be the preferred term in which an organisation titles its public relations operations, while Verčič and Verčič (2012) concluded there is no agreement on how lobbying fits into public relations practice and Wise (2007) suggested this is part of a wider problem of researchers ignoring specialised fields of practice. Toth (2006) defined public affairs as a public relations specialisation that is focused on building public policy relationships between organisations. A significant proportion of scholarship has been primarily interested in researching corporate contexts, which helps explain why Windsor (2005) defined public affairs as the interface between corporations and their non-market environments. This is partially echoed by McGrath et al's. (2010) positioning of public affairs as being in the nexus of politics, management and communication. Milbrath (1963) provided a widely adopted definition of lobbying that emphasised it was a communicative act aimed at influencing governmental decision-makers, but while lobbying may lend itself to simpler definitions public affairs is a more diffuse function that as Harris and Moss (2001) argued is centred on managing relationships that may have policy implications with a broader range of stakeholders.

Part of the difficulty in defining and conceptualising public affairs as a specialism of public relations is that a considerable proportion of public affairs practice is indistinguishable from public relations activity (Somerville & Ramsey, 2012). By way of example, in written evidence to a committee of the UK parliament that was investigating the regulation of lobbying, Ed Williams then CEO of Edelman UK argued that for large agencies such as his "... public affairs is just one of many public relations services we provide to clients. The boundaries between, for example, activity which influences the political environment and activity which influences a broader media and stakeholder environment is increasingly blurred." (Political & Constitutional Reform Committee, 2012: p. 67).

In most definitions public affairs is a function that seeks to influence policy environments and political decision making by those who are not elected politicians or civil servants. However, a further complication is that in US contexts public affairs is often the term used in reference to public relations practitioners working for government departments. This originates from the 1913 Gillett Amendment that stated publicity activities must only come from funds specifically defined for such work. Furthermore, after the first waves of scholarship on political communication management which were developed within political marketing frameworks there is now a growing interest in the emerging field of political public relations. An important text book in developing this field defines the discipline as a management process involving purposeful communication for "political purposes" Stromback and Kioussis' (2011: p. 8). This definition places public affairs as a function that can be researched within a shared framework with studies exploring governmental communications and election campaigning. As with public affairs practice governmental public relations initiatives impact on the public's ability to receive adequate information in order to evaluate public policy choices (Rice & Somerville, 2013). Government public relations, and the activities of parties and candidates who wish to assume executive power at some future point, are critical determinants of the external environments within which public affairs practitioners operate. However, for what is already a diffuse field of study, it can be unhelpful to blur the boundaries further when there is an available operational consensus, for this paper and other studies, that public affairs practitioners are not, or seeking to be, elected politicians.

There is also an impetus for public relations scholars to theorise and research public affairs based on its political significance and its perpetual desire to influence policy-making at all levels from the hyper-local to global treaty negotiations. These normative expectations are multiplied when the widespread civic and scholarly concerns regarding the nature and impacts of lobbying on real-world policy-making are recognised and acknowledged.

Scholars who draw upon political economy frameworks to study public relations and lobbying emphasise how communications and relationships are built within wider structures and processes of power, and explore inequalities of resources available to different groups. Miller and Harkins (2010) argue public relations and lobbying are deployed by corporations who pursue their interests by dominating decision-making environments. Not only does lobbying enable the communicative agency for asserting corporate power, ethical standards are low and routinely involve deception and manipulation (Dinan & Miller, 2007; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Corporations use communications and lobbying to undermine global efforts to implement environmental policies on sustainable development (Beder, 2002) and similar campaigns to frustrate public health initiatives to restrict the tobacco industry have also been well documented (Saloojee & Dagli, 2000). These critiques chime with wider public and media discourses that portray public affairs as involving "influence peddling" and "corridor creeping" (Moloney, 2006: p. 91) that are then further amplified by scandals relating to the activities of figures such as "Casino" Jack Abramoff (Stone, 2006) and the corruption inquiries and trials related to his activities in the US. Indeed a recent report by the OECD expressed concern that "a sharp and damaging ethical schism has emerged in many countries between the lobbying profession and the public" (OECD, 2009: p. 17).

In the context of public affairs' significance as a high status public relations specialism that generates considerable levels of public concern in regard to its perceived impacts on democratic decision-making, this paper seeks to establish how

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/138678>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/138678>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)