

Stamping Their Ground: A Study of Public Opinion and Activists

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Abstract

Public opinion is comprised of a complex set of social and political processes that involve individuals, groups and organisations (Hennessy, 1981; Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2004). The relationships amongst these individuals, groups and organisations are guided by an equally complex set of values and principles (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), which serve to shield or expose the organisational decisions that influence or respond to public opinion. Whilst there is much literature about public opinion and stakeholder relationships, this paper is part of a study that examines how activist stakeholders use public opinion to condemn government decisions, and shift debate from the court of public opinion to the court room itself.

This paper is built around a case study about the importation of Asian elephants. In July 2005, the Federal government approved the importation of eight endangered Asian elephants as part of a breeding program that would operate out of Taronga and Melbourne Zoos. In response, a number of animal welfare groups including the RSPCA lodged a legal challenge and forced the zoos to prove responsibility and effectiveness in caring for and breeding these elephants. This study involves an analysis of content from 68 items retrieved from print and electronic media from March to October 2005. Codes were developed from the literature to understand the nature of public opinion as well the sources of opinion. This paper will highlight the extent to which activist publics, as a united collective, will go to be heard. This study has implications for the continued understanding and management of activist and stakeholder relationships.

Keywords: public opinion, stakeholders, relationships, animal welfare.

Literature Review

In public relations, understanding the role, power and strength of public opinion is critical to building, maintaining or repairing relationships. Public opinion is defined as 'the complex of preferences expressed by a significant number of people on an issue of general importance' (Hennessy, 1975: 7). Public relations scholars add that public opinion is dynamic (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006) due the role of perception (Newsom et al, 2004). As a result, organisations must learn to deal with both real and perceived public opinion within internal and external environments (Cutlip et al, 2006).

According to Hennessy (1975), the public opinion environment is comprised of a number of key elements: an issue, a significant number of publics or recognisable groups of people concerned by the issue, a complex set of preferences made up of the real or perceived opinions of publics, and the expression of opinions. These elements will be expanded to build a context for the role of activist publics in public opinion debates.

Issues can emerge from decisions made or actions taken by organisations or the environment. Equally, any actor in the public opinion sphere has the power to influence environmental and organisational decisions (Taylor, Vasquez & Doorley, 2003). Organisations must also be aware of their role in creating public opinion. Often, organisational decisions or actions can create issues that result in the sharing of opinions amongst stakeholders and attempts to influence the behaviours of others (Hallahan, 2001). Not all issues hit the public agenda, but those issues that involve a number of

characteristics, such as, power and struggle, and organised actors, materialise in the media (Hallahan, 2001).

Publics organise around issues (Henessey, 1975). Public issue disputes involve at least four parties including the two disputing groups, the media and interested parties (Leitchy, 1997). Following from a belief that organisational goals should complement societal goals (Ferguson, 2000), publics are increasingly interested in the actions or inactions of organisations. In response, public relations practitioners are aware that relationships with publics must continue beyond the resolution of one issue (Taylor et al, 2003), especially when resolution with one public can easily lead to the alienation of another (Leitchy, 1997).

The level of public involvement in organisational issues varies according to their interest in the issue (Center & Jackson, 2003; Cutlip et al, 2006; Grunig, 1992). Strong opinions held by publics can lead to the demonstration of these opinions and behavioural change (Seitel, 2004). Active publics can act as opinion leaders and mobilise public opinion (Newsom et al, 2004). Lesly (1985, as cited in Newsom et al, 2004) identifies three leaders of opinion who are relevant to organisations: 1) vocal activists, 2) societal opinion leaders such as the mass media, and 3) power leaders in corporate, government or legal positions.

While this study recognises and aims to examine the role of all three leaders, its focus is on the first, vocal activist publics. Activist publics show both high awareness of and participation in organisational issues. When activist publics disagree with organisations, they constrain organisational operations (Anderson, 1992). Activist publics are defined as 'a group of two or more individuals who organise in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force' (Grunig, 1992: 504).

Unlike common perceptions, activist publics do not necessarily hold radical views (Leitchy, 1997). At one extreme are radical activist organisations who demand fundamental change and use militant strategies including disruptive image events, harassment and sabotage (Derville, 2005). In contrast, Kovacs (2001) explored the communication strategies and relationship building activities of six activist groups in Britain and found that these groups were not adversarial or confrontational. While activism is a relative term (Hallahan, 2001), the involvement of activist publics in an issue can influence public opinion. Like corporations, activist publics use issue frames to 'influence the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of internal and external audiences' (Reber & Berger, 2005: 191). Communication, using interpersonal and mass media sources can increase awareness of the organisation's stance on an issue and recruit support for this position (Hallahan, 2001). Activists also aim to create or reinforce their legitimacy by continually establishing a perceived need for reform (Anderson, 1992). Henderson (2005) showed how activist groups involved in genetic engineering issues adopted an environmental discourse that was based on ethics and prioritised biodiversity and sustainability in order to argue for the social good. The addition of an economic justification to this argument further increased the group's legitimacy (Henderson, 2005).

One of the key carriers of legitimacy is media coverage (Grunig, 1992). Activist groups appeal to the media, one of the recognised leaders of opinion, by encouraging journalists to devote sympathetic coverage to an issue (Hallahan, 2001). A study of the Dow Corning silicone implant crisis examined

the relative influence of stakeholders on mass media reporting and found that activist groups received minimal coverage (Andsager & Smiley, 1998). This was explained by the activists' relative lack of organisational definition, especially in comparison to the frequent media framing of the more established medical community (Andsager & Smiley, 1998). In contrast, Reber and Berger (2005) found that the activist group Sierra Club dominated media coverage in comparison to business and political actors. Although the sample of Reber and Berger's (2005) study may impact on their findings, Hallahan (2001) argues that activist groups must be organised and legitimate in order to utilise resources and receive media attention for their issues.

Public relations research of activist publics presents two opportunities. Firstly, a number of scholars have criticised existing studies of activist publics for taking an organisation-centric approach (Berger, 2005; Dougall, 2005; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). That is, where activists are framed and seen as needing to be managed by organisational public relations practitioners. Instead, a postmodern view of public relations suggests that practitioners act as organisational activists to encourage and enhance ethical decision making (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Berger (2005: 25) concurs with this position and argues that activist public relations roles have the potential to 'alter relations of power inside dominant coalitions as well as influence perceptions of the practice in the general public'.

Some researchers also suggest that access to resources affects how activist publics are able to influence public opinion. While Dozier and Lauzen (2000) identified a paradox of resource rich corporations fighting against resource poor activist publics, Grunig (2000) argued that activists are not powerless or without access to public relations resources and skills and that they too have social responsibilities (Grunig, 2000). Similarly, Olson (1971, as cited in Dozier & Lauzen, 2000) suggested that activists' passion and commitment to their social cause were able to at least match the effectiveness of expert practitioners.

The second opportunity for public relations research is the influence of national culture on the behaviour of activist publics. Guiniven (2002) noted the differences between activist publics in the US and Canada and discussed the implications of this in relation to the practice of public relations. Kovacs (2002) also showed that activist publics in the UK were less antagonistic but still dedicated to their cause. Guiniven (2002) suggested that in Canada, the two-way symmetrical model of public relations is often employed to achieve compromise over confrontation. Darnall and Jolley's (2004) study of environmental risk showed preference for collaborative stakeholder relationships but also suggested that the degree of public involvement in decision making needed further research.

A limited number of studies of activists are set in Australia (see Demetrious, 2002; Dougall, 2005). As a response to Reber and Berger's (2005) identification of a void in public relations scholarship about activist publics, this paper adds to current understanding of activists in an Australian context. Three research questions are posed to meet the aims of the study.

RQ1: What is the direction of public opinion in relation to the issue?

RQ2: Who are the sources of opinion in relation to the issue?

RQ3: What is the role of activists in this issue?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, this study employs the use of framing of mass media exchanges in relation to a public issue. Framing is employed by

journalists to 'select and emphasise certain ideas over others' (Andsager & Smiley, 1998: 185). Nelson, Clawson and Oxley (1997: 1) argue that framing examines the 'effects of media content rather than mere coverage of a problem'. Framing emphasises messages and influences public knowledge, and affects public opinion (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). It is because of this link to public opinion that this study follows the lead of other authors (see Andsager & Smiley, 1998; Reber & Berger, 2005) to employ framing of mass media exchanges to examine the role of activist publics in the public opinion environment.

This study's claims are examined through a case study of mass media coverage of the Taronga Zoo elephant importation. In July 2005, the Federal government approved the importation of eight endangered Asian elephants as part of a breeding program that would operate out of Taronga and Melbourne Zoos. This decision was made despite earlier concerns that the Zoos failed to meet legal requirements, the elephants were bred in the wild rather than in captivity, and threats of legal action from activist groups. The Minister justified his decision, which he claimed was not an easy one, based on Australia's ability to contribute to international conservation and breeding programs.

In response to the government's decision, three leading activist groups (RSPCA Australia, Humane Society International and the International Fund for Animal Welfare) organised to individually and collectively oppose the government's importation decision. Within the public opinion environment, the activist groups held the government accountable to national and international treaties. The groups targeted the government and Taronga and Melbourne zoos. The zoos defended the government's decision and the demonstration of their ability to care for and breed the elephants. The activist groups seized the opportunity to share and pool organisational resources to shift the issue from the court of public opinion to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal on the basis that the importation was in contravention of international treaties.

Sample

In order to explore public opinion and the role of activists, it is necessary to identify where such opinions can be observed. The mass media have been used in a number of studies to understand public opinion (see Deegan et al., 2002; Deephouse, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Dougall, 2005).

The unit of observation for this study is newspaper articles and electronic news transcripts. Sixty-eight media text were sourced from a variety of national, and state and international media including *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *Bangkok Post*, using Factiva, and online ABC radio and television transcripts. The search terms were *Taronga Zoo*, *elephants*, and *importation*. These items were collected from March 2005 to signal the beginning of government's decision to allow the importation to October 2005 to signal the end of legal hearings into the issue.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Simon and Xenos' (2000) framing methodology and involved an initial analysis of media coverage into broad content themes that reflected the consecutive development of the issue and the strategies of activist publics. Next, mass media framing or direct quotations of stakeholder opinions were identified and categorised according to direction of opinion from positive, negative, neutral or mixed. The public opinion literature identifies direction as a key analytical dimension. Favourable media coverage

has been used to indicate positive public opinion in a number of studies (Deegan, Rankin and Tobin, 2002; Deephouse, 2000; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Dougall (2005: 538) applied direction to 'capture the favourability of the focal organisational population's public opinion environment as described by the extent to which the media coverage of the organisational population is favourable'. Next, each of these stakeholders was categorised by their organisational role as activist, government, or corporate (zoos). A coding sheet with instructions and operational definitions was developed and tested by the authors with an intercoder reliability score of 0.92. Finally, the study examined the mass media report of activist publics to study the individual and collective strategies adopted to influence the public opinion debate about the importation of elephants.

Although similar to other news framing studies, the study is limited to study text that is deemed newsworthy by the mass media. Further, the strategies of activist publics are studied as they are presented in the mass media alone. Research suggests that activist publics also use a range of non-media communication to communicate to their supporters.

Results

Direction of Public Opinion

The direction of public opinion in this issue was found in both discrete and mixed categories as displayed in Table 1. The most frequent direction of opinion expressed was negative and comprised 44.12 percent (n=136) of the sample. The next most frequent direction of opinion was positive, which accounted for 30.15 percent (n=136) of the sample. The mixed category of negative/neutral was found to occur more frequently than the discrete category of neutral or the second mixed category of positive/neutral. Given the dominance of discrete negative direction of opinion found, it is expected that the mixed category of negative/neutral was found more often than either neutral or positive/neutral.

Direction	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	60	44.12
Positive	41	30.15
Negative/ Neutral	17	12.5
Neutral	11	8.09
Positive/ Neutral	7	5.15
Total	136	100

Table 1. Direction of public opinion

Sources of Opinion

Building from the direction of opinions present within this case study, the authors identified and categorised the organisational role of each opinion holder as well as the direction of the opinion holder in relation to the issue. Opponents and proponents to the government's decision were segmented into discrete categories that included activist group, corporate, government, or letter to the editor. The results of the study concluded that the elephant importation debate encouraged 37 stakeholders to put forward points of view (see Table 2). Of this group, 32.43 percent (n=37) support, 62.16 percent are against, and 5.41 percent hold neutral views towards the government's decision to import elephants. The primary active supportive publics are Senator Ian Campbell, Federal Minister for the Department of the

Environment and Heritage and key staff at Taronga and Melbourne Zoos, all of whom have defended their positions regarding the zoos' capacity to provide quality care. The neutral publics were a US academic and a Thai Senator. The opposing publics dominate public opinion, and their role is discussed under the results to the final research question.

	Activist publics	Corporate	Government	Letter to editor	Other	TOTAL
Proponent	0	7	2	1	2	12
Opponent	11	0	2	7	3	23
Neutral	1	0	0	0	1	2
TOTAL	12	7	4	8	6	37

Table 2 Organisational role of opinion holders

Overall, the majority of opinions are expressed by activist publics followed by letters to the editor and corporate opinion holders. The majority of the letters to the editor opposed the government's decision. All opinions expressed by people in corporate positions were in support of the government decision. The least number of opinions were expressed by government but most were in support of the decision.

The Role of Activist Publics

The final research question sought to understand the role of activists in public opinion around the importation of elephants. The activist publics of the RSPCA Australia, Humane Society International (HSI) and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) clearly dominate mass media exchanges. A thematic analysis of the role of activists in relation to this issue identified three critical incidents.

Firstly, the activist publics dominated media framing of the public opinion using messages that positioned the zoo's motivations for profit over animal welfare. Throughout the public opinion debate, activist publics used issue frames of profit over conservation when describing the zoo's program and government's decision:

- "Bringing elephants to stock Australian zoos will not address the threats that are facing these animals...It's purely commercial gain dressed up as conservation."
- "We believe they're importing elephants in Australia simply as a drawcard for failing attendances at zoos"
- "Elephants are used as 'flagship' animals and drawcards for zoos"
- "It's a ploy to boost gate takings".

The second incident related to the mass media's collective framing of the activist groups, which serves as a powerful example of how three separate organisations with different organisational backgrounds but a similar passion for animal welfare joined forces and resources to present a collective, united, and consistent message of opposition to the importation of the elephants. By uniting, the groups maximised the impact of their effect on public opinion. The collective offered joint statements, which were printed in media articles.

The arguments put forward by the collective have been supported in the media and through other channels by opinion leaders such as the internationally renowned Dr David Suzuki. A joint letter was sent to the Federal Government from activists including Dr Suzuki, the Wildlife Trust of India's Vivek Menon and the world's leading elephant scientist Dr Cynthia Moss. In addition to these high profile opinions, the government received more than 65,000 emails and 52,000 postcards of protest. These additional

voices add legitimacy to the arguments of the activist groups.

The third critical piece of the role of activists was the relatively early movement of the issue from the court of public opinion to the court room itself. From 11 July 2005, the activist groups threatened to take the issue to the legal arena if the Minister allowed the importation of the elephants. Although the Minister encouraged the groups reconsider court involvement to avoid taxpayer expenses, the activist groups lodged a legal appeal on 20 July 2005, the same day as the Minister's decision was announced. The activists sought an injunction from the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) to prevent the transportation of elephants from Thailand on the basis that the Minister's authority was limited to viable conservation and breeding programs, which in the opinion of the activists, was yet to be established.

On 21 July 2005, the AAT granted an interim order preventing the transportation of elephants and scheduled a hearing in September 2005. The AAT's decision allowed the activist publics to build legitimacy by linking the issue with the authority of the legal system. In response, the Taronga and Melbourne Zoos agreed to wait for the outcome of the hearing before moving the elephants. During the hearing, the activist groups continued with earlier issue frames that emphasised motives of profit over conservation, and introduced a new issue frame. This new frame encouraged the Tribunal to consider the impacts of their decision on illegal trade or poaching, and is illustrated by these quotes:

- "In purchasing elephants from camps in Thailand, the zoos have risked stimulating the market demand for juvenile elephants in Asia that derives an illegal trade from the wild"
- "...would only encourage poachers to capture endangered wild elephants for commercial sale"

The results show that in a short amount of time, activist publics established clearly their opinion on the issue, garnered support for the cause from others and led the debate from the public opinion environment to the legal environment.

Discussion

Overall, this study extended current understanding of the role of activist publics. Through mass media framing of activist publics, the study has implications for the legitimacy of activist publics, and organisational understanding of and response to activist publics' efforts to influence the public opinion environment.

While Taylor et al (2003) argue that any actor has the potential to influence opinion and change, it is those actors that are regarded as legitimate and are able to garner support for their cause that will be most successful. According to Reber and Berger (2005), "source power" helps legitimate activist groups and affirm their role in policy debate and formation. In turn, a journalist's news framing is guided by the levels of acceptability and established social power of parties involved in a debate (Andsager & Smiley, 1998).

Arguably the activist groups studied within this public issue debate are well recognised due to the length of time of their existence and their association with animal welfare across a range of issues in Australia and overseas. That is, their legitimacy could be taken for granted by the mass media (Suchman, 1995). In contrast to earlier research, this study showed that mass media framed activist publics more so than any other group involved in the issue. The findings of this study support Henderson's (2005:

133) advice that activist groups establish 'overlapping zones of meaning to communicate with multiple-interest groups'. The legitimacy of each singular activist group as well as the collective was strengthened in two ways. First, the collective was positively endorsed by other well-known opinion leaders including Dr David Suzuki, and the legitimacy associated with these leaders was transferred to the coalition. Second, the collective successfully move the issue from the public opinion environment to the Tribunal. The messages of the activist publics were designed to build the regulative legitimacy of their position (Suchman, 1995).

Arguably the pooling of activist resources may have impacted on their comparative dominance of mass media framing. Andsager and Smiley (1998) argue that those organisations with greater access to resources have greater opportunity to disseminate messages and dominate media. Future studies could explore for the development of similar activist collectives as framed by the mass media and enacted by the RSPCA, IFAW, and HSI in the formation of the collective. The pooling of resources may have put this collective at an advantage over the individual entities of the government and zoos.

In this study, although preference was given to the role of activists, implications for the management of public relations still bear relevance. According to Guiniven (2002), organisations should communicate with activists before the fight begins (Guiniven, 2002). Recent scholarship in this area calls for the engagement of activist publics rather than the management and silencing of activist views. Open communication allows for this type of engagement, and frames issues as opportunities to continue and not stop communication (Taylor et al, 2003).

The activist publics dominated mass media coverage. On one hand, in the interests of open communication, activists could adopt a more balanced perspective. But equally, the government and zoo stakeholders could consider opening communication channels to improve relationships with activist publics. However, there are times when collaboration may not be possible. As a result, organisations should be prepared to adopt multiple response strategies to manage relationships with activist publics (Hallahan, 2001). Further research could examine stakeholder points of view and alternative communication channels used by activists, government and corporations. Although media archives present a useful foundation, further studies of this nature should consider using additional tools such as interviews (Ferguson, 2000).

A final contribution of this paper was to the role of activists in Australia. While other studies have shown that activist publics in and Canada and the UK (see Guiniven, 2002; Kovacs, 2002) were less antagonistic towards their cause than those studied in the US, this study offers no evidence one way or the other to support any such claim. Rather, the nature of the issue, the history of the activist groups and organisations involved together with the role of other stakeholders in the public opinion environment are seen as the influencing factors on the level of antagonistic behaviour. Further, in order to draw international or cross-cultural comparisons, the focal issue would need to be understood globally. Henderson's (2005) research into genetic modification provides a clearer start to such a line of research.

In February 2006, the AAT approved the importation of the Asian elephants. Both sides claimed victory with the zoos required to make additions to the elephant enclosures. This paper highlighted the strategies used by activists to build legitimacy, manage resources, and achieve results.

While activists dominated mass media exchanges, it appears the time has come for the elephants themselves to be heard.

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