

## Editorial

# Public affairs, issues management, and corporate political strategy: An introduction

What impact can organisations have in the marketplace of ideas as opposed to the marketplace of goods and services? This marketplace of ideas involves the articulation, debate, defence and response to ideas that emerge later as demands for action. But where is this marketplace to be found? We would argue that it can be found in the legislatures and commissions of government at all levels, in regulatory agencies, in judicial arenas of all kinds, in media presentations of both events and in-depth stories on issues, in the positioning and public pronouncements of public interest groups and NGOs on and around issues and areas of concern. As members of a specific element of academia — business and management — we are concerned with the ability, skills, strategies and tactics of firms and industries to engage in this marketplace and to achieve success both in the short and long term.

Elements of the ‘tool kit’ for firms and industries include (among others) departments, areas and individuals concerned with public affairs, issues management and the development and formulation of political (as opposed to but not in substitution for market-based) strategies to enter and engage in the marketplace of ideas. This marketplace of ideas has no geographic or easily drawn boundaries and ‘competitors’ are not always clear and known. The actions of Greenpeace in Europe to impact Shell Oil’s decision to sink the Brent Spar oil platform is an example of an idea that had ramifications throughout Europe and America with rippling impacts on corporate decisions in related

industries. The ongoing debate between European regulators and governments with the USA on the topic of genetically modified foods is yet another example of an idea without geographic boundaries, as the solution to this impasse will have clear implications on such food sales worldwide. Finally, the recent denial of General Electric and Honeywell’s merger (a merger of two domestic US firms) by European officials should make it evident that this marketplace of ideas is one with fluid and permeable boundaries. For those who would rather keep a tight European focus, recall the battle in 1994–95 over motorbikes, or the issue of alcohol and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Now, more than ever, firms need to be prepared to engage in this marketplace anywhere and at any time. We believe that the appropriate tools in organisations are public affairs, issues management, and the development of a clear political and social strategy for dealing with ideas and issues that is integrated with the more commonly known and accepted area of business and corporate strategy.

The establishment of the *Journal of Public Affairs* is a clear recognition of two facts. First, the time has come for organisations to realise that issues, stakeholders, and solutions and debates are internationalised. Second is the need for practitioners and researchers to be better informed as to what both are doing. In this manner practitioner knowledge and skills can enrich academic research and teaching. Academic research and teaching can then be grounded in the reality of public affairs so that research that is of value

and impact to practitioners can be undertaken, and that the training and education of the next generation of managers (public affairs and non-public affairs) can produce more sophisticated individuals with a sensitivity to the marketplace of ideas.

In order to begin a dialogue on these issues, academics *and* practitioners were invited to attend a conference on the topic of 'Public affairs, issues management and corporate political strategy'. The conference took place in the USA, in the state of Maine, and was sponsored by the University of Maine, the University of Northern Iowa, and the International Association for Business and Society (IABS). This funding allowed for all expenses (lodging and food) to be paid for at the conference — invitees were expected to fund their own travel. Invitations were extended to academics and practitioners in Australia, Canada, France, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA to be part of the dialogue. The invitations to academics included colleagues of all ranks in academe (including doctoral students), so that a broad, diverse and generational perspective could be obtained and represented. Similarly, invitations were extended to practitioners in a variety of organisations and political and competitive context — again, to obtain diversity of representation. The good news is that individuals from 21 colleges and universities from Canada, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA agreed to attend, including all ranks and doctoral students. The bad news is that only a very few managers of public affairs agreed to attend and even less actually arrived. As academics, particularly those who organised the conference, we are concerned by this lack of involvement. Our research can only be enriched and relevant if it is related to the practice of public affairs by those involved in living the day-to-day activities and challenges of that profession. Nonetheless, we believe that it is the largest and most diverse gathering of individuals who are interested

in, and do research or work daily in this area ever to be held.

In order to be as productive as possible, we asked certain individuals to develop an original paper on a theme related to this conference. All four individuals that we asked agreed immediately to participate and to develop their ideas in time for all participants to receive a copy *before* the conference took place. In addition, and as a unique twist, we asked four other individuals to present these original papers (that is, the original authors did not present their own work, someone else did) and to develop a written commentary on them. As before, all readily agreed. On a bright warm Friday in June of 2001, the participants listed at the end of this editorial arrived to begin to debate, argue, discuss, challenge, think and reflect on these topics. The papers that appear in this edition are the product of this process, but in no manner do they capture the richness of the dialogue and debate that took place at the conference itself. We are extremely grateful to the editors and publisher of the *Journal of Public Affairs* for so graciously affording this opportunity for you to read this. We would encourage you to share comments and observations (especially for practitioners and managers) to mahon@maine.edu and if there seems to be interest in such a dialogue, some of these comments might appear in a future edition of this journal.

The first paper in this set, 'Public affairs and political strategy: Theoretical foundations' by Kathleen A. Getz, reviews research in the area of public affairs (noting the recent contributions of this journal in its first two editions, especially the two-part bibliography)<sup>2</sup> noting the failures of scholarship in this area. She observes early on in her analysis that '... the impacts and importance of public affairs management permeates business' and as such is worthy of our attention and resources.

But rather than focusing on our failures,

Getz calls us to develop models and explanations which are internally consistent, conceptually rich, and *applicable to the practice of public affairs management*. Getz pursues this analysis by looking at what she terms three threads, evident in the existent literature. The threads she identifies are: (1) Why do firms (and others) become politically engaged? (2) What strategies and tactics could a firm employ given it has decided to participate? and (3) What are the limits to capacity of rational political action?

Using these three threads as anchors in her analysis, Getz then looks at the contributions of a diverse literature base: political science (interest group theory); economics (collective action theory); public choice theory; transactions cost theory; game theory; sociology (resource dependence theory, institutional theory); and management theory (agency, behavioural theory of the firm, business strategy and population ecology). Getz artfully weaves these theoretical approaches to demonstrate their individual and collective contributions to the threads noted earlier. Getz concludes, not with a conclusion, but with three questions. Upon initial read, these questions might appear to be of interest only to academics, but a closer read would reveal that the answers would expand the education in and practice of public affairs management.

One of the outcomes of this conference is that unanimous agreement was not the focus or necessarily a goal of the discussions. Stimulation of thought and eventual action was a unifying theme. Martin Meznar, who presented Getz's paper, offers his comments in 'The theoretical foundation of public affairs and political strategy: Where do we go from here?' Meznar immediately takes off from Getz's analysis and raises concerns addressed by Getz to a broader, international perspective. His paper asks the question: does Getz's analysis have applicability in an international context, and more specifically in a non-western context? He makes an unequivocal

call for a classification theory that deals with different political activity environments and offers a classification scheme as the beginning of thinking on this issue. Meznar's comments, in combination with Getz's work, provide a powerful logic for cross-cultural studies of public affairs and further managerial involvement in the crafting of such studies.

If empirical research conducted by academics (and others) is to have value, it should address questions of interest to public affairs managers and be undertaken with appropriately powerful, reproducible and easily communicated methodologies. This is the starting point for the paper by Doug Schuler entitled 'Public affairs, issues management and political strategy: Methodological approaches that count'. The lack of a theoretical model of public affairs, or an incomplete one, particularly disturbs Schuler. He addresses these problems in research, noting that the task is made difficult by the requirement to understand firm level processes and institutional (political system) level processes simultaneously. He develops a representative model that he terms the 'corporate political cycle' (see his Figure 1). Schuler correctly observes that most of the research to date has been occupied with the activities of public affairs, issues management and political strategy and their determinants. The 'good' news is that this research has used both quantitative and qualitative data and approaches that have aided in the richness of the analysis. He notes a subtle, but telling distinction (of great import to academics and those who research in this area and with trailing implications for managers) — many latent variables cannot be directly observed, the example that he uses is political influence. We would add that the time dimension to measure, observe and assess the impact of political actions may also be inappropriate. That is, impacts of corporate political action may not unfold in a linear fashion but unfold at various times and rates

as the process of interplay among stakeholders and players in the marketplace evolve.

Schuler divides research up into smaller portions that he terms ‘tractable pieces’. He then moves on to a slightly more detailed analysis of actions to influence the political process. Although some of the terminology used here might not be familiar to non-US readers, we urge you to attend carefully to the development of the argument and the logic of the analysis. As members of the European Union move closer and closer, policy making will also migrate to the EU political apparatus. As such, the locus of lobbying and influence will also migrate to another level (see the last paper in this edition, which was not a part of the conference, but is on point and relevant).

Amy Hillman (who presented Schuler’s work at the conference), in her commentary, while agreeing with much of Schuler’s analysis, draws the line at Schuler’s call for a grand model to guide research efforts. Hillman questions whether that is even possible, much less desirable, and notes that much older areas of inquiry (organisational behaviour for one) do not have any such grand theory or model. In a deft turn, Hillman argues that what we need (and what will resonate with managers) is a clear dependent variable for our research. She then argues cogently that this variable should be ‘firm performance’. Hillman observes that what we need is ‘... an area of *inquiry* instead of an area of *description* (emphasis in original)’. She then offers the following question to aid in this process: ‘Why do some firms outperform others in the political/public issues arena?’ and ultimately ‘How does this performance affect overall firm performance?’ We believe that the framing of questions in this manner is of interest to practitioners and can be aided by their participation in research.

Gerald Keim is the author of ‘Managing business political activities in the USA: Brid-

ging between theory and practice’. He begins his analysis with a central question: ‘What can those of us who study business political activities offer practitioners who manage and participate in these endeavours?’ This is and rightly should be a central concern of those academics interested in this area of inquiry. Although Professor Keim offers his comments in the US context, his observations and remarks are applicable to almost any western democracy. Keim centres his comments on the political marketplace, and in a fashion similar to Hillman, notes the competitive nature of the environment in which political activities are undertaken. Keim offers a challenge — how many citizens know the name of their elected representatives, and more importantly, how many citizens (and by extension, managers) know what the policy efforts are of their legislators and their positions on specific ideas and issues? We could ask the same of European citizens — how many can name their representatives to the European Parliament and what the positions and policy efforts of their representatives are on specific ideas and issues? Indeed, can citizens and managers name the Directorates in the European Union, their areas of responsibility and who is the head of each Directorate? Although it is a simple question to ask, answering it is difficult. Yet the answers may be key to any political action that a firm, interest group or individual takes.

Keim then reports (in condensed format) the result of some work he has done on elections in the USA. The observation of interest is that close elections have increased by approximately 66 per cent in the last decade. The conclusion that he draws from this is worth pondering by any elected official and interest group. He then branches out from this position and looks more closely at competition in the political marketplace, offering insights from brief case studies to sharpen his observations and analysis.

Craig Fleisher (the presenter of Keim’s

paper) follows up this analysis in his work entitled 'Managing business political activities in the United States: Bridging between theory and practice — another look'. He points out what is well known to academics — but perhaps not to managers — that the number of academics engaged in work with practitioners in this field is a very limited set. Sadly (from our perspective) he notes that any group of practitioners would have a very difficult time coming up with the names of academics who made a contribution to the business political activity field. This is an issue of concern and only draws attention to the need for greater interaction between and among academics and practitioners.

He then challenges Keim's view of competition in political arenas. Fleisher does not argue on the issue of competition, but instead addresses the underlying logic that competition is inherently a win-win, win-lose, lose-win, or lose-lose situation. Instead he argues that wins and losses are only measured in partial and incomplete effects, so that a 'pure' unambiguous win or loss in a political marketplace is rare. This on its own merit would suggest the need for new evaluation tools of 'success' and 'failure' in the organisation. Fleisher goes on to sharpen the practical use of political marketplace using the familiar terms of monopoly and oligopoly. Fleisher makes several other points, but concludes with a powerful observation that leaves no party uninvolved: 'Is the difficulty we have seen in bridging business political activity practice and theory due to the theory, our empiricism, or the practice?'

Professor Berman, in his opening comment on Duane Windsor's 'Public affairs, issues management, and political strategy: Opportunities, obstacles, and caveats' pointed out a principal lesson he learned in reading this analysis. Berman wryly observed that: 'I learned that Windsor sure reads a lot!' This comment, delivered with humour, does reflect the breadth and depth of Windsor's analysis.

Windsor neatly summarises his main conclusions in Table 1 of his paper, offering what he sees as the principal opportunities, obstacles, and caveats in research in public affairs. Windsor then moves to a review of the existing literature, which has significant differences in it from the review presented earlier by Getz. He artfully uses the metaphor of 'low hanging fruit' to frame his discussion and unfold public affairs research in an historical context, and places this research in a visual format in Figure 1. He builds on this initial framework, and develops a model of policy making in democratic politics, equally applicable to the USA and to Europe.

Windsor then moves to a discussion of the obstacles to research, noting the intellectual fragmentation that exists among academicians in this area. Once again he provides a visual representation of his argumentation in Figure 3. Figure 3 places business and business-stakeholder political activity in context (some would call it a model — see Figure 2 in Schuler's work for comparison purposes) and Windsor fleshed out in detail scholarship and business practice concerns, focusing on lobbying, political contributions and corruption. He provides rich, descriptive commentaries on approaches to reform.

Windsor turns his analysis to a discussion of caveats in public affairs and political strategy research. He notes that one difficulty is the research that has occurred in this field in various disciplines. Windsor proposes that the strength that business and society can bring to this research is a normative orientation — a move away from what he terms 'neutral' analysis to a more ethically based approach. Windsor also raises the concern that our knowledge of public policy making and associated processes is inadequate, especially in different regions of the world. This is further compounded that the public policy making process itself changes over time, so that there may always be a lag between our knowledge of the process and the real time unfolding of that process.

Shawn Berman's commentary, 'Public affairs, issues management, and political strategy: opportunities, opportunities, and more opportunities' notes that Windsor's analysis is '... undeniably pessimistic'. Berman agrees with Windsor (and with Schuler's earlier comments) that most of the interesting data are not available/obtainable by academic researchers. This is a crucial area of ongoing concern, as data are the lifeblood of research, especially if the research is to be grounded in reality and of value to practitioners. Berman, like Hillman, sees value in linking public affairs, issues management and corporate political strategy to overall firm strategy.

Berman is clearly impressed by Windsor's enumeration of the opportunities, obstacles and caveats facing researchers in this area. Berman, agreeing with Hillman's comments on Schuler's paper, takes issue with Windsor's concern over 'intellectual fragmentation'. Berman states flatly that this fragmentation is not a hindrance to research in this area.

Berman's main contribution is in his suggestion of additional areas of research. He articulates four opportunities: (1) self-regulation; (2) the initiative process; (3) term limits; and (4) alliance building, constituency statutes and the link to stakeholder theory. Berman provides commentary on each of these areas in a thoughtful manner. Berman ends his analysis with a question that leads nicely into the last contribution in this issue: 'What is more fundamental to the ability of citizens to fulfil their potential as human beings than the functioning of a political process which provides incentives and constraints on their behaviour?'

Professor Justin Greenwood's paper, 'EU public affairs and the white paper on governance' was not presented at the conference in June but was submitted for publication consideration to the journal. It is a worthy addition, as it links some of the issues addressed earlier, specifically to the European context. For example, Windsor argues in his

analysis that the nature of business-government interaction is shifting toward access to the public policy-making process. Berman suggests that the areas of self-regulation, initiative processes and alliance building and constituency statutes are unfolding opportunities for research. These areas are all raised in Greenwood's paper.

Greenwood's paper addresses the emergence of governance, and in particular the role of external stakeholders and public interest groups on public policy making in the European Union. He does an excellent job in tracing out the unfolding events and publications surrounding this issue. Greenwood notes that this process reflects an age-old problem — the difficulty of persuading an existing organisation to reform itself.

He provides data that shows the explosion of interest groups throughout Europe (that can or could influence the public policy-making process). Although he does not note it, an explosion of interest groups can actually lead to further (and more intense) political fragmentation and result in policy-making paralysis. Why? First, as the number of interest groups and other stakeholders in the public policy process increases, the number of positions for and against a specific policy initiative (political entrepreneurship, as Greenwood notes in his opening comments) can place enormous pressure on the preservation of the status quo. Policy makers, in order not to offend/cater to a specific interest group, can maintain the status quo as the compromise solution. Second, in the marketplace for ideas, the proliferation of such interest groups and their positions on an issue actually cedes discretion to the public policy maker. Policy makers can choose one or a subset of interests to support their public position — leading to stalemates in the process. Finally, enormous power accrues to civil servants and support staffs in these situations and they have significant power to set the agenda. What is to be discussed, when it is to be discussed, who will be heard and

allowed to speak, and when an issue/idea will be addressed are formidable powers in the public policy-making process.

To deal with some of these issues, Greenwood notes that consideration was given to the development of a detailed set of criteria to select those organisations that would be consulted in the EU policy-making process. This criterion itself became the subject of intense debate and interest group manoeuvring as it had the potential to deny access (see Windsor and Berman's comments) to the public policy-making process.

Many of the issues being considered by the EU reflect substantial elements of the earlier commentaries in this issue. Access issues, deregulation, decentralisation, and the power of stakeholders to shape the rules of the marketplace are addressed in *all* of the papers in this special issue.

Greenwood concludes his comments with a section entitled 'Overloading democracy and organising democracy'. He clearly considers the number of interest groups to be a concern, and we agree, as we have noted earlier. Interest group increases, rather than adding clarity to the debate and aiding in the framing of issues, can lead to chaos, fragmentation, hardening of positions and rhetoric around positioning and not centred on solutions. This raises a fundamental, and perhaps unanswerable dichotomy: does the proliferation of public interest groups lead to better public policy processes (and outcomes) or does it lead to fractionation and paralysis in the process that reflects the status quo, the power of the civil servants and supporting staff, and/or the lowest common denominator solution?

What have we learned from these papers, commentaries and the discussions held in June? We would like to raise four observations for your consideration (and would be delighted to hear your thoughts on them or on any of the papers in this journal).

The area of public affairs/issues management/corporate political strategy is, from both a practitioner and academic perspective,

vibrant and diverse. There seems to be no lack of topics, issues and problems to be addressed, and there is a willing and able cadre of individuals to pursue the research and to perform the tasks in the large organisation. Within the academic community, however, there are tensions surrounding this topic. Is the research pursued to improve practice — improve corporate and other organisations' capability to engage and succeed in influencing public policy making (and outcomes) — *or* is the research pursued to improve the public policy-making process in the public interest (a more normative based approach)?

Communications between/among academics and practitioners are awkward and limited in duration and scope. We desperately need more opportunities for dialogue between these two groups. The gap between 'good research' from an academic perspective and 'useful research' from a practitioner's perspective is significant and is not going to be narrowed without changes in this relationship.

The need for more sophisticated public affairs, issues management and corporate political strategy skills and tactics continues to grow. Interest groups and other stakeholders are themselves becoming better 'players' in the marketplace for ideas. The movement toward more unified, encompassing forms of governments has enormous implications for 'how' business is and will be conducted (the rules of competition noted). Public policy can impact on a variety of firm operations and strategies, including but not limited to what kinds of products and services will be allowed to be sold; how and where they will be marketed; how they will be delivered (including what outlets are acceptable); who shall be allowed to purchase the products/services; and what kinds of responsibilities the producers of these products and services have to the ultimate consumers. These issues are not resolved solely in the actions of the marketplace for goods and services. They are often addressed and resolved (with uneven

impacts) in the marketplace of ideas. To the extent that *corporations* fail to engage in this marketplace, they leave themselves vulnerable to enormous changes in the rules of engagement. Such involvement, if it is to yield long-term success, cannot be on an infrequent/occasional basis. Efforts in this marketplace, much as in the marketplace for goods and services, must be ongoing, diverse and adapted to the specific ideas marketplace in which an issue is unfolding.

The need, from an academic's perspective, is for clear and unambiguous linking of public affairs activities and actions and issues management to the organisation's overall strategy. One of the ongoing challenges for practitioners of public affairs management is the need to demonstrate concretely the value of their activities to the rest of the organisation.<sup>3</sup> We believe that this is best accomplished by continuing demonstration of the contributions of public affairs and issues management to the achievement and advancement of overall corporate objectives.

All of the authors involved in this issue believe in the critical importance of public affairs, issues management and corporate political strategy. We believe that the ideas contained herein can advance *both* academic research and the practice of public affairs management, but we await your judgment.

John F. Mahon, Steven L. Wartick and  
Craig S. Fleisher  
*Special issue editors*

#### NOTES

- (1) For a discussion of these issues see Peterson, J. and Bomberg, E. (1999) *Decision-Making in the European Union*, ch. 3. UK: Palgrave.
- (2) One might look at the references to these papers and compare them with the two-part bibliography authored by Griffin *et al.* in the first two editions of this journal to assess the degree or non-degree of overlap and to get an apprecia-

tion for the breadth and depth of work being undertaken in this area.

- (3) Curiously, this problem is remarkably similar to that faced by academics pursuing research in this field. Academics need to show the 'value' of public affairs research to other academic colleagues in their respective institutions. Compounding this problem is the lack of involvement by the constituency most interested in this research — the public affairs manager.

#### PARTICIPANTS IN CONVERSAZIONE 2001

- Mr Christopher J. Allen (Doctoral Candidate, Boston University)
- Professor Shawn Berman (University of Santa Clara)
- Professor Jean J. Boddewyn (Baruch College)
- Professor Jean-Philippe Bonardi (University of Western Ontario, Canada)
- Professor Richard H. Borgman (University of Maine)
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- Teresa Yancey Crane (President, Issue Management Council)
- Professor Craig S. Fleisher (University of New Brunswick, Saint John, Canada)
- Professor Virginia Gerde (University of New Mexico)
- Professor Kathleen A. Getz (American University)
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 Professor Kathleen Rehbein (Marquette University)  
 Professor Douglas Schuler (Rice University)  
 Professor Brian Shaffer (University of Maryland)  
 Professor Robert Strong (University of Maine)  
 Professor Steve Wartick (University of Northern Iowa)  
 Professor Stephanie Welcomer (University of Maine)  
 Professor Duane Windsor (Rice University)  
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#### **Editorial Comment**

I am very pleased to comment on this special edition of the *Journal of Public Affairs*, edited and put together by John Mahon, Craig Fleisher and Steve Wartick. It reflects the best in critical thinking in the area of Public Affairs, Issues Management and Corporate Political Strategy coming out of North America. It arose out of the admirable *Conversazione Two* Conference, held in June 2001 at MBNA's Corporate Training Centre in Belfast, Maine, by the University of Maine and supported by the International Association of Business and Society (IABS) and the University of North Iowa.

I have particularly warm memories of arriving in Maine and staying at my corporate log cabin in the middle of a forest just below the wonderful mountain-top training centre in which *Conversazione Two* took place. The room in which we debated the papers and issues was designed to hold a large round table, which accommodated up to 40 participants, thus the number of conference attendees. It was a friendly, snug, convivial (I will remember the wonderful lobster bakes for a long time), intellectually demanding, well-run and organised event, where many

of us came together for the first time. We grappled with the evolution of worldwide Public Affairs and Political Strategy, and became good friends. As a result, the papers were long but weighty in their insightfulness for the discipline and for practitioners, thus we have supported the editors' desire to publish these measured papers in their revised entirety, with commentaries, rather than reduced to the basics, which can sometimes produce a limited range of thinking. To add balance to the collection, and an EU perspective, Justin Greenwood's opportune and interesting paper has been added by the editors to the Conference paper collection.

Given the terrible events of 11 September, and reflections all of us have had, this collection seems particularly useful for those thinking and reflecting on Public Affairs on a global scale. Can I reiterate Danny Moss, and give my thanks to John, Craig and Steve for all their hard work in making this such an interesting and well-edited collection.

Phil Harris  
*Editor*  
 January 2002