

Editorial

In search of public affairs: A function in search of an identity

Paradoxically, at a time when there are more practitioners than ever who, at least nominally, are employed in 'public affairs' departments/functions, the term 'public affairs' remains one that is surrounded by ambiguity and misunderstanding. In short, public affairs remains a function in search of a clear identity. This commentary seeks to explore how the term 'public affairs' is or should be understood, examining its relationship with contemporary corporate communications and public relations practice. Here we seek to provoke further academic, industry and political debate about how the function or practice of public affairs should be defined.

Even many of those working within the field appear a little uncertain how best to define precisely what public affairs is, or how to delineate the boundaries of the public affairs domain. For some the answer is that those working in the public affairs field handle and advise on organisational relationships with government, while for others, the role is primarily one of lobbying. Those adopting a broader perspective, see public affairs as concerned with managing a broader range of relationships with organisational stakeholders, particularly those which may have public policy implications, in which they may employ a range of marketing communications and public relations tools. Hence it is hardly surprising that it remains difficult to pin down precisely what public affairs is.

A US PERSPECTIVE

Much of the debate about the nature of public affairs has originated in the USA.

Here, for example, Sietel (1995) suggests that the roots of contemporary public affairs lie in the earlier function of 'community relations' and has evolved to become an all-encompassing activity concerned with all areas of public policy that may affect organisations. While acknowledging that it is difficult to identify a precise definition of public affairs, Sietel cites the US Conference Board's definition as a reasonable starting point:

'A significant and substantial concern and involvement by individuals, business, labour, foundations, private institutions and government with the social, economic, and political forces that singly or through interaction shape the environment within which the free enterprise system exists.'

Gruber and Hoewing (1980) argue that the rapid growth of public affairs functions in the USA, in particular, dates from the 1970s. They suggest a more politically oriented definition of the public affairs function: 'The activities of an organisation to manage its responses to political issues and its relationships with government.'

White (1991) suggests a further definition of public affairs that introduces another area of debate — namely that of its relationship with public relations:

'Public affairs is a specialist area of practice within public relations. It is concerned with those relationships which are involved in the development of public policy, legislation and regulation which may affect organisations, their interests and operations.'

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Cutlip *et al.* (1994) emphasise the frequent confusion that exists between public relations and public affairs, with the title 'public affairs' often being preferred by senior management because of the negative connotations associated with the term 'public relations'. Grunig and Hunt (1984) have also highlighted this emphasis on functional nomenclature, rather than on the substantive differences between the public relations and public affairs functions. They argue that, at least conceptually, public relations is a much broader function than public affairs as it is concerned with *all* of an organisation's relationships with its environment (with all stakeholders), whereas public affairs focuses primarily on those stakeholder relationships concerned with public policy issues and government relations. Similarly, Cutlip *et al.* (1994: 15) suggest that: 'Public affairs is the specialised part of public relations that builds and maintains mutually beneficial governmental and local community relations.'

The US Public Affairs Council highlighted the rather futile nature of the debate about the distinction between the public relations and public affairs functions, arguing that the only consensus tends to be that public affairs is more government relations-oriented, and public relations more communications oriented.

WHAT ACTIVITIES DO PUBLIC AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS PERFORM?

One of the earliest studies of what activities public affairs departments perform was conducted by Boston University Management School (1981); this found that public affairs focused around the two broad areas of community relations and government relations. This study also found a strong emphasis on media relations as a tool to help influence public affairs outcomes. More detailed probing about the activities performed by public affairs professionals revealed a number of other important elements of public affairs

work. These included: identifying and prioritising public issues for corporate attention; forecasting social/political trends for the corporate planning function; reviewing corporate as well as departmental, divisional and subsidiary plans for sensitivity to emerging social/political trends. The specific techniques most frequently used by public affairs practitioners that emerged in the study included: issues monitoring, environmental scanning, central, local government and trade association lobbying, communicating with government agencies, communicating the company's position to management, and to a lesser extent, internal communications about the company's position. Respondents accorded a relatively low rating to communications with the general public about that position which may reflect the stronger emphasis within public affairs on managing relationships with governmental and regulatory stakeholders.

The US Public Affairs Council identified four principal functions found within the typical public affairs department, namely government relations (at the Federal, State and local levels) political action (including political education, grassroots activities and communications on political issues), community involvement (community relations, philanthropy, social responsibility programmes) and international activity (political risk assessment, monitoring international socio-political developments).

Reviewing the composition of public affairs work revealed by these various studies suggests that public affairs practitioners generally perform two primary roles:

- Serving as a corporate intelligence and issues monitoring function, particularly with regard to political, regulatory and public policy issues,
- Acting as corporate advocates, championing their organisation's cause in political and public policy debates.

A further role that emerges from many US

studies, in particular, is that of handling an organisation's community relations and social responsibility initiatives.

It is the predominant US focus within the majority of the literature to date that has undoubtedly coloured the way the practice of public affairs is portrayed. Indeed, relatively few studies of public affairs practice have been conducted in the UK or European context. One of the few such studies is that conducted by Steve John (1998) on behalf of the UK's *Public Affairs Newsletter*. John's study was based on a survey of senior officers responsible for government and public affairs drawn from a cross section of major blue chip companies, trade associations, trades unions, charities and pressure groups, and also included senior executives from a range of public affairs consultancies. Significantly the study revealed a strong emphasis on the role of public affairs as one primarily concerned with government relations and exerting influence within the political process. Here, for example, the study found that the key targets for public affairs programmes included: Members of Parliament, Ministers and their special advisers, civil servants, select committees, regulators, the EU Commission, peers, all party groups and the media (as a channel of influence). Again reflecting a strong governmental focus, the study identified the most effective techniques employed by public affairs practitioners as:

- Briefing officials privately;
- Briefing Ministers privately;
- Combination of media relations strategy and private briefings;
- Briefing MPs privately;
- Media campaigning;
- Researching issues and advising clients on their implications and actions.

This strong emphasis on political lobbying activity through the use of 'behind the scenes' briefing activity further reflects the strong governmental emphasis found in the

way public affairs is perceived within the UK.

POLITICAL LOBBYING AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Although some organisations in the UK have specific government relations departments and or practitioners, it is common to find departments or practitioners within the sector designated as 'public affairs'. This confusion over nomenclature only serves to further obscure our understanding of what precisely public affairs is. As has been suggested earlier, at least conceptually, public affairs extends beyond the function of government relations alone to include community liaison, associated initiatives and other corporate stakeholder programmes that are not necessarily focused, at least directly, on business or politically related strategies. Here it may be useful to return again to the question of definitions. Reviewing the literature on public relations and public affairs, Fleisher and Blair (1999) have summarised the core definitions of public affairs as follows: 'Managing relationships between organisations and stakeholders/issues in the public policy (ie non-market or socio-political) environment' (Fleisher 1994).

'A process by which an organisation monitors, anticipates and manages its relations with social and political forces, issues and groups that shape the organisation's operations and environments.' (Gollner 1983)

'An umbrella term referring to how a firm develops and implements its enterprise-level strategy (ie what do we stand for?), its corporate public policy (a more specific posture on the public, social or stakeholder environment or specific issues within this environment), its public affairs strategy (issues and crisis management most important here) and how all these processes may be embraced within a public affairs function (a department)'. (Carroll 1996)

‘It serves as a window: Looking out, the organisation can observe the changing environment. Looking in, the stakeholders in that environment can observe, try to understand, and interact with the organisation. (Post and Kelly 1988)

The name for the integrated department combining all, or virtually all, external non-commercial activities of the business world. (Hoewing 1996)

Taking these definitions as a guide, it appears that public affairs can include both political lobbying and a number of other externally focused organisational functions. Thus public affairs practice can include both overt and more covert activities designed to build and sustain relationships with government or influence policy making, as well as a range of other stakeholder and community relations initiatives. This broad description of the scope of contemporary public affairs practice reflects the views expressed both within the literature (eg Cutlip *et al.* 1994; Harris and Lock 1996; Fleisher and Blair 1999; Harris *et al.* 1998), as well as the broad understanding held by practitioners. Here a closer examination of some of the component areas of public affairs may be useful.

POLITICAL LOBBYING

Like public affairs, the term lobbying is itself often misunderstood and is often treated as something of a secretive activity involving behind the scenes attempts to manipulate the political agenda in favour of particular organisations. Although research into lobbying is relatively nascent, particularly in the UK, there has been a marked growth of academic interest in this field in recent years because of the realisation of its increasing strategic importance. One of the more robust definitions of lobbying is that advanced by Van Schendelen. He argues that lobbying can cover a multitude of practices:

‘The informal exchange of information with public authorities, as a minimal description on the one hand, and as trying informally to influence public authorities on the other hand.’ (Van Schendelen 1993: 3)

This definition is sufficiently broad to allow both for informal and formal contact between government officials and politicians at whatever level, and appropriate sectors, be it ‘not for profit’, private or public interest groups.

However, many of the definitions of lobbying do not necessarily reveal an entirely clear picture of what lobbying involves — they appear like pieces of a jigsaw that have never been put together to form a whole picture.

In an early definition Milbrath defines lobbying as:

‘The stimulation and transmission of communication, by someone other than a citizen acting on his own behalf, directed towards a government decision-maker in the hope of influencing a decision.’ (Milbrath 1963: 7–8)

More than 30 years later, Moloney has put forward a very similar definition, arguing that:

‘Lobbying can be defined in the first instance as persuasive activity to change public policy in favour of an organisation by groups of people who are not directly involved in the political process.’ (Moloney 1997: 169)

The common element in virtually all definitions is that they focus solely on the communication side of lobbying; and particularly the representational aspects of it. However, as highlighted earlier, some commentators equate lobbying with a broader definition of government relations or public affairs that embraces activities such as issues management and corporate intelligence gathering. Here, authors such as Grant (1991) have argued that the term lobbying can be misleading in that it is often applied to describe

the whole work of the government relations departments and associated functions of organisations. In many businesses, there has been a trend towards a more holistic integration of distinct functions within organisations as well as a recognition of the need to manage them collectively on a more strategic basis. Grant goes on to state that ongoing interaction with government is generally more refined than the term lobbying implies:

‘A company with a sophisticated approach to government will attempt to develop a climate of well informed mutual understanding between it and civil servants and politicians so that, if an issue that affects the company arises, it is not necessary to build relationships from scratch.’ (Grant 1991: 100).

However, it can be argued that rather than viewing lobbying primarily as a form of discrete action, as some of the above definitions seem to suggest, it should be recognised as a *process*. This process, in order to be successful, requires a preliminary stage of issues monitoring and information gathering, in order to assess what is happening and is likely to happen to an organisation and its immediate environment, and then devising appropriate strategies to gain commercial or societal advantage for the organisation through exchange processes with appropriate government or other representative bodies. Therefore, one might question whether public affairs should be considered a necessary prelude to effective lobbying or question whether lobbying is a consequence of public affairs. Miller, a London-based lobbyist, offers a definition of lobbying that reflects such considerations: ‘The business of advising organisations on understanding, monitoring and dealing with the system of government’ (Miller 1987: 173).

Similarly, building on the criticisms of earlier definitions of lobbying, Moloney (1997: 173–4) offers a further definition of lobbying:

‘Monitoring public policy-making for a group interest; building a case in favour of that interest; and putting it privately with varying degrees of pressure to public decision-makers for their acceptance and support through favourable political intervention.’

Of course, for many, lobbying is primarily associated with the visible areas of commercial and political campaigning, which have become more prominent and sophisticated in recent years, and, as a consequence, such activity has attracted considerable critical comment. More recently, lobbying activity has also been considered from a marketing perspective, positioning it as an effective strategic business tool. Here, Harris offers the following definition of the area:

‘The marketing communication of information and pressure on government or public bodies to bring about commercial gain or competitive advantage.’ (Harris 1999)

Finally, in considering our understanding of lobbying and its relationship to public affairs, it is important to take account of the cultural differences in the meaning and interpretation of the way the term lobbying (and for that matter public affairs) is used in Europe and North America (Mack 1997). Here, as we have suggested earlier, the North American interpretation of public affairs differs from that found within the UK and Europe, and similarly, the way lobbying is practised in the UK can have a very different meaning from the way the practice is understood in the USA.

THE COMMUNITY RELATIONS DIMENSION OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

In addition to the area of government relations and lobbying, many of the early definitions (particularly from the USA) of public affairs see the function as embracing the area of community relations and corporate responsibility programmes. This dimension of public affairs work is still evolving, particu-

larly in Europe, and in some cases, may be linked with lobbying activity. Contact programmes for organisations often embrace both policy makers and decision makers as well as community leaders. Here, for example, one leading utility company has been able to develop a regular dialogue with key stakeholders through developing a programme of events built round community initiatives or corporate responsibility programmes which have also enabled it to engage in dialogue not only with key community representatives but also with local government officials and representatives, national officials and representatives and the equivalent at a Brussels and Washington level.

A good example of this type of work in action is the 'Granada Community Challenge' initiative in the UK, which was stimulated by the Princes Trust and particularly Business in the Community (BiTC) and has involved five leading UK companies, BNFL, British Aerospace, Manweb (part of Scottish Power), Norweb (part of United Utilities) and Greenalls (recently renamed Jarvis) in major regeneration projects over a five-year period in neglected urban areas in the North West of England. Teams of managers from each company headed-up regeneration projects that involved them using their own contacts to supply materials and finance to build and staff the initiatives. During this initiative more than 1,000 companies were involved in projects which also engaged the leading opinion formers and decision-makers of the North West of England. The initiative helped both good community contacts and understanding by organisations as well as stimulating a greater cohesion in the region, which has partly helped foster the beginnings of regional government in the area and the effective promotion of its corporate and community interests at a national and international level (Bakewell *et al.* 2000). The projects received regular television coverage on Granada, the regional television franchise

holder, which helped to ensure that opinion formers and the wider North West of England community were kept in touch with developments.

Essentially community relations activities may be used by organisations both to enhance their reputation and build goodwill with their communities as well as more instrumentally, to bring about changes that may help the organisation to realise their own goals. Thus locally based corporate community initiatives may help to build a sense of rapport and understanding of local citizens' concerns and needs, which in turn may assist organisations when seeking planning permission, change of use of a site, or the closure or development of a plant — all of which are likely to be made easier when there is a thorough understanding by the organisation or community of how each other works and its interests. Open day events, liaison and sponsorship of local schools and college initiatives all play a useful role in underpinning dialogue and liaison between organisations and their communities. Such initiatives contribute to a greater cohesiveness in society whether it be civic or corporate.

With larger international or multinational corporations, community relations initiatives may take on an international dimension, perhaps embracing issues that transcend national boundaries but which manifest themselves in similar ways in the different communities where an organisation has a presence. Issues such as poverty and the attendant problems of unemployment, poor educational opportunities and disease may become the focus of a variety of community initiatives that international corporation may sponsor individually or in cooperation with other local agencies. Here the driving force behind such initiatives has been the growing acceptance by large corporations of their obligation to act as responsible corporate citizens contributing to the creation of healthier communities, not only in their home-

based country, but within society as a whole. Such initiatives also offer international corporations opportunities to build bridges with national and local opinion leaders and political authorities, which may help them, at least indirectly, in the pursuit of their economic and commercial goals.

Research into community relations has suggested that winning community support for an organisation can be problematic, particularly as the community and organisational interests may sometimes be in conflict (Pavlik 1987). The potential for such conflict has been exacerbated by the growing pluralism within society which may result in complex patterns of sectional interests, and also by the growth of international business where business decision makers may be quite remote from the communities affected by their decisions. One approach to overcoming the potential for such conflict is to devolve decision making regarding community initiatives to locally based staff who are more likely to be in touch with local conditions and, hence, more sensitive to the needs and interests of the local community. This type of more flexible approach to determining local community initiatives may help to avoid international companies being accused of a lack of sensitivity to local priorities and concerns and thereby alienating not only some local communities, but also their local politicians and opinion leaders.

It is the increasing size and power of many multinational corporations that creates an expectation that they should accept a wider social responsibility and support the communities on which they at least partially depend for their success. Recognition of the interdependence between an organisation's commercial and social spheres of operation provides the essential rationale for engagement in community and social responsibility initiatives. Moreover it has become increasingly difficult to divorce the commercial and social spheres of activity from the political sphere, as governments throughout the

world become more interventionist and seek to shape the social and business environment. As a consequence, there is a closer interaction between community relations strategies and the work of the government and public affairs function in many organisations.

Thus, as this review of the literature suggests, there is still considerable confusion and uncertainty surrounding understanding of what constitutes the functional domain of public affairs. Despite the existence of some broad areas of agreement, there is a need for more robust typological constructs to delineate the area of study adequately. Further confusion has arisen because some aspects, particularly of social responsibility activity are being appropriated under the banner of 'cause-related marketing' and 'not for profit marketing'. More recently the concept of 'stakeholder marketing' has also emerged to describe the area of exchanges within communities whether they be private, public or non profit organisations — a term which those working in public affairs may see as adding yet a further tier of confusion to the picture of what it is that they do.

CONCLUSION

The *lingua franca* of what appears to be the principal two arms of public affairs — government relations/lobbying and community relations/corporate responsibility — can be seen as 'dialogue at both a societal and government level'. By implication, those working in the public affairs field increasingly are required not only to be proficient communicators, but to have a sound appreciation of how the political parties work, develop policy, are influenced, run campaigns and are funded. Moreover, the type of issues and challenges that normally fall within the public affairs domain generally require far more complex and sophisticated solutions than those required when tackling market-related promotional campaigns.

If, as has been suggested here, public affairs is a discipline still in search of a clear identity,

then the anchor points of its identity must surely include dialogical relationship building, political and social analysis and persuasive rhetoric. However, given the different perspectives of public affairs that appear to prevail in the USA and Europe, and equally, the lack of universally accepted parameters for the practice of public affairs, there is clearly a need for some consensus building amongst academics and practitioners in order to delineate the boundaries of the public affairs domain.

It is hoped that the *Journal of Public Affairs* will provide a vehicle for such debate and consensus building and we encourage further contributions from both academics and practitioners.

Phil Harris and Danny Moss

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ERRATUM

Dr Phil Harris was erroneously listed as Professor on the Editorial Board listing in our first issue. We regret any confusion this may have caused.