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## **Managing public affairs and lobbying: persuasive communication in the policy sphere.**

Ian Somerville

This chapter examines the specialist area of public affairs and lobbying work.<sup>1</sup> It discusses the importance of intelligence gathering and monitoring the policy making processes in government as well as exploring how organizations can seek to influence government thinking, public policy formation and legislation through the process of lobbying. Here insights will be provided into how such processes may vary under different national political systems, as well as in supra-national contexts like the EU or UN. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses definitional issues, theoretical perspectives and the influence of political structures and culture on public affairs and lobbying work. The second part of the chapter situates the practice of public affairs and lobbying within the MACIE (management analysis, choice, implementation and evaluation) framework outlined in Chapter 2 of this volume but develops this framework by considering the practice of public affairs through the theoretical lens of discourse theory and the concept of 'framing'. Original research data from interviews with senior practitioners is used to provide illustrative case study examples of the practice of public affairs and lobbying.<sup>2</sup>

### **1. Public Affairs and Lobbying: Definitional issues, theoretical perspectives and political structures**

The three sections which make up the first part of this chapter discuss in turn three key issues in current debates on public affairs and lobbying. In the first section the attempt to provide a coherent and comprehensive definition of public affairs and lobbying are discussed and the debates surrounding what precisely constitutes a pressure group or

an interest group are examined. The second section outlines some of the key theoretical debates in the field including the influential contribution from political science which primarily views public affairs from a pluralist or corporatist perspective. This section also outlines the key features of a 'discourse' approach to theorizing public affairs and lobbying. The third section assesses the impact that differing political institutions, structures and cultures have on public affairs work and briefly discusses these issues from a political economy perspective.

### **1.1 Defining public affairs**

Attempts to define the activity of public affairs, who actually engages in it and what it is that they do exactly, have encountered various difficulties. Harris and Moss (2001) noted that 'the term "public affairs" remains one that is surrounded by ambiguity and misunderstanding' (p. 110) and furthermore they suggest that:

[M]any 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 organizational relationships with government, while for others, the role is primarily one of lobbying. Those adopting a broader perspective see public affairs as managing a broader range of relationships with organizational stakeholders, particular those which may have public policy implications, in which they may employ a range of marketing communications and public relations tools. (Harris and Moss, 2001, p. 110).

It is fair to say that many of the definitional problems surrounding public affairs remain unresolved but for the purposes of this chapter this broader definition articulated by Harris and Moss is utilized. It is clear that public affairs activity cannot merely be limited to advocacy efforts to influence government policy through direct contact with political actors by organizational members or representatives. Public affairs work will almost always involve monitoring and intelligence gathering in the public policy sphere and indeed the wider public sphere. It obviously also may involve indirect engagement such as coordinating with the activities of others engaged in pursuing the same interest or promoting the same cause and that involves building relationships and alliances with other groups. Depending on the organization it may also involve coordinating grassroots activities by members of one's own group.

If we ask who engages in public affairs and lobbying activity an analysis of most political cultures would suggest it is those actors who have an interest in the

development of public policy but are not directly engaged in legislating or governing. These actors are usually described as 'interest groups' or 'pressure groups'. If we examine typical definitions of what constitutes a pressure group it is clear that the 'pressure' that groups exert is in respect to political influence of some kind more specifically in relation to the development and implementation of public policy and legislation. Grant (2000) writing in a UK/EU context states that; 'A pressure group is an organization which seeks as one of its functions to influence the formulation and implementation of public policy, public policy representing a set of authoritative decisions taken by the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary, and by local government and the European Union' (p. 14). Coxall (2001) in his analysis of pressure group politics makes a useful distinction between a 'cause' group and a 'sectional' group. He notes:

A *sectional* pressure group represents the self-interest of a particular economic or social group in society: examples are the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and the British Medical Association (BMA)...[whereas]...A *cause* group is formed to promote a particular cause based on a set of shared attitudes, values or beliefs: examples are Greenpeace, the Child Poverty Action Group and Amnesty International. (Coxall, 2001, p. 5)

There is a vast literature attempting to define interest groups and explain interest group activity particularly in studies which focus on the US political context and culture. Thomas (2004) offers a very useful discussion of definitional issues and the problems that occur with attempting to construct a broad all-encompassing definition. He nevertheless, and this echoes closely the definitions of a pressure group which we noted above, does suggest at the very least an interest group is 'an association of individuals or organizations or a public or private institution that, on the basis of one or more shared concerns, attempts to influence public policy in its favour' (Thomas, 2004, p. 4). Thomas notes that interest groups work toward achieving their primary goal of influencing public policy through the activity of lobbying. He defines lobbying as; 'The interaction of a group or interest with policy makers, either directly or indirectly, that has a view to influencing current policy or creating a relationship conducive to shaping future policy to the benefit of that group or interest' (2004, p.6). His definition has merit in that it does describe the vast majority of groups which engage in lobbying activity but does, as he acknowledges, run into problems with delineating certain kinds of 'interests'. For instance, he would seek to distinguish between an interest group and a social movement arguing that 'social movements try to champion grand visions of social change (usually for a large, disposed

segment of the population)' (Thomas, 2004, p. 7). One must assume that Thomas is here referring to the historic campaigns for equality and social justice for women, ethnic minorities, the disabled etc. However, while acknowledging that it may be possible to make some sort of conceptual distinctions, arguably there is such a degree of overlap between such 'social movements' and those that promote and lobby for such causes that it makes little sense to label them as distinct from interest groups. Certainly the connection between broad-based social movements and the various alliances of interest groups that make up social movements means it is probably more coherent to view them as part of the same continuum rather than discrete entities.

McGrath (2005) offers a succinct and pertinent discussion of definitional issues and points out that in many accounts that attempt to define this area of activity much is made of the distinction between 'public affairs', 'government affairs', and 'lobbying' and, at best, results in a lack of clarity and, at worst, is rather confusing and contradictory. As an example he cites Mack (1997) according to whom lobbying is, 'the process of influencing public and governmental policy' whereas 'government relations is the application of one or more communications techniques by individuals or institutions to affect the decisions of government' (cited in McGrath, 2005, p. 19). McGrath also notes the example of Morris (1997) who explains, if explains is the correct word, that:

Public affairs is a term rather wider than Government Relations. It is when an Interest Group has a wide range of relationships with government and the political process, locally, nationally and internationally; in the UK, its chief part is about relations between an Interest Group and the Central Government... Government Relations is dealing with Ministers, Civil Servants, agencies and quangos so as to gain or stop some new thing, to change an analysis or a decision; to increase Government's knowledge or expertise' (cited in McGrath, 2005, p. 20)

McGrath (2005) returns to Milbrath's, still relevant, 50 year old definition to describe the essential features of lobbying. Milbrath notes 'lobbying is the stimulation and transmission of a communication, by someone other than a citizen acting on his own behalf, directed to a governmental decision-maker with the hope of influencing his decision' (Milbrath, 1963, p. 8).

Ultimately, as is evident from Milbrath's description, in many ways defining lobbying is a more straightforward task than defining public affairs. Lobbying, almost irrespective of where it is practiced, is essentially an advocacy activity directed at government/legislators and carried out by actors within or on behalf of a group or

organization. Public affairs is a much broader activity and those involved in interest group, or pressure group, politics do more than just lobby governmental decision-makers although it is fair to say that lobbying is a necessary but not a sufficient element of any definition of public affairs. As noted above it almost always also involves intelligence gathering, coordinating alliances with other actors, organising ones own grassroots and media relations. Reference to the media leads us into the contentious issue of the relationship between public affairs and public relations which do overlap in significant ways although the nature of their relationship tends to be viewed rather differently in different political cultures. We will return to this point below (section 1.3) but suffice to say in regard to public affairs other functions apart from just lobbying are highly significant. Knowing when to intervene in the public policy formation process and who to target is of vital importance but this requires knowledge, analysis and strategic decision-making.

## **1.2 Theoretical perspectives on public affairs and lobbying**

### *Interest group theory and pluralism*

After a comprehensive survey of the literature in the field of public affairs studies Getz (2001) concludes that:

There is no ... agreed upon theory of public affairs or political strategy. There is a paradigm and there are many models, but theory is hard to find. ...The models are rarely atheoretical, but often they are not firmly grounded in a theoretical base. Rather, they present a series of propositions derived from any theoretical base that seems appropriate *for the proposition*. (p. 306)

Nevertheless she does however concede that, while there is no agreed upon overarching theoretical framework, it is clear that from a political science perspective that 'interest group theory' underpinned by a pluralist conception of the relationship between actors in liberal democratic societies is the most widely utilized approach. She notes: 'the dominant theoretical approach to political influence is interest group theory. Interest group theory suggests that the democratic public policy process is an attempt to reach a compromise between the competing goals of a multitude of interest groups' (Getz, 2001, p. 308). Thomas (2004) in a key work on interest group theory which includes important contributions from a wide range of perspectives ultimately agrees with Getz that while it is the case that different theoretical approaches make a definitive body of knowledge hard to construct 'most theoretical approaches utilize 'pluralism' and

'corporatism/neocorporatism' (p. 17). Pluralism can be defined as 'the idea that modern societies contain all sorts of competing groups, interests, ideologies and ideas and in this context democratic politics is seen as a struggle by interests and ideas to predominate, often by inspiring the formation of political parties or pressure groups' (Budge *et al.* 1998, p. 323).

Corporatist theory according to Hill (2005) can be viewed as a rather limited version of pluralism which focuses attention on 'the ways in which powerful interest or pressure groups outside the state and groups within the state relate to each other' (p. 67). He argues that the theory 'tends in a rather generalised way, to develop a single model which gathers the 'parties' to this relationship into three overarching groups: capital, labour and the state. Much other pluralist theory, however, sees neither capital or labour as single interests, easily brought together in all-embracing institutions' (Hill, 2005, p. 67). Some of the literature on public relations has attempted to offer definitions of the related practice of public affairs which echoes this line of thinking. For example, according to Broom (2009) 'Lobbying is an outgrowth of the... democratic system functioning in a pluralistic society' (p. 451). Many theorists from the pluralist perspective, as is evident from Schwarzmantel's (1994) description below, paint an optimistic picture of what they view as the modern liberal democratic pluralist society:

Because pluralism takes as its starting point to be a modern society in which there are different interests, popular power is realised through group activity, the working of political parties and pressure groups or interest groups, each of which represents one of the many interests into which a developed society is split. Pluralist perspectives salute and emphasise this diversity of interest. (Schwarzmantel, 1994, p. 50)

Schwarzmantel here seems to not just suggest that this is an accurate way of describing and explaining how power structures actually work in liberal democratic systems but also appears to be offering a normative theory as well. The perspective of pluralism does in some ways provide a useful theoretical perspective for understanding the role of public affairs in a liberal democratic societies but there are some telling critiques of pluralist theory. Hill (2005) notes that the

[O]pposition to the pluralist perspective can take two forms. One is to argue that this is not a satisfactory model for democracy (it is too indirect or it is impossible to realise the 'general will' through such diversity). ...The other is to argue that pluralism provides a misleadingly optimistic picture of the way power is organised in those societies described as pluralist. (p. 28)

This 'pluralist perspective' Hill notes is opposed and challenged by a range of theories which identify ways in which power is 'concentrated in the hands of small groups, often described as elites' (2005, p. 50). Hill notes that in much of the literature these approaches have traditionally been described as 'structural' critiques. The argument is that 'there is a range of institutions – the family, the church, the economy, the state – that are linked together in a structure that has a powerfully determining impact on what gets on the [political] agenda' (2005, p. 47). However Hill suggests that when one examines much of this critique

[I]t is open to question whether the phenomena being explored should be described as 'structural'. What is being described is divisions within societies, which are maintained and reinforced in various ways ...[through]...ideas about society and its culture – discourses if you like – that sustain patterns of power (2005, p.48-49).

#### *Discourse analysis*

Arguably, as we shall see in section 1.3 below, Hill dismisses 'structural' issues rather too hastily but it must be said his reference to 'discourses' is interesting and important because although there have been some notable attempts (e.g. Fisher, 2003) to apply the discourse perspective to public affairs this has remained an underdeveloped theoretical lens through which to view the practice. To see what a discourse perspective on public affairs might look like it is worth turning to the related practice of public relations to examine how discourse theory has been applied there.<sup>3</sup> Historically public relations like public affairs has largely been theorised through variations of a functionalist paradigm (L'Etang, 2008) but as the discipline develops there have been fruitful attempts to theorize public relation through the lens of discourse theory.

Motion and Leitch (1996) suggest that discourse theory can offer valuable insights into public relations practice, in fact, they argue that practitioners can be viewed as 'discourse technologists who play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of discourse' (p. 298). Arguably the same can be said about public affairs practitioners and in fact from a discourse theory perspective both practices can usefully be viewed as essentially similar activities though in some senses aimed at different audiences. Motion and Weaver (2005) argue that from a discourse perspective,

[P]ublic relations is theorized as a legitimate tactic in the struggle for and negotiation of power. The task for the critical public relations scholar is to investigate how public relations practice uses particular discursive strategies to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission.



...understanding how public relations represents and promotes selected positions of truth and power is the examination of discourse strategies deployed by practitioners. In public relations, discourse is deployed as a political resource to influence public opinion and achieve political, economic and sociocultural transformation (p. 50-52).

Arguably the public affairs practitioner is engaged in a similar endeavour albeit, as noted above, in a more specialist role focused on a more specific audience. Motion and Weaver are suggesting that the ultimate aim of the public relations practitioner is to deploy certain discourses in an attempt to gain a position of power for their client or organization by establishing what Foucault called a 'regime of truth'. Foucault suggested that 'There is a battle "for truth" or at least "around truth"... it being understood also that it's not a matter of a battle "on behalf" of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays' (Foucault, 1980, p. 132). From this perspective a 'discourse' is the vehicle by which public relations practitioners (and public affairs practitioners) attempt to 'establish, maintain, or transform hegemonic power [because] public relations discourse strategies are deployed to circulate ideas, establish advantageous relationships, and privilege certain truths and interests' (Motion and Weaver, 2005, p. 52-3). Viewed in this way public affairs practitioners as well as public relations practitioners should be 'theorised as working to (strategically) privilege particular discourses over others, in an attempt to construct what they hope will be accepted as in the public interest and legitimated as policy' (Weaver, et al, 2006, p. 18). How does it work in practice? According to Motion and Weaver (2005) a key strategy of how public relations contributes to hegemonic power – where 'hegemonic' means the nonviolent struggle to maintain economic, political, cultural and ideological dominance – is what Fairclough (1992) describes as the 'articulation, disarticulation and re-articulation of elements of a discourse' (p. 93). Motion and Leitch (1996) suggested that the significance of this strategy for public relations is that otherwise unconnected discourse elements, for example, images or ideas can be articulated with pre-existing attitudes or experiences with the aim of predisposing an individual to accept that idea or image. In their study of the GM debate in New Zealand Motion and Weaver note that a key strategy of the pro-GM campaign was to try to ensure that the 'issue of GM was disarticulated from the scientific and environmental discourse and rearticulated as an economic discourse' (2005, p. 64). This echoes other campaigns such as the campaign to ban tobacco which in the US arguably has become

a battle between the discourse of health (and long term health costs) and the economic discourse (jobs).

### *Framing and Storytelling*

As was noted above there have been explicit attempts to apply discourse theory to the practice of public affairs (Fisher, 2003) however it should also be noted that, although they do not articulate it in these terms arguably some recent academic accounts of public affairs do adopt something similar to a discourse analysis of public affairs activity. For example McGrath's (2007) analysis of the tactic of 'framing' which he suggests involves assessing how 'lobbyists use language consciously to frame policy issues in such a way as to position their organization and its policy preferences to greatest effect' (p. 269) clearly echoes the discourse perspective. McGrath refers to Entman's definition of framing to explain the concept. Entman (1993) notes that the process of framing is in essence 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendations for the item described' (Entman, 1993; cited in McGrath, 2007, p. 271). The overlap here with the notion of promoting a hegemonic discourse is evident. The use of storytelling which obviously involves the construction of a narrative discourse has been analysed by some researchers in public affairs although the obvious link between this analysis and discourse theory is seldom alluded to. Terry (2001) has investigated the use of storytelling as an explicit tactic directed toward policy makers by lobbyists in the US and Heugens (2002) assesses storytelling as an important corporate and activist tool for gaining the support of various external constituencies in the ongoing semiotic wars over biotechnology. Heugens appears to mean by storytelling the construction of grand narratives (or discourses) about biotechnology by the key opponents in the battle over GM technologies. The corporate interests on one side produce a narrative about scientific progress, human advancement, curing starvation etc. On the other side the environmentalists construct a discourse focused on potential health risks, exploitation of third world farmers, corporate greed etc. Heugens notes that 'every corporate story that was ever written and performed to gain the support of consumers and legislators for the commercialisation of modern biotechnology was quickly reciprocated by an antagonist story that defied and contested the claims of these earlier variants' (2002, p. 68). Interestingly, although articulated differently in political

terms, the analysis of the battle between the stories, or discourses, surrounding biotechnology offered by Heugens and by Motion and Weaver comes to fairly similar conclusions. This is no surprise as their analyses, despite employing different terminology, is ultimately assessing what are similar strategies by corporate actors and the activists which oppose them.

It is worth pointing out, however, that while deconstructing the use of storytelling is a very useful analytical tool for the public affairs researcher it arguably doesn't go far enough in assessing and understanding the key role which the political economy context plays in the acceptance or rejection of a 'story' or a 'discourse'. Motion and Weaver (2005) argue 'that discourses deployed for public relations purposes can only be fully understood in relation to the political, economic, and social contexts in which they operate' (p. 50). As we shall see in the next section this is also the case with the practice of public affairs.

### **1.3 Structure, institutions and culture: political economy and public affairs**

Many textbooks on public policy or public affairs are structured around presenting a list of apparently discrete perspectives such as pluralism, corporatism, Marxism, network approaches, rational choice theory, institutional theory and so on (e.g. Hill, 2005; Sabatier, 2007), all of which have been put forward as theoretical explanations of how public policy formation emerges from the interaction of politics, interest group pressure, and public affairs activity. It is probably fair to say that while it is the case that some of these perspectives are fundamentally oppositional, it is clear that ultimately many of them share common features and assumptions in that all of these approaches do acknowledge the significance of structures, institutions and cultural context.

#### *Political economy*

We noted above the perspective of Motion and Weaver (2005) which argued that the political economy context needed to be taken into account in any coherent understanding of why some public relations and public affairs efforts are successful and others fail, or to put it in their terms, why some discourses achieve hegemony and others do not. By the political economy context they appear to mean such factors as the current political landscape (its structure and culture etc), current economic agendas and relevant existing government legislation. It should be noted that their definition of political economy is broader than that employed in many texts on public affairs. For example,

Thomas (2004) outlines a rather narrower view of the concept of political economy when he suggests that 'the political economy explanation of interest groups in the public policy process is incomplete. ...The economic interpretation of interest groups suggests that large interests organize, support politicians who promote key programs, and thereby extract collective benefits from government' (p. 56). Thomas does, however, acknowledge that the 'types of groups and interests that exist, and the way they attempt to influence public policy are determined by historical, geographical, cultural, social, economic, political, governmental structural and other factors' and makes the important point that in turn 'interest group activities help shape and define the nature of a political system' (2004, p. 67).

In this chapter the broader conception of political economy is favoured and furthermore it is argued that in attempting to understand the influential factors which impact upon public affairs practice, the political structures, institutions, and culture are always of primary importance. Their significance is perhaps thrown into sharpest relief when comparisons between political systems are made although, as Thomas (2004) acknowledges, comparative studies in this area are rare. He notes:

For the most part, however, scholars have only addressed the factor of differences in political and governmental structure incidentally and not as a major focus of their research. Consequently, insights into the influence of this factor must be extrapolated from various studies. Extrapolation reveals that four factors are particularly important: (1) the constitutional structure, particularly the contrast between the parliamentary and separation of powers systems and federal and unitary systems; (2) the strength of political parties; (3) the power and independence of the bureaucracy; and (4) the degree of centralization or fragmentation of a political system and the extent of corporatism or neocorporatism. (Thomas, 2004, p. 75).

#### *Institutions, structures and systems*

An exception to this lack of comparative work in public affairs scholarship is McGrath's (2005) important study of lobbying practices in Washington, London and Brussels. McGrath's starting point is that 'lobbying activities are influenced by institutional architecture and policy-making processes...lobbying cannot usefully be studied in isolation from the factors which influence it' (2005, p.2). A key feature of McGrath's work is that it offers a very useful detailed analysis of the role political culture, institutional frameworks, regulatory environments and executive/legislative relationships all play in determining differing access points to the policy-making process where lobbyists insert themselves to attempt to influence policy decisions in the three political

systems. It is clear that the UK with its strong party system, is different to the US with its weak political party control over legislators and in turn both are very different from the EU where the key 'policy-making institutions are supra-national, and composed of members or appointees from a range of political parties' (McGrath, 2005, p. 185). Thomas (2004) also notes the importance of US constitutional arrangements when he points out that 'largely because of its separation of powers system, its weak political parties, and low level of ideological politics, the United States is an aberrant political system in regard to interest group activity' (p.1). However he does go on to suggest that wider socio-political changes may have the effect of leaving the USA less peculiar in this regard, 'The decline of ideology across the Western world, and particularly Western Europe, is making the factor of parties less significant and more akin to the situation in the United States by increasing the strategy and tactic options for many groups' (Thomas, 2004, p. 76). It should also be pointed out that this assumed inverse relationship between political party and interest group influence needs some qualification. For example, amongst UK scholars there is a widespread consensus that attempts by the Thatcher government in the 1980's to curtail the influence of pressure groups ultimately had little impact. Richardson argues that 'despite attempts to radically change Britain's policy style during the 1980's, interest groups retained their key role' (1993, p. 99). Jordan actually suggests that it is reasonable to claim that pressure groups in many ways exert a more powerful influence over policy in the UK than the US (Jordan in Thomas, 2004, p. 303). It is clear that while the Westminster parliamentary system in the UK means that political parties exert tight control over the legislative process the decline in party membership and voting figures at election time has seen a certain shift of power in the policy arena toward interest groups. Jordan notes; 'Given the scale of interest group numbers and memberships, the "decline of parties" and their replacement by group participation, interest groups are now taken seriously in Britain' (Jordan in Thomas, 2004 p. 302). Thomas also makes the point that political and 'cultural differences have also led some countries to regulate interest group activity extensively, as in the United States, while in others it is much less stringently regulated, as in Britain and Germany' (2004, p. 72). For a useful account of regulatory environments in the US, UK and EU the reader is directed to McGrath's study (2005, pp. 167-180).

*Public affairs and public relations*

One final point is worth making in respect to cultural differences and this in respect to how scholars and practitioners view the relationship between public affairs and public relations in different political cultures. The two activities clearly overlap in several key ways although the nature of their relationship tends to be viewed rather differently from the US and UK perspectives. A typical US public relations textbook describes public affairs as merely one aspect of public relations work:

In corporations, “public affairs” typically refers to public relations efforts related to public policy and “corporate citizenship.” Corporate public affairs specialists serve as liaisons with governmental units; implement community improvement programs; encourage political activism, campaign contributions, and voting; and volunteer their services in charitable and community development organizations. ... PR counselling firms use the public affairs label for their lobbying and governmental relations services designed to help clients understand and address regulatory and legislative processes. (Broom, 2009, p. 35)

It is probably fair to say that it is this conception of public affairs as a public relations strategic specialism that is articulated by the majority of practitioners in the US (McGrath, 2005) however in the UK the relationship between public affairs and public relations is viewed rather differently. In fact in many ways it might be more accurate to say that if one examines much of the UK scholarly literature on this issue the idea that there is any necessary connection at all between the two activities is rejected (or at least downplayed). Moloney notes;

Many professional lobbyists reject their inclusion in PR, joining the flight from it as a work title and preferring euphemisms such as government relations, political communications and public affairs specialists. For these separatists, PR is public campaigning via the media, as opposed to private and confidential approaches to persuade powerful persons face to face. (2000, p. 113)

L'Etang also writing from the UK perspective suggests that public affairs 'is becoming recognised as a specialism distinct from public relations and experts are beginning to debate issues such as education and qualifications for public affairs consultants' (2008, p.109). Ultimately it is clear that although public affairs is frequently described, particularly in the UK, as 'higher status strategic work' (L'Etang, 2008, p. 109) and while there may be some merit in articulating a conceptual difference between the two activities at times, in many ways this is more about cultural difference than the practicalities of public affairs work. As will be explained further in the next section of the chapter, the management of public affairs work in the UK, as in the US and elsewhere, almost always involves much more than just face-to-face 'insider' dealings with those

who hold power in public policy arenas and ultimately a considerable amount of public affairs practitioner work is indistinguishable from public relations activity. It is also very important to note that shared conceptual understandings and theoretical explanations of both public affairs and public relations can enrich our understanding and analysis of practitioner work.

## **2. Public affairs and lobbying practice**

The second part of this chapter will focus on how the practice of public affairs can be articulated within the MACIE framework outlined in chapter 2. Issues surrounding *environmental analysis, strategic choice and decision-making, implementation of strategy and tactics and the analysis and evaluation of public affairs efforts* are explored. In the sections below interview data with practitioners in the corporate, consultancy and voluntary/NGO sectors (including British Petroleum, Virgin Media, Amnesty International, Disability Action, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and several public affairs consultancies) are used to illustrate, and provide insights into, key aspects of public affairs work and are theorised utilising the perspectives discussed in the first part of the chapter.

### **2.1 Analysis of the policy sphere**

Fleisher (2002) writing about corporate public affairs argues that in this context ‘analysis is the multifaceted combination of processes by which collected socio-political information is systematically interpreted to create intelligence and recommendations for actions’ (p. 168) According to Fleisher the ‘essential responsibility of a CPA [corporate public affairs] analyst is to protect and enhance their company’s competitive and non-market interests by providing useful and high-quality analysis about the “4Is”, interests/stakeholders, intelligence, institutions and issues’ (2002, p. 168). Although he is writing about practitioners employed in the private sector Fleisher’s point is valid for public affairs across all sectors, and arguably it is frequently pressure groups who put his advice into practice most consistently. Many pressure groups illustrate very well Broom’s point that ‘lobbyists spend substantially more time collecting information from government than they do communicating to it, since sound lobbying strategies, tactics, and positions are highly dependent on a strong base of information’ (2009, p. 34). For

example, the human rights organization Amnesty International (UK) have put a great deal of effort into researching and constructing an up-to-date intelligence database on the elected members and senior officials of every legislature in the UK - Members of Parliament, the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament and Members of Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies - to ascertain where they stand on issues which concern the organization. The Amnesty International Campaigns Coordinator, who also helps co-ordinate lobbying efforts, notes that 'we refer to [the database] when we want to know which MP, MLA, Lord or other official is supportive of each individual cause'.

Amnesty International stress that it has identified and works with those actively sympathetic with their cause in all UK parties with elected representatives except one. Its campaigns co-ordinator told the author that they have a 'policy of no discussion with the BNP [British National Party] due to their political and ideological views'. If we attempt to understand this from the perspective of a 'discourse approach' the reason for this becomes apparent. The BNP does not share or accept the human rights and equality discourse underpinning all other elected parties in the UK. Amnesty International's promotion of this hegemonic discourse, of the right of all human beings to basic human rights, obviously makes it difficult for all major political parties and political institutions - which ostensibly agree with this discourse - to resist appeals to support them. The exception to this is of course the BNP which is underpinned by and actively promotes racist political policies thus excluding the possibility of developing a shared discourse and making any attempt at engagement let alone lobbying futile. McGrath (2005) cites a US lobbyist who suggests an organization must try to engage with all political actors and that 'there should be no enemies in Congress' (p. 149). In general this is a sensible policy but it is important also to make the point that, depending on the organization and its aims or values sometimes it will not be possible to engage with every political actor, nor should it necessarily try to.

In respect to the analytical methods, models and techniques used by public affairs practitioners, Fleisher readily admits that the 'majority of techniques have been borrowed from related fields like administration, management, marketing, political science, public policy and public relations' (2002, p. 168). He lists a range of analytical methods and techniques and the debt, particularly to the disciplines of PR and management are apparent. Others too have noted the use of typical business and management analytical tools such as the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis (Shaw, 2005). However, Fleisher rather gloomily



concludes that although these methods exist a lack of adequate training means that 'analysis will remain underemphasized in...CPA [corporate public affairs] and its practitioners will never exploit the field's vast potential to simultaneously increase both its value and legitimacy' (2002, p. 171). It must be said that while Fleisher is largely correct to point to the lack of a rigorous methodologically grounded approach to analysis, it is nevertheless clear that practitioners do, of course, make some attempt to analyze and assess their operating environments and, for example, many do take seriously Van Schendelen's advice about attempting to understand one's opponents in a public affairs battle. Van Schendelen warns that 'lack of knowledge of the styles and techniques of the opposition is detrimental to one's own interest' (van Schendelen, in Thomas, 2004, p. 92).

An Edinburgh based consultant whose company is engaged in public affairs work for several large Scottish based companies claimed that he continually monitored various websites of 'other organizations, pressure groups, or political parties including Friends of the Earth and SEPA [Scottish Environmental Protection Agency] and other organizations to see their view and get a perspective on things, see what's going on on the other side'. The Head of Communication and Lobbying for the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education told the author; 'Sometimes it a case of having to do a bit more homework with opponents and try to find out what their opposition is, where its stemming from...is it a fear of change?'

It is clear that some public affairs practitioners do attempt, sometimes very successfully, to analyze their operating environment and make good strategy decisions based on that analysis. It is equally apparent, however, as Fleisher's (2002) own research demonstrates, that much of what does occur is not based on a coherent or rigorous methodology. This, Fleisher acknowledges, is an issue which needs to be addressed more seriously by current practitioners. It is clear therefore that the identification, monitoring and analysis of legislators, officials, political opponents and other relevant stakeholders is very important in public affairs work, but of course, analyzing and assessing the environment is only useful if it enables the development of relevant choices in respect to strategy and tactics and if it aids decision making in respect to those choices. We can now examine how the second step in the MACIE model - the process of selection and choice of appropriate strategies and tactics - can be applied in public affairs work.

## **2.2 Choice and decision making: strategy and tactics**

In a key work on the relationship of the business sector to the public affairs process Getz (2001) discusses the key choices and decisions facing private sector companies. In actual fact the issues she raises face most organizations seeking to influence public policy. She writes;

A clearly important question has to do with the strategies and tactics that might be employed once the decision to participate has been made. Should a firm develop an ongoing relationship with public officials or should it enter and exit the political arena as issues change? Should political decision makers be approached directly or indirectly? Should the approach be intended to inform, to persuade, or both? Which tactics are effective in which situations, and how does one know? (Getz, 2001, p. 307)

Once an organization has made the decision to attempt to engage with the public policy process and try to influence it in favour of its own agenda or cause as was noted in the section above, the first stage is to analyse the public policy arena to locate the spaces where it might most usefully insert its perspective, or its 'discourse', for maximum influence and to identify who it is most valuable to lobby. After this analysis and assessment has been carried out, there are some important choices and decisions to be made about the most appropriate strategies and tactics which will result in maximum benefit and influence in the public policy sphere.

Showlater and Fleisher (2005) refer to a wide range of public affairs techniques in an discussion designed to highlight 'the necessity for public affairs practitioners to be aware of the various tools at their disposal and to know how, when and where they can be best utilized' (p. 109). They describe and explain a fairly exhaustive list of techniques and tactics including:

Lobbying, environmental (including issue and stakeholder) monitoring and scanning, grassroots, constituency building, electoral techniques like "Get out the Vote" (GOTV), issue advertising, political action committees, public affairs and corporate social audits, judicial influence techniques such as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), advisory panels and speakers bureaus, voluntarism, sponsorships, Web activism, coalitions and alliances, and community investment' (Showlater and Fleisher, 2005, p. 109).

Some of these tactics are peculiar or at least fairly exclusive to the US political environment, but many of them are significant options for public affairs in most liberal democracies. In reality, practitioners working for most interest groups will consider a range of techniques although most of the literature agrees that these boil down to a choice between several key strategies or combinations of these strategies (McGrath,

2005; Thomas, 2004; Showlater and Fleisher, 2005). These strategies are: direct lobbying face-to-face via insider access; indirect lobbying using grassroots pressure; and the formation of coalitions or alliances with like minded groups to exert broad based pressure.

These key public affairs strategies will be discussed in greater detail below but before we move on to that discussion it is worth noting that it is frequently argued that web activism can be used to underpin and compliment the latter two strategies and thereby transform existing power imbalances that lobbying by powerful groups produces (Kakabadse, *et al*, 2003). However appealing this sounds, one should be careful of falling into an uncritical technological determinism and assuming that, a technology, such as the Internet, necessarily subverts traditional hierarchies. As Oates (2008) notes: 'The internet has not radically changed the fundamental relationship between rulers and citizens, but it has provided useful tools for activists to mobilize for specific political causes' (p. 155). In fact there is evidence to suggest that the Internet may actually be reinforcing the status quo. According to Rethemeyer (2007) his research indicates: 'The Internet appears to foster and intensify closed, corporatized policy networks. The solution may not be IT, as the Internet optimists suggest. Rather, it may be to embrace and reform politics-by-organization. The Internet and other forms of IT have a role – though a small one – in this process' (p. 199).

It should also be noted that 'choice' in respect to which strategy to adopt may be influenced by socio-economic and ideological constraints. For example a key choice facing activist groups is whether to engage at all in direct lobbying to try to influence policy or whether to eschew this in favour of protest and pressure from the outside. Some of the more ideologically driven environmentalist and animal rights groups typically have major concerns about compromising their core values by engaging with the governments which perpetuate systems which they are fundamentally opposed to. It is important to bear in mind that some groups may decide to deliberately reject some of the avenues or strategies open to them and choose to remain outside some parts of the public policy arena. Grant (2000) offers a useful definition of insider and outsider groups: 'An *insider* group is regarded as legitimate by government and consulted on a regular basis...' 'An *outsider* group does not wish to become involved in a consultative relationship with public policy-makers or is unable to gain recognition' (Grant, 2000, p. 16). Most interest groups do, however, recognise the importance of putting their case directly to political parties and those holding political office. Fleisher's (2003) advice to

public affairs managers is 'Be prepared to learn as much as you can about the official before meeting them; do not be concerned if the lawmaker is unavailable and a staff assistant is in their place' (p. 373). A senior practitioner at the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education concurs: 'Direct contact is very important...even speaking to the PA of a minister and building a relationship there.'

As noted above organizations may be excluded from direct 'insider' contact or they might decide other strategies are also required. In these circumstances indirect lobbying using grassroots pressures is likely to be a useful strategy choice. Fleisher (2003) suggests that;

Grassroots techniques have become essential to the advocacy and influencing toolkit of most sophisticated North American organizations' public affairs operations. These techniques, originated and institutionalised decades ago by activist groups and subsequently modified for corporate application by public policy-savvy businesses, allow an organization's stakeholders the opportunity to work in the public policy process on behalf of an organization who is seeking to establish and impress its position on those elected officials. Very few issues, particularly those captured in the public's attention by the media, escape the onslaught of organised grassroots techniques coming from all sides of the matter. (p. 371)

It's worth making the point that cultural differences need to be acknowledged in respect to strategy choice. For example in the above quote it is clear that Fleisher emphasises the corporate organizing of grassroots lobbying as primarily a Northern American practice. Fleisher's point is backed up by a senior practitioner who works for British Petroleum and has experience working in both London and Washington. This practitioner stated that in the company's US operation there are pages on the company's intranet 'where you can look up your local congressman. You can also look up his or her voting record. And then BP will also have materials available on subjects of interest to BP that you may or may not wish to use if you were to contact your congressman'. The practitioner acknowledges that it is possible to access this sort of information in the UK and that an employee in a company could petition his/her local MP on behalf of their employer but the active engagement of the company is a peculiarly American approach. They noted that in the UK 'to do it as part of your company is the unusual thing, is the boundary that they seem to have crossed in the US, ...[where it]... seems to be perfectly acceptable'. Although this practitioner and Fleisher emphasise this approach as a characteristic of North American political culture, it should be acknowledged that some scholars would argue that it is becoming increasingly important in the UK and European

context. Titley (2003) and McGrath (2005) note the increasing importance of 'outsider' tactics, (e.g. grassroots campaigns) which are increasingly supplementing and to some extent perhaps even supplanting 'insider' contact in respect to British and European public affairs. It is clearly a route that is increasingly seen as a useful and legitimate strategy by all interest groups.

Building a public affairs strategy around grassroots campaigning frequently goes hand-in-hand with the strategy of coalition and alliance building with other interest groups. Fleisher (2003) notes; 'Through well-conceived coalitions with other allied interests, various groups have been able to achieve important public policy successes' (p. 373). On many occasions necessity is also the mother of alliances and coalitions with other groups with the choice of this strategy being crucial for many groups aiming to reduce the resources cost. Citing specifically recent refugee and violence against women campaigns, the campaign co-ordinator for Amnesty said that: 'It can be very important to work alongside other groups when there is an opportunity to share expertise...In our regional offices we are quite often forced to work alongside other groups and make alliances as we may not have the resources to complete all of our actions alone or another group may approach us asking if we would like to join them in a specific appeal'. We will examine in more detail the issues surrounding developing an effective coalition in the next section but what is clear is that when contemplating coalition building as a strategy establishing clear ground rules and ensuring mutual benefit is of primary importance. As Showalter and Fleisher (2005) note: 'The best coalitions have the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders, clear leadership, group agreement on the vision and mission for the coalition, and assessment of member needs and member resources...Once these initial building blocks are established, the effective coalition creates short- and long- term objectives, develops an action plan and implements (p. 119)'.

### **2.3 Implementing public affairs strategies and tactics**

For a public affairs manager choosing which strategy to adopt and which tactics to employ is one thing; successful implementation resulting in policy change which benefits your organization or advances your cause is, of course, quite another. In respect to direct lobbying efforts a knowledge and expertise of how to engage in and implement traditional face-to-face lobbying still determines the success or failure of many public affairs efforts. McGrath's (2007) point about lobbyists using 'language

consciously to frame policy issues in such a way as to position their organization and its policy preferences to greatest effect' (p. 269) is of key importance in any direct lobbying activity.

The view that direct lobbying is essentially persuasive communication where you simplify your message and frame it in an appropriate and appealing way is echoed by many commentators. Mack (1997) suggests that 'Issues should be framed to show how the public benefits from your side of the argument. Don't go public with a narrow, self-serving issue' (cited in McGrath, 2007, p. 271). Politics in liberal democracies is ultimately underpinned by utilitarian ideals so it is clear that the 'story' or 'narrative' you present must demonstrate how the policy which your organization would wish to see accepted is in some way benefitting the common good. This is where an understanding of the role and power of discourse becomes significant for the lobbyist. Being able to demonstrate that your position on an issue is part of a generally accepted discourse which is seen as core to liberal democratic society will always be to your advantage, e.g. human rights, women's rights, freedom, equality, progress etc. In our discussion above (section 2.1) on the battle between the environmentalist lobby and the biotechnology corporate lobby over GM we noted that both tried to frame their arguments to appeal to this key societal discourse of maximizing the common good. The corporate lobby primarily presented a scientific progress/economic benefits story while the environmentalist lobby employed a corporate greed/citizen disempowerment narrative. Arguably in the above example both sides present simplistic narratives but in lobbying efforts most commentators would agree that this simplification process is important. A clear coherent message narrative works best, as McGrath (2007) notes, 'public policy issues (the focus of lobbying efforts) tend to be complex, involving an array of both factors and alternatives; framing is an attempt by lobbyists to set the boundaries of debate on a given issue.' (p. 271).

Of course to actually present your case access for the lobbyist to government actors or key political figures is a key issue. Several recent studies have revealed the growing importance of party conferences as key forum for meeting and engaging in lobbying efforts with political actors. Thomas (2005) suggests that 'key lobbying efforts take place at party conferences' (p. 76) and in a study also published in 2005, Harris and Harris draw attention to the growth of lobbying activities at political party conferences through the 1990's in the UK. They note: 'The party conference environment acts as a communications conduit for the sharing and swapping of information as well as an

opinion exchange and policy positioning forum... It is perhaps the ultimate network opportunity for those interested in government, political processes, and the formation of policy' (Harris and Harris, 2005, p. 224). They also note the shifting makeup of the lobbying organizations at these events and specifically point out that 'increasingly activity by outside groups at conferences is coming from the private sector and "not for profit" categories... There has been a steady growth in activities by not for profit organizations over the ten year period of the study and a slow but steady decline among public-sector, unions and professional association interests' (Harris and Harris, 2005, p. 238-9). A senior practitioner at the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education agrees and views the party conferences of Northern Ireland's political parties as a key target for direct lobbying efforts: 'We would attend their party conferences and take an information stand at their party conferences... we would be available to talk to people'.

All of the above efforts usually involve a lobbyist communicating face-to-face with key political actors, grassroots lobbying involves a more indirect approach by organizational lobbyists but it can be a very effective approach. Writing about corporate sector lobbying Fleisher (2003) notes that in the US the role of the public affairs manager in respect to managing the grassroots includes 'activities such as motivating employees to meet with and discuss policy concerns with public officials, inviting public officials to organizational sites in order to allow mutual exchange with company employees, get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, voter registration drives, political education of stakeholders and various other forms of government relations supporting activities' (2003, p. 372). It is fair to say, as we noted in the previous section, there are certain differences in the approach to the deployment of grassroots between the US and the UK/European context. Encouraging members of your company to become an effective grassroots lobby is perhaps not as common a feature in the UK/European context as it is in US policy debates but according to practitioners while not common it is a growing phenomenon in the UK. A senior practitioner working for Virgin Media pointed out to the author that one of its rival organizations, British Telecom, had in the past actively tried to organize grassroots lobbying by its staff in relation to the policy of providing broadband to all regions of the UK. She noted in regard to encouraging grassroots lobbying by company employees that 'BT actually took that stance and it encouraged its employees to write to their local MP to encourage them to be thinking about the introduction of Broadband because they felt it was just so important to the economy. And I think that whole campaign has been hugely successful.'

To some degree then the adoption of what were traditionally thought of as US practices in respect to grassroots lobbying are appearing the UK/EU context although it is probably fair to say that at the present time - for the reasons to do with political culture noted above - in the US many interest groups use grassroots lobbying much more effectively as a political weapon during key legislative debates. Morris (1999) reflecting on the NRA's tactics notes:

[T]he NRA has become incredibly skilled at using its members as a political tool, unlike many special-interest groups, the NRA doesn't even aspire to popularity. When it seeks to influence an election, it doesn't advertise on television or radio. Instead, the NRA sends mailings to its members to urge them to vote for their favoured candidates in elections. The NRA emphasizes its capacity to turn out a disciplined bloc of voters for or against any candidate to strike terror into the hearts of wavering congressmen and senators when gun control legislation come up for a vote. (p. 132)

Fleisher (2003) makes the important point that 'irrespective of the level of database sophistication, grassroots are only effective if activated individuals are effective in making their views known to public officials' (p. 373). Many campaigning organizations focus on trying to provide its grassroots with the tools to become effective communicators. The campaign coordinator for Amnesty International regards helping their grassroots members become effective lobbyists as a key strategy for the organization. She told the author: 'Our grassroots level correspondence to MPs is extremely beneficial. We dedicate a page on our website to show activists how to lobby their MP and pinpoint which MPs are good to lobby and when. We highlight that it is best to lobby your MP if they are new to Parliament and that new MPs spend a considerable portion of their time focusing on their constituents.'

The power and influence of the grassroots has not gone unnoticed and some organizations in recent years have engaged in the practice of manufacturing a grassroots campaign to try to influence policy makers. Although an old practice, the expansion of the Internet has led to a significant amount of debate on the creation of "front" groups created to deceive or mislead policy makers about public opinion (Showlater and Fleisher, 2005). Also known as 'astroturf lobbying' such front organizations are designed to give the appearance of widespread citizen support, when in reality they often are created to promote narrow interests.

In respect to the actual effective implementation and management of coalition and alliance building several key issues must be borne in mind by the public affairs practitioner. Coalitions which share a similar ideological position, economic interest or



which belong to the same sector socio-economically probably have the greatest chance of long-term success. This is obviously because they may well share substantive political, economic and social objectives and be able to communicate more effectively because they share a similar worldview or a common discourse. Although frequently overlooked in public affairs literature – Martens (2009) being a notable exception - coalitions are particularly important in human rights lobbying and have been much studied by international relations scholars who have particularly focused attention on the strategy of transnational alliances. Keck and Sikkink (1998) have described the effectiveness of the ‘boomerang’ model in human rights lobbying. They state:

Boomerang strategies are most common in campaigns where the target is a state’s domestic policies or behaviour...It is no accident that so many advocacy networks address claims about rights in their campaigns. Governments are the primary “guarantors” of rights, but also their primary violators. When a government violates or refuses to recognize rights, individual and domestic groups often have no recourse within domestic political or judicial arenas. They may seek international connections finally to express their concerns and even to protect their lives. When channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked, the boomerang pattern of influence characteristic of transnational networks may occur: domestic NGO’s bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside. This is most obviously the case in human rights campaigns. (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 12)

Although a scenario where transnational advocacy networks put pressure on a specific state government on behalf of coalition partners in that state may be thought of as a strategy to apply only to despotic or totalitarian regimes around the world the reality is this boomerang strategy has been used in liberal democracies as well. The campaigns director for Disability Action told the author that they used precisely this strategy to put pressure on the British government to fully ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and thereby write the provisions into domestic law in Britain. The British government wished to ratify the Convention but with a raft of reservations and op-outs. Disability Action turned to allied organizations in Australia to get them to petition the Australian government to pressurize the British under a UN mechanism whereby if one government objects to another’s reservations then these objections are publically recorded. In effect it is a strategy designed to expose and embarrass countries into dropping reservations and to comply in full with UN conventions. Disability Actions’s campaign’s director told the author: ‘In regard to UN conventions there is a UN mechanism that we used which was that another state party to that convention can

challenge the reservations on the grounds that they go against the fundamental purpose of the convention.’ This strategy was successful up to a point with the UK eventually reducing the number of its reservations from thirty to just four.

While alliances between ideologically compatible interest groups are more common it is possible for apparently strange bedfellows such as big business and the voluntary sector to work together for mutual benefit. McGrath (2005) notes the example of the alliance a large Japanese manufacturer of audio equipment and tapes forged with the Royal National Institute for the Blind, among others, to campaign against an increased levy on audio tapes. He cites a senior London lobbyist who helped develop the coalition on behalf of the manufacturer who stated;

[T]he crucial ally was the blind – if you are blind, you use audio tape in the way that others use pen and paper. Getting the Royal National Institute for the Blind on board was decisive, and yet it was not difficult because this was a genuinely important issue for them: the government was proposing to do something which would substantially increase costs for their members. The RNIB said “Yes, we absolutely were planning to campaign against this anyway, but we lack resources.” So we told them, “That’s fine. We have resources and you have a powerful argument. Let’s put those together.” We decided that what the government was proposing was not a “levy”, it was a “tax”, and we launched a campaign against this tax. Essentially it was funded by manufacturers, but most of the action was provided by other parts of the coalition, in particular the blind. That is why in the end the campaign succeeded, because the blind are a very powerful pressure group and they are not afraid to use their emotional pulling power. (McGrath, 2005, p. 131)

What is interesting about this example is that the actors in this coalition not only changed the ‘frame’ of the debate – a ‘levy’ was rearticulated as a ‘tax’ – but even more significantly an equality/discrimination discourse was foregrounded and arguably exploited very effectively by the partners in the coalition. Showalter and Fleisher (2005) note that coalitions and alliances are frequently fraught with difficulties but groups can work together, even those with radically different worldviews if they can agree on what each can bring to the alliance and what the strengths of each partner are. Having discussed the areas of analysis, choice and implementation in the context of public affairs work the final element of the MACIE model, evaluation, can now be examined.

## **2.4 Evaluation and assessment of impact**

There have been various attempts to derive evaluation and measurement criteria for public affairs work from what might be described as functionalist frameworks. According to Fleisher (2005) for the public affairs manager ‘Evaluation means

determining the relative effectiveness, performance, or value of a public affairs program or strategy, ordinarily done by measuring outputs and outcomes against a predetermined set of objectives' (p. 147). As he acknowledges however things seldom run as smoothly in practice as they do in management handbooks and after conducting several major studies in the 1990's and in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Fleisher concluded: 'Unfortunately, the state of performance assessment in public affairs does not actually look all that much better than it did over a decade ago' (2005, p. 158). One key trend in literature on public affairs evaluation which Fleisher identifies is the tendency toward quantitative measurement in recent years although as he rightly points out providing numeric data seems to be being confused with evaluation in much of this work. He notes:

The dominant view was that all dimensions of performance could be measured, which by default meant that all phenomena could be placed in numerical terms. For those public affairs officers who have attempted to take up the challenge, this has led to their counting most public affairs activities – in terms of things like the number of meetings with key stakeholders, the number of letters sent to key public policy committee personnel, the number of issues being actively monitored, wins and losses, the number of bills being tracked, the number of persons involved in the grassroots programs, etc...Counting is not equivalent to and is only the starting point of measurement...Also, all the counts that were accumulated by public affairs officers generally only provided snapshot measures of how busy they were' (Fleisher, 2005, p. 153)

A senior practitioner lobbying on behalf of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education emphasises this focus on the quantitative measurement of meetings, visits and of course press coverage. 'We would monitor contact with political representatives, we would monitor visits to their offices for meetings, all catalogued, we would monitor press ... so we will have a full record of any press articles'. According to Fleisher there has always been great difficulty in measuring or demonstrating the value of public affairs activity. Writing specifically on grassroots campaigns he notes: 'public affairs does not have a body of procedures established that allows appropriate accounting of the net effect on the investments and uses of public affairs resources as other functions have been accustomed to. In general, public affairs practice and performance have always been more of an art than a science, more qualitative than quantitative, and more conjectural than empirical' (Fleisher, 2005, p. 145).

Fleisher is largely correct to assert that the effective evaluation of specific strategies and tactics is a problematic area for the public affairs practitioner. Obviously, in a more general sense, the key assessment in respect to any public affairs effort is if

there has been an impact on the public policy process and ultimately perhaps legislation which impacts positively on the organization or the cause which it promotes. Thus arguably a straightforward way of evaluating any lobbying activity is to examine the legislation adopted in response to the lobbying efforts surrounding an issue. The reality, of course, is that it is seldom this simple because public policy battles may occur over a very long period of time and this needs to be taken into account by the public affairs manager when thinking about evaluation and measurement issues. 'Success' in the policy sphere may not mean the achievement, in the short term, of legislative change at all instead it may be measured in the gradual transformation of the 'language frame' used to describe the issue. The intimate connection between a language frame and a 'discourse' has been explored in several places in this chapter and it is clear from research in this area that if your organisation or your interest group can change the language frame used to describe an issue you can change the discourse within which an issue is debated. Once you manage to change the discourse the policy change, and legislation, will in many cases follow.

A good example of this can be seen in the lobbying and campaigning efforts pressing for a legal ban on female genital mutilation in East Africa. In the early stages of this campaign in the 1920's, when it was a universal practice undergone by all pre-pubescent girls in Kenya the term female circumcision was used by all sides in the issue to describe the practice (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Those in favour of the procedure claimed it was a 'cultural' practice just like male circumcision and that those who campaigned to ban it were trying to impose 'Western values' upon legitimate 'African' culture. The use of the language frame 'female circumcision' actually reinforced the discourse that this is a cultural issue and unsurprisingly those who campaigned against the practise had limited success in stopping it and none at all in respect to a legal ban. In reality the practice bears only superficial similarities to male circumcision, as Keck and Sikkink (1998) note female circumcision 'carries short-term risks and can lead to chronic infection, painful urination and menstrual difficulty, malformations and scarring, and vaginal abscesses; it also reduces a woman's sexual responses and pleasure' (p. 67). A key change occurred in the 1970's when campaigners against the practice stopped using the term 'female circumcision' and thereby rejected the discourse which opposed 'African culture' to 'Western values'. Keck and Sikkink (1998) note that: 'Modern campaigns in the 1970's and 1980's drew attention to the issue by renaming the problem "female genital mutilation," thus reframing the issue as one of violence against women'

(p. 67). This change in the language frame had a significant impact and there were several attempts to introduce legislation in Kenya's Parliament to outlaw the practice. In the beginning they failed, most notably in 1996, but eventually legislation expressly outlawing female genital mutilation was introduced as part of the Children's Act in 2001. The practice still goes on in secret but the changing of the discourse to one of human rights, or more specifically woman's and children's rights, and the subsequent legislative change has had a big impact in Kenyan society with a dramatic drop in the number of girls suffering the ordeal over the past generation. Of course evaluation and measurement of this kind of campaign is extremely difficult, one cannot point to instant results, but what this example illustrates is if increasing numbers of key actors involved in the policy process begin to accept your language frame to describe an issue - have adopted your discourse so to speak - then you can usually be assured that your organization has achieved significant progress and is on the way to success in the policy arena. If they wish to evaluate public affairs efforts effectively public affairs managers and practitioners in all sectors would do well to follow the advice of Mack (1997), McGrath (2007) and others and become much more sensitive to the language and narratives used to describe issues.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have examined the key issues facing practitioners seeking to manage public affairs across a range of sectors and political, economic and institutional contexts. The usefulness of traditional approaches to managing issues in public policy arena has been examined alongside newer approaches which make use of perspectives based on discourse theory and the concept of linguistic frames. The MACIE (management analysis, choice, implementation and evaluation) framework has been used to structure the examination of the role of public affairs management in contemporary liberal democratic societies and elsewhere. A knowledge and understanding of how to choose public affairs strategies and tactics, how to implement them and how to evaluate success and failure beyond crude quantitative measurement techniques is increasingly vital for all sectors (voluntary, public, private) in their efforts to successfully manage public affairs activity. Managing issues in the public affairs arena is a complex task and perhaps more than in any other area of professional communication

practice it requires an understanding of the role of persuasive communication and the power of humankind's key symbolic weapons, language and narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews cited in this chapter were carried out between March 2004 and December 2009 in London, Edinburgh and Belfast. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted on average 45 minutes. The participants answered all questions put to them.

<sup>3</sup> It should be made clear that the author claims only a limited knowledge of 'discourse theory' and its uses in the discipline of language and linguistics. One of the aims of this chapter was to employ several key ideas from this approach and discuss their application in the field of public affairs. For a useful introduction to the method see Wetheral, M., *et al* (2001) *Discourse Theory and Practice*, London: Sage.