Lobbying as a public affair. PR and politics in Australia

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Abstract

Lobbying in Australia seems once to have chiefly involved 'old boy' networks and quietly wielded influence. It now has a new public dimension. Interest groups and corporations with the resources to engage in research-based advocacy or the 'stakeholder' status to directly reach decision-makers often also take their case into the media. Major interest groups now routinely maintain websites and a visible public presence. PR firms number among the organisations which offer lobbying services in Canberra. PR texts are fond of pointing out that organisations operate with the consent of, and thus need tend to their publics. One aspect of 'going public' involves building public support to 'gain an important bargaining advantage' (Iyengar & McGrady 2007, p.168). But more may be involved. The news media (and perhaps the blogosphere) have become an important arena in which political elites contest policy frames.

In line with Schnattschneider's (1960) account of 'issue expansion', it was long held that 'going public' was an ineffective strategy used only by 'outsider' groups denied direct representation. That well-resourced groups now 'go public' points to a fundamental shift in the nature of lobbying. Just as election campaigning has, this aspect of politics has been 'mediatised'. One plausible explanation is that insider interest groups are pushed into using the media because policy communities are increasingly crowded. 'Going public' is a form of venue shifting. An alternative explanation might lie with the attraction of 'strategic campaigns' (Bennett & Manheim, 2000) and the sophistication of techniques that PR has introduced to politics. This is a development to which students of political communication need pay much closer attention.

Keywords

Lobbying, crowded policy communities, public relations, strategic campaigning, 'going public', interest groups, issue expansion

Lobbying as a public affair

The Australian Policy Handbook begins by noting that public policy is made by not by politicians and public servants alone, but also by 'the tens of thousands of women and men
who petition parliaments and ministers, who join interest groups, comment through the media or represent unions, corporations and community movements’ (Althaus, Bridgman & Davis, 2007, p.1). In short it recognises that lobbying is an integral part of Australian democracy—that corporations, unions, activists and a host of other interest groups are often routinely involved in shaping public policy. Despite its importance, scholars who study political communication have paid lobbying scant attention. In part this may be because lobbying is a problematic concept.

Narrowly defined, lobbying refers to the activities of consultants hired by business and interest groups to influence government decisions. But a great many business organisations and groups employ their own ‘government relations’ staff and are well equipped to—and do—directly represent their own interests to government. More generally lobbying can be understood as ‘the process by which the non-government sector—business, interest groups, representative organisations—seeks to influence government’ (Warhurst, 2007, p.9). Defined in this way lobbying is virtually a synonym for ‘interest group politics’ and encompasses such a diverse array of political actors and activities that it defies precise use. This has seemingly been an obstacle to its careful study. But there may be another explanation for the little attention students of political communication have paid lobbying. Theirs is a field which has been substantially shaped by a concern to understand the place and power of media in contemporary politics. Lobbying is generally understood to be most effective, and to mostly occur, away from media scrutiny in the backrooms and corridors of power. Unlike, say, election campaigning or the use of spin by governments, lobbying has not been seen as illuminating the place of the media in contemporary politics.

Lobbying in Australia has not been extensively studied. However that evidence to hand does suggest that some lobbying is now being conducted via the mainstream media—that lobbying has spilled from the backrooms into the public arena. Lobbying has changed markedly over the past several decades: it has grown to be more important, more commonplace, more specialised, more dependent upon the provision of information, and more professional (Warhurst, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2006) As has happened in Europe and the USA, over the last twenty or thirty years, the activities undertaken by lobbyists have changed considerably. The ‘good old boys’ who typified much lobbying have now largely disappeared from the scene to be replaced by men and women conversant not just in the language of both politics and business but also in sophisticated techniques of communication and the management of strategy (McGrath, 2005, p.222).
Among the management consultancies, accounting, legal, specialised policy research and boutique lobbying firms, whose newfound presence in Canberra underlines the increasing specialisation and presence of lobbying, are PR companies such as Kreab Gavin Anderson and CPR Communications & Public Relations. Warhurst (2007, p.19) suggests that there are now close connections between lobbying and PR and points to the emergence of “a new generation of specialists in political communications and media” within the Canberra lobbying industry. Burton (2007, p.14) considers that PR advisors are involved in “most issues that are the subject of public debate”. This development warrants careful exploration. It is a key to understanding the place of the media and contemporary democratic politics.

Table 1. PR agencies listed as ‘Registered Lobbyists’ in Canberra.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Selected Clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Agenda Group</td>
<td>CFS Managed Property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Public Affairs</td>
<td>Covidien, Kraft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBS Communications</td>
<td>Queensland Brain Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burson-Marsteller</td>
<td>Hewlett Packard, Australian Lung Foundation,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cicero Communications</td>
<td>APN News &amp; Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMAX Communications</td>
<td>Grains Council of Australia, Sydney Theatre Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPR Group</td>
<td>Australia Zoo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPR Communications &amp; Public Relations</td>
<td>CEPU, Cosmetic Physicians Society of Australasia, Australasian Gaming Council, Australian Music Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Utting Communications</td>
<td>Australian Home Heating Association, Renewable Energy Holdings, Carnegie Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edelman Public Relations</td>
<td>Jobfind Centres Australia, One at a Time Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fay &amp; Fay Public Relations</td>
<td>Ausker Pacific, Bonnie Babes Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foresight Communications</td>
<td>Australian Automobile Association, Group Training Australia, Australian Self Medication Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Communications Aust.</td>
<td>Diabetes Australia, NovNorthick Australia, CNS Pharma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill &amp; Knowlton</td>
<td>National Indigenous Development Centre, Blackmores, Nutricia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kreab Gavin Anderson</td>
<td>Australia Post, Australian Banana Growers, Great Barrier Reef Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Word Corporate Communications.</td>
<td>Foxtel, Sky News, BluGlass Ltd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lobbying in Australia seems once to have chiefly involved “old boy” networks and influence wielded in backrooms. Insider lobbying remains important. Much lobbying is still conducted “behind closed doors”. However, it now has an additional, public dimension. “Significant developments in the electronic media mean there is now more lobbying going on in public than ever before” (Warhurst, 2007, p.9). The clients served and the lobbying undertaken by the range of PR firms listed in Table 1 is one measure of this. The importance of going public is also suggested by Fitzgerald’s (2006, p.238) analysis of 150 Canberra-based interest groups. He found that 10.6 percent of the 2408 staff they employed worked as “professional spin doctors”. Evidently pressure groups have indeed “become very proficient in the use of public relations to draw attention to their cause” (Craig, 2004, p.137).

Conventional wisdom

It is usually considered that lobbying utilizing the media seeks “to begin a public debate and exert community pressure on government-decision makers” (Warhurst, 2007, p.9). This is a circuitous route by which to exercise influence. Craig (2004, p.138) argues that interest groups “will rely on the media to differing degrees”. “Insider” groups that are entrenched in policy networks have ready access to government and a direct opportunity to shape policy: “those without such institutional links to government are more likely to implement media strategies to publicise their cause and influence policy”. Economou and Tanner (2008, p.139) echo this argument. Interest groups “outside the government” wishing to have policymakers address their agenda must use the media by attracting its attention or purchasing advertising “to get the message across”. It is true that, in developing the familiar distinction between insiders and outsiders on which Economou and Tanner draw, Grant (1978) identified a sub-category of “high profile” insider groups which eschewed “acceptable” methods and used the media to raise public support on an issue. However the belief that it is outsider groups who must publicise their cause via the media is well-entrenched.

Binderkrantz (2005, p.697) suggests that the literature on interest groups presumes that privileged groups will “stick to approaching central decision makers” while outsiders must “resort to indirect strategies”. According to Thrall (2006, p.407) the “conventional view of interest group strategy” is that outsiders without standing must engage in issue expansion. “Because they lack a formal role in the policy process, many groups seek to mobilise public support, stimulate grassroots activity, and generate favourable media attention to issues in order to exert pressure on policymakers.” This conventional view proceeds from the premise that, as Schnattschneider (1960, p.71) noted, “some interests are organised into politics and some are organised out”. Democratic politics do not sustain a level playing field. Business and other stakeholders have an institutionalised presence within policy-making that normally allows them a control over problem definition and the policy agenda. Those interest groups who have been “organised out” are obliged to find ways of expanding issues—of mobilising enough support to demand political action. Thus issue expansion is a lobbying strategy “for the disadvantaged” who stand to benefit from disrupting “status quo decision-making” by attracting media and public attention and by recruiting new players and bringing new considerations to the bargaining table (Nisbet & Huge, 2006, p.198).

Issue expansion has many drawbacks. A group which seeks to expand the scope of conflict by entering into a coalition with other like-minded interests may need to compromise. Its voice may be diluted, and it risks losing political control. Maintaining a broad coalition over time
can be difficult. So too can getting all members of a coalition to agree in a timely way upon the key messages to be communicated to decision-makers. “Managing and coordinating the work of a lobbying coalition can be difficult in practical ways” (McGrath, 2005, p.135).

Using the media to publicise an issue, to flag it as worthy of debate, to spur other groups to become involved, and to enlist public support is an alternative issue expansion strategy (see Baumgartner & Leech, 2000, 3). It is also problematic. Groups reliant upon generating pressure upon a government via publicity and the ballot box face a stiff challenge: this is an indirect and difficult tactic even for organisations with some public support. Often outsiders must use forms of protest (or stage publicity stunts) to attract the interest of reporters. This can generate publicity. But as Rawnsley (2005, p.113) argues, “engaging in direct action for publicity is a risky strategy because … [it] delegates control of the story to the media which decides how to cover the event, what images to show, and what language to use to describe what is going on”. It is also risky because any breach in discipline will see the media “focus on the dramatic and sensational”, not the policy issue.

Even groups well-versed in managing the media may find their message is confused and their campaign “distorted by the imperatives of news values and media production requirements” (Sireau & Davis 2007, p.135). Thrall (2006, 407) suggests that “outside strategies are only as effective as the amount of media attention they attract.” But this may not be strictly so. If a group successfully attracts media interest and secures an airing of its concerns in op-ed columns, letters, editorials, blogs or on talk radio and current affairs television programs, there is no guarantee that its view will prevail, nor that publicity obtained will translate into sympathetic public opinion. Even when going public does secure public support for a group’s cause there is no guarantee that governments will respond by taking the administrative or legislative decision it would wish. Davis (2007, 112) notes that “increased media attention, alone, is unlikely to … [push] an issue near the top of the parliamentary agenda”. The reality of Australian politics may be, as Baumgartner and Leech (2000, 2) suggest it is for the USA, that public engagement influences government in just “a tiny fraction of the issues that are acted upon each year”.

**An alternative view: ‘going public’ as an insider strategy**

If going public is risky and a last resort forced upon outsiders without direct access to decision-makers, then why do “public relations, communications or public affairs specialists” count among the “range of newer professional intermediaries” now working as lobbyists in Canberra (Warhurst, 2006, p.10)? It is noteworthy that Grant (2004, p.412) now believes that outsider strategies may be more successful than suggested in his original formulation of the
distinction between insiders and outsiders. There is a small but growing literature, none of it Australian, which shows that issue expansion and going public are not confined to resource-poor groups. This invites the question of “whether the conventional understanding of the outsider strategy actually applies” (Thrall, 2006, p.408)? For example, Binderkrantz’s (2005, pp.708-09) survey of Danish national interest groups finds that those with privileged access to bureaucrats do not make less use of the media—a finding which “sharply contradicts” the view in the literature that going public is the fall-back option for “groups finding themselves excluded from insider options to exercise influence”. At least in Denmark, she argues, groups with an direct access to decision-makers may nonetheless make supplementary, tactical use of media campaigns (Binderkrantz, 2005, 710).

Thrall’s study of the media coverage obtained by 244 interest groups in the US media between 1991 and 1994 leads him to “throw cold water” on long-held assumptions about the outside strategy of expanding the scope of conflict via protest and news coverage”. Most obtained too little news coverage to warrant making publicity “a reliable element of their overall political strategy” (Thrall, 2005, p.412). Those which do receive sustained media coverage are “in fact the same groups that are also best placed to pursue a successful inside strategy” (Thrall, 2005, p.414). It is “the largest and most well-funded interest groups [that] have a consistent place in the public debate carried out in the mass media” (Thrall, 2005, p.417). Hence it appears that established interest groups are able to choose between inside and outside strategies as circumstances require: “for such groups, making news is more about strategic efforts to “go public” (Thrall, 2005, p.414).

Kollman’s (1998, p.58) US study of outside lobbying finds that “nine out of ten interest groups engage in some kind or level of outside lobbying”. Moreover this tactic is not confined to activist grassroots organisations: “even corporations and professional associations get into the act at times”. Kollman agrees that outsider strategies can expand a conflict by engaging public interest and involvement. But altering public opinion is often not the chief purpose of appealing to the public. Rather it is to signal that a “group has (or can generate increasing) popular support” (Kollman, 1998, p.58). Publicity campaigns are an opportunity for interest groups to demonstrate the extent and intensity of popular opinion on issues. By signalling to politicians the likelihood that an issue will be a factor in the next election, going public enhances the leverage that interest groups have to influence policymaking and public officials via their “inside” lobbying activities.

Here too is a suggestion that insiders are increasingly turning to outsider strategies. This is consistent with the observation that lobbying in Australia has spilled from backrooms into the
public domain. Warhurst (2007a, p.59) writes that business lobbying in Australian can now involve “public media campaigns” where indeed—because “media communication is expensive”—business lobbies and corporations have an advantage. Going public is no longer a strategy confined to activist outsiders. Rawnsley (2005, p.106) argues that “groups that are able to do so … devote a significant proportion of their resources (staff, time funds) to developing close relations with the media”. Interest groups and corporations with the resources to engage in research-based advocacy and having the “stakeholder” status that allows direct access to decision-makers, nonetheless appear often also “go public” and take their case into the media.

Crowded policy networks

Binderkrantz (2005, p.694) argues that “outsider strategies are becoming more widely used as interest groups operate in increasingly complex environments”. The tactical purpose of “going public” is to draw in other groups, build public support, and thus “gain an important bargaining advantage” (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007, p.168). Those that have been “organised out” of decision-making have every incentive to go public. But so too do insider groups when they find their claims languishing down the policy agenda. One feature of the increasingly complex environment in which interest groups lobby government is the number involved. Policy communities have grown more crowded. In Australia, as elsewhere “the last quarter century has witnessed an explosion of interest group formation and participation in policymaking” (Heaney, 2004, p.237; Marsh, 2002, p.126). As Baumgartner and Leech (2000) suggest, the “second half of the 20th century saw the rise of a great many new issues on the public agenda” which, as a result, is “densely packed with issues vying for space and attention”.

There are two broad, familiar explanations for the proliferation of interest groups. The first is suggested by Figure 1 which maps legislation passed by the Commonwealth Parliament over the course of last century and records a sharp increase since the 1970s. This mirrors the expanding scope of modern government. As societies have grown more economically and technologically complex, governments have been driven to widen their regulatory reach. For example, something as simple as the perfection of invitro fertilisation in the 1970s triggered an array of administrative and legislative initiatives to regulate the provision of IVF treatment, its funding, the disposal of surplus embryos, their availability for stem cell research, and even the rights of lesbian couples and individuals to access IVF. As is often the case with government intervention in new areas, these decisions proved controversial, prompting the creation of new groups such as Access Australia and reenergising others such as the Catholic
Bishops of Australia. In this way—as is well understood—the expanding scope of government has been an “important spur to group formation” (Loomis, 2003, p.235).

Figure 1. Pages of Commonwealth legislation passed each decade since Federation

Source: Courier Mail, 24 May 2005

The sharp increase in legislative activity shown in Figure 1 also owes something to the emergence of new social movements in the latter decades of last century. These made new “postmaterial” demands for laws governing the environment, gender equality and the protection of indigenous, gay, consumer and indigenous rights. The rise of new social movements is a key to a second explanation of the mushrooming of new interest groups. Marsh identifies at least nine new social movements which collectively spawned a great many groups that now “fill the space between the major parties and the community” (Marsh, 2002, p.126; Warhurst, 2007, p.17). Indeed it is “hard to overstate the degree to which Australia has become a group-based community” (Marsh, 2002, p.131). As it did elsewhere, the proliferation of interest groups disrupted the “clubby” pattern which had characterised lobbying in Canberra (Warhurst, 2006, p.333). It progressively shifted policymaking to a less predictable and “much looser configuration of participants” (Richardson, 2000, p.1009).

The explosion of groups seeking to lobby them, plus the sheer complexity of the policy issues with which contemporary governments were asked to grapple, had a significant impact on the organisation and conduct of government itself. One development—captured by the idea of governance—entailed a “new process of governing” involving “self-organising, interorganisational networks” which link government, business and interest groups in the development and implementation of public policy (Rhodes, 1997, pp.34-5). There is a growing literature examining policy networks and the mechanisms they use to determine which issues are acted upon (and which are not). Richardson—although not with Australia in
mind—argues that policy networks can be less stable, more fluid and less predictable than is often believed. First, “interest group activity begets yet more interest group activity”. Second the “tendency for closer linkages between policy problems across different policy sectors” means that “stakeholders from other policy communities demand and get entry”. The result is that policy networks are often overcrowded, linked via a “messy and unpredictable chain of actors”, and assemble actors “who do not know each other well”. In turn policy debates are difficult to control and their outcomes often unpredictable (Richardson, 2000, p.1008).

If Richardson’s argument also applies to Australia, then it explains why insider groups choose to press their case in the public arena which the media provide. In crowded policy communities insiders are obliged to “devise news strategies to gain policymaking influence” (Heaney, 2004, p.270). Insider groups who find themselves competing to be heard in crowded policy networks have several strategies open to them. One is to “venue shop” or to seek a hearing for their concerns in an alternative forum where they might well obtain a more favourable hearing—say by seeking a decision in the courts, by switching the focus of lobbying from one level of federal government to the other, or by shifting from an administrative to a more openly political venue (Birkland, 2007, p.69; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p.31). Transporting policy debate into the public arena involves a particular form of venue shifting: as Birkland (2007, p.69) observes, “the news media are also a venue”.

**The media as a venue for elite conflict**

The suggestion that media are a decision-making venue in which groups and other actors pursue their interests is entirely consistent with the argument that politics has become mediatised. “Going public” is not a strategy limited to lobbyists. Iyengar and McGrady (2007, p.11) note that it is used by both elected officials and interest groups who have “accumulated considerable expertise in the use of public relations strategies.” They see its origins in the media-reliant electioneering of parties and candidates. In democracies where governments periodically face elections, leaders and parties have become substantially reliant upon mainstream media to reach and persuade voters. Indeed the media have grown so important that parties and leaders have been obliged to adapt their own behaviour to suit journalistic practices, news formats, and the media’s other requirements. Where a “media logic” dictates the timing, location and framing of political events that are staged to attract media attention, and where political actors internalise media rules, “we can speak of a mediatisation of politics” (Mazzoleni & Schultz, 1999, p.251).
From this vantage point politics and the media do not form different spheres of activity. It is not simply that “candidates, politicians, and other government officials live in a special world where media messages are central, rather than incidental, to their workaday activity” (Schudson, 2002, p.265). Nor is it that policy makers must consider how a policy will play in the media. Rather politics are routinely conducted in and through the media. Indeed it can be argued that decision-makers will “be influenced directly by the metaphors, images and arguments that they see in the media” and, the importance of other venues not withstanding, that the “mass media is the major site of political contest because all of the players in the policy process assume its pervasive influence (whether justified or not)” (Ferree et.al., 2002, p10, p.15). It is useful, Kollman (1998, pp.25-26) suggests, to think of “public opinion as the landscape upon which interest groups and elected officials operate”. It is not fixed. Groups are able to alter it. But it is “sturdy” and it does constrain interest groups and “set limits on the success of lobbying in general”.

Davis (2003, 673; 2007, 60) contends that news media act as “a communication channel for the regular negotiations and decision-making” in which elites engage. He recognises that “while needing to communicate with larger publics”, corporate and political élites “also spend a significant amount of time targeting rival elites at all levels”. Hence “élites are simultaneously the main sources, main targets and some of the most influenced recipients of the news”. In short the media provide a “forum for elite-to-elite communication and conflict” (Davis, 2007, pp.15-16). It follows, Davis (2007, p.60) suggests, that debates between elites over public policy that take place in the media occur in front of, but are not aimed at, citizens who can be “no more than ill-informed spectators”. In applying this analysis to interest group politics, Sireau and Davis (2007, p.132) retreat somewhat: interest groups usually “pursue change on two or three fronts”. While “the key audience in most cases is the elite decision-making one”, in some circumstances this “elite audience may be persuaded by an appeal to wider public opinion”. This nuanced view allows that going public may be one element of a wider lobbying strategy mixing insider and outsider methods with the aim of steering a policy community toward a particular outcome.

**Shaping the policy agenda**

Often the way in which a policy is defined gives the inside running to some and not other policy solutions. For example “to talk of ‘tax relief’… is to take a position on socially desirable levels of taxation. One is relieved of a load, or a pain, or an illness… so even before you start having a debate about tax levels, the phrase ‘tax relief’ already contains an argument that tax should be minimised whenever possible” (Poole, 2006, p.2). Edelman (1988, p.104)
has shown that the “critical element in political manoeuvre for advantage is the creation of
meaning” and that a key political tactic must always be “the evocation of interpretations that
legitimate favoured courses of action”. Nisbet and Huge (2006, p.196) argue that the
interpretation of an issue “that comes to dominate public discourse has profound implications
for the future life cycle of the issue, for the interest groups involved and for policy decisions”.

Lobbying can be understood as a competition to have policymakers accept the validity of a
particular understanding of a problem. This contest to “name and frame” (Rein & Schon,
1993) policy issues “occurs across various ‘public arenas’, social environments such as the
news media or various political institutions” (Nisbet & Huge, 2006, p.196). Taking an issue
into the media is a way of settling how it will be defined or framed where this can not be
achieved in an alternative venue. Richardson (2000, p.1008) points out that policy
communities can be networks in “the very loosest of senses” in which “only minimal
interaction occurs”. Overcrowded policy networks assemble actors “who do not speak the
same ‘language’ … [and who] may bring quite different ‘policy frames’ to the table”. In
these circumstances, going public may introduce exogenous variables and offer lobbyists a
mechanism for framing the debate within the policy network in which they are vying for
influence.

Public opinion can only be mobilized when issues are publicly canvassed. Policy solutions
which garner editorial support and acceptance amongst columnists and commentators, or
which stir talkback radio callers and hosts, may gather a momentum in the public arena that
will then shape thinking with a policy network. Ministers and their staffers (and possibly
senior public servants whose performance contracts attune them to their masters’ political
interests) do monitor the media, public opinion, and the government’s electoral fortunes. They
are likely to favour policies which appear to have extensive public support. Here is further
reason why insider groups may choose to press their case in the media. In a crowded policy
network, insider groups may simply be unable to have their concerns addressed. Generating a
public discussion can draw the attention of ministers and their advisors and thereby elevate an
issue on the policy agenda. Nisbet and Huge (2006, p.196) demonstrate that once an issue has
been canvassed in the media “it remains on average more likely to receive future attention
than other issues”.

The appeal of strategic campaigning

Kollman’s (1998, p.25) study of the lobbying by 50 US groups led him to conclude that
interest groups are more likely to go public where they perceive that public opinion will
favour them. It is certainly plausible to suggest that groups of all kinds are more likely to mount a public campaign when they believe that it will be favourably received. However there is a more intriguing possibility: it is that interest groups will go public where they believe they can create a concerned public and thus catch the attention of policymakers. Well-resourced groups and companies may be attracted to public lobbying because the technology now exists to manufacture public support via “strategic campaigns” (Bennett & Manheim, 2000). It is clear that PR has now permeated most aspects of democratic politics (Davis, 2002). It is less well recognised that PR can involve quite sophisticated technologies to identify and target sympathetic journalists, and to monitor the unfolding media and website coverage of issues in ways that permit proactive and prompt (if not “real time”) intervention.

Issues management is defined as “the proactive process of anticipating, identifying, evaluating and responding to public policy issues” is a specialised area of PR (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000, p.17). The term was coined in the latter 1970s by a US-based PR consultant who had recognised that consumer and environmental activist groups were influencing public policy in ways that could affect the corporate “bottom line” and which warranted early, countering measures. This is not the only lesson that PR has taken from the activist groups spawned by new social movements. Another learned from the pioneering efforts of environmentalists was that grassroots lobbying could be very effective. Strategic campaigns can be thought of as a refinement of “astroturf” politics and of “elemental techniques” of strategic communication “developed years ago in public relations” (Bennett & Manheim, 2000, p.293). Their purpose is to “reach target audiences (which may be no larger than other government officials and policy elites) with news that shapes images, damages opponents, disguises motives, and authenticates political claims” (Bennett & Manheim, 2000, p.281). As Gandy (2000, pp.145-46, p.155) explains, a hallmark of issue politics in an age of professionally managed campaigns” is the application of sophisticated analytical techniques to deliver precisely targeted messages, and even the creation of “instant organisations”. These methods have altered the behaviour of established cause groups, unions and business interests (Bennett & Manheim, 2000, p.281, p.284).

Grefe and Castleman (2005, p.162) argue that new information and communication technologies “enable advocacy to embrace tactics not logistically available twenty years ago”. Database technology has grown “more and more powerful” and developments in ICST make it possible to “track legislative issues on a minute-by-minute basis” in the mainstream media and also in websites, message boards and chat rooms (Grefe & Castleman, 2005, p.190, p.176, p.184). It may well be that these technologies have encouraged established interest groups to imagine that, with skilled PR advice, they might both generate public support and
manage the ways in which news media cover policy issues of concern. But if recent technological developments have given a fillip to strategic campaigning, it is also true that this approach to lobbying can be traced back to the 1980s. It is not simply or only an artefact of recent ICST. Public relations with its “systematic adoption of more scientific methods for shaping images and promoting or undermining causes” (Bennett & Manheim, 2000, p.282) has progressively established a close connection with lobbying which Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000, p.18) regard as a “more specialised” part of public relations. The marriage of PR and lobbying is likely to have encouraged the view that public opinion can be engineered via going public, and that the media coverage of a policy issue can be managed.

**Conclusion**

We can only say that it is ‘likely’ that the marriage of PR and lobbying has encouraged well-resourced groups to go public. This is a topic which clearly requires further investigation. There have been very few studies of lobbying in Australia. Equally, even although almost half a century ago Milbrath (1960) defined lobbying as a communication process, the study of political communication has substantially focused on electoral politics and largely overlooked lobbying and interest groups. The limited evidence to hand does suggest that lobbying has acquired a public dimension and is no longer confined to backrooms. PR firms have established a Canberra presence as “lobbyists for hire”. But we know little of the role they play. However going public appears not to be confined to outsiders with whom this strategy is usually associated. Interest groups that are treated by governments as stakeholders and entrenched within policy networks seem also drawn to this strategy, even though conventional wisdom holds that issue expansion is risky.

Two broad explanations of why insiders are adopting outsider methods may apply. One derives from the specialised study of public policy. Policy networks are increasingly crowded and even insiders may find it difficult to be heard and have their policy issue given priority. These constraints may push them to finding alternative venues in which to have their issue decided, of which the media is one. By generating a discussion in the media of the importance of an issue and the need for policy change, lobbyists may succeed in drawing it to the attention of ministers and their advisors. But there is an alternative explanation of why lobbying has become a public affair. It too assumes that policymakers can be influenced by exogenous factors. From this vantage point the goal is not obtain sufficient publicity to mobilise supporters. It is to secure control of how issues are “named and framed” and to combat the influence of rival interests. In this view the media are a forum in which interest groups battle for ascendancy and a site in which policy decisions can, in effect, be decided.
Well-resourced groups are seemingly pulled into this battle by a belief that effective PR will allow them to control the way issues are reported. Each explanation is plausible. Both are speculative. Whether both apply, or one has more merit than the other, remains to be determined.

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