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## ISSUES MANAGEMENT MAKEOVER: A FACELIFT FOR AN AGING THEORY

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### ABSTRACT

This essay argues for an expanded role for issues management in public relations that sees environmental scanning and issue monitoring as broader than short term predictions, and focused on long term issues likely to impact an entire industry or area. We contend that public relations professionals have moral and organizational imperatives to act as organizational consciences and guide organizations to more fully-embrace issues management practices. With advances in technology, public relations practitioners now have the ability to fully engage in boundary spanning research that can directly impact long-range strategic planning.

### INTRODUCTION

There is a long history in public relations of criticizing the issues management literature (Ewing, 1990; Jaques, 2009; Ramsey, 1993; Roper & Toledano, 2005; Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003; Wilson, 1990). Vigorous criticism is often a sign that one paradigm is maturing while another is withering. As Kuhn (1970) suggests, inherent within paradigms are rules, standards, and problems/solutions that dictate how members of the field should act. These rules allow for a deepening of our knowledge about the paradigm; yet, these rules also limit attempts to broaden the field. The goal of criticism in general is to extend, refine, or clarify, theory, criticism, or practice (Nothstine, Blair, & Copeland, 1994; Nothstine & Copeland, 1989). Without critique, knowledge does not advance. Criticism, or critique, is part of every scientific endeavor. As Bowers (1968) suggested in the "Pre-Scientific Function of Rhetorical Criticism," more than 40 years ago, even quantitative research is informed by criticism.

This essay conducts a close reading of the literature on issues management in public relations with specific interest in how new communication technologies and relationship management can help organizations engage in timely and relevant environmental scanning. We call for expanding the current conception of issues management to include a broader range of publics and social issues. Communication technologies can help professionals as they pursue issues management and ethical communication that engages publics.

### ISSUES MANAGEMENT

Issues management sprang up in response to specific environmental exigencies such as impending governmental regulation, and public unrest and anger over corporate excess

(Hainsworth & Meng, 1988; Ramsey, 1993; Wilson, 1990). In a 1979 issue of *Public Relations Review*, Jones and Chase wrote one of the first articles on issues management in public relations positing, "When challenged by today's activism, business tends to react to overt symptoms, rather than by identifying and analyzing fundamental causes of the trend which has lead to a critical issue" (p. 3). Issues cannot be managed if they are not planned for, thus, organizations need to be prepared for crises and ready to deal with technical and symbolic obstacles: environmental cleanup, public outcry, calls for regulation, etc.

Many early studies saw issues management dealing with contentious problems that had reached the public agenda because of the efforts of activist individuals and groups. Indeed, much of the early literature comes from social and political pressures that began in the 1960s as individuals and activists became more focused on environmental and social ills that were increasingly attributed to corporations (cf. Brown, 2008; Heath, 2006, p. 64). Viewing issues management as both a reaction to social pressures and a form of crisis management, Crable and Vibbert (1985) argued for a broader definition: "issues—while derived from problems—are not exactly problems. They are situations in which relief but not total solution is found. Said another way, issues may be resolved—in the sense of a temporary answer—but they are never solved in the sense of a final answer" (p. 5).

Jones and Chases' (1979) initial essay suggested issues management is a process that involves (1) issue identification; (2) issue analysis; (3) identifying issue change strategy options; (4) developing an issue action program; and (5) evaluation of results (pp. 11–17). Crable and Vibbert (1985) broadened the scope of issues Cousino (1990) argued that "issues management requires four functions: (1) involvement of public policy experts in strategic business planning and management, (2) issue communication, (3) issue monitoring and analysis, and (4) efforts to meet changing standards of corporate social responsibility" (p. 10). Ewing (1990) defined issues management as a process of influencing the public agenda and "supporting action programs to participate in the public policy process in the resolution of sociopolitical and economic problems" (p. 20). Nelson (1990) saw issues management as a response to stakeholder pressure through the management of public policy issues. And Wilson (1990) suggested an international theory of issues management that identifies potential issues and "mobilizes and coordinates organizational resources to strategically influence the development of those issues" (p. 41). As this literature on broad policy formation and strategic management was building, public relations managers from the top twenty-five Fortune 500 companies still understood issues management as a fairly-narrow activity often confused with "futurism" or attempts to identify trends (Hainsworth & Meng, 1988, p. 20).

By the next decade, Bridges (2000) was able to identify ten features of effective issues management: (1) integrating public policy and issues analysis into strategic planning; (2) monitoring organizational performance and key public's perceptions of the organization; (3) developing and implementing ethical organizational social responsibility codes; (4) assisting senior management with decision-making goals and policies based on public opinion; (5) identifying, defining, prioritizing, and analyzing issues of great financial and political significance; (6) creating multidimensional proactive and reactive response plans from among possibilities; (7) establishing relationships with likeminded individuals and groups, including the media; (8) communicating on the most important issues to the organization and publics to build support and create an agenda; (9) influencing public opinion in order to stall or thwart unfavorable legislation or regulation; and (10) evaluating issues management objectives to measure success, direct improvement, and advise management (p. 97).

More recent research has attempted to reconcile some of the different approaches to issues management by calling for an integrated “engagement framework” to get at how one might engage in ethical issues management (Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003, p. 260). And yet, researchers who examine persuasive campaign cases continue to see issues management strategies reflecting “sides”: “our side” and the opposition (Darmon, Fitzpatrick, & Bronstein, 2008). Brooks and Waymer (2009) explain that issue management, as a resource, highlights the discursive power of the corporate world, in which organizations will try to rhetorically define relevant issues, and influence public debate. Finally, Jaques (2009) combines these perspectives by arguing that issues management “enable[s] corporations to participate in, and not simply respond to, public policy issues which have the potential to impact the organization” (p. 282).

The purpose of this summary research shows there is substantial agreement and overlap about what issues managers should be doing: scanning the environment and searching for threats (issues), managing public policy issues, shaping the beliefs of key stakeholders and stakeholders, preparing content to enable successful engagement of oppositional publics in policy/issue debates, etc. Issues management was based on a continual process of research and engagement in response to ethical concerns. The expanding features of issues management provide implications for its future while invoking the need for an expanded definition, including measures of organizational ethics, and true stakeholder engagement through technological advances.

## EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF ISSUES MANAGEMENT

Speaking about “issues” may be deceptive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In public relations, the term issue is essentially a technical term. As Bitzer (1968) suggested many years ago, issues are more complex, consisting of *exigencies* or “an imperfection marked by urgency” (p. 6), *audiences*, and *constraints* (pp. 7–8). For Bitzer, issues were not just perturbations for one person or organization, but social problems that involve an assortment of stakeholders. While some have criticized Bitzer for proposing a reactive theory of situation that in a sense waits for issues to arise and then responds to them, in Bitzer’s defense, 1968 was pretty early (about 20 years early) to be thinking about “catalyzing” issues. But Bitzer’s theory of situation—and in many ways, theory of “issues”—was a moral approach to issues management that asked professional communicators to take into account multiple publics and act and speak on their behalf. Issues are not simply rhetorical (argued into existence like some pseudo event) (Edelman, 1988), issues are also broader, and have local, national, international, and global ethical implications.

*Issues Management and Organizational Ethics.* What is absent from many contemporary treatments of issues management is an ethical imperative. Issues managers have been encouraged to build relationships (Jaques, 2007; Taylor, et al., 2003), engage in corporate philanthropy that serves the interests of organizations and publics (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Stewart, 2006), engage in corporate advocacy and identification to create relationships with publics (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994), and have an eye toward long-term issues and the future sustainability of organizations and the environment (Roper & Toledano, 2005).

Without question, issues management should be a long-term process interested in the continued health and success of organizations. However, a recent trend in issues management has focused on short-term goals and efforts to create persuasive messages that build identification through deception (Veil & Kent, 2008). Additionally, when issues management is seen simply as a means of manipulating the public by anticipating unfavorable legislation, and heading off activist groups, issues management is reified as nothing more than “Creeping

Eichmannism” (cf., Arendt, 1963; Postman & Weingartner, 1969)—a mindless state of following orders, or being a mere technician, rather than of counseling organizations and acting for the good of all stakeholders and publics.

Many organizations have difficulty thinking beyond quarterly earnings or annual reports. Enron continues to serve as the prime example of an organization expensing ethical business practices to ensure profit. At the same time, public relations practitioners increasingly are urged to serve as ethical counselors to the dominant coalition (Heath, 1994) and as the ethical conscience of the organization (Ryan & Martinson, 1983; Wright, 1996) in the midst of technological and societal changes and expectations. Bowen (2002, 2008) noted that, “the well-being of both organizations and publics could be enhanced management to include five predictable stages (potential status, imminent status, current status, critical status, and dormant status) (pp. 5–6) and proposed a “catalytic” approach in which organizations can identify issues, prepare responses to issues, and manage how issues are resolved by influencing public policy. Crable and Vibbert describe issues management as a management role guided by research, audience analysis, environmental scanning and monitoring, and skillful persuasion.

In 1990, a number of scholars took up the issue management cause and wrote articles attempting to clarify the practice. Heath and through both academic study and professional attention to public relations managers performing the role of ethics counsel to the dominant coalition” (2008, p. 270). Technology provides one set of tools to help practitioners enact this new role of long-term issue management that serves both the organization and the public.

Table 1 outlines a conceptual approach to understanding how issues management may be rethought to serve organizations and publics. It builds on the work of Taylor, et al. (2003) and argues that new forms of mediated engagement may be valuable for future issues management. Taylor, et al. (2003) identified three assumptions that create a foundation for an engagement approach—one assumption focuses on organizational interests, one assumption addresses the public interest, and finally, one assumption explains the convergence between these interests. This paper adds an additional assumption: mediated engagement and environmental scanning through technology can bolster issues management’s value.

**TABLE 1. 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY ISSUES MANAGEMENT**

Theoretical Origins	Relational Theory
Research Interests	Participation in Policy Decision
Purpose	Organizational Involvement with Publics
Goals	Improved Organizational Effectiveness Through Better Understanding of Publics
Locus of Analysis	Organizational–Public Communication
Key Concepts	Dialogue, Relationships
Definition of Issues	One Part of an Ongoing Relationship
Role of Communication	Create Shared Meaning
Useful Technologies	Analytics, Web Sites, Blog Scanning, Twitter
Ethical Orientation	Continue the Conversation

Research efforts in an engagement approach should focus on the ways in which organizations engage publics before, during, and perhaps one of the most neglected times of analysis, after an issue has moved through its life cycle. An engagement approach can evaluate

how public debate is encouraged or discouraged, managed, and how the convergence of organization–public interests influences issues decision-making. Technology provides evidence of how issues are framed by online publics and show how issues evolve over time. Relational communication (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000) offers a theory-based framework for examining engagement between organizations and publics. Writing before the mass diffusion of the Internet, Wilson (1996) argued for a strategic management approach that focused on long-term relationship building. Relational communication factors such as trust, predictability, mutual interest and benefit, proximity, community spill over, and immediacy of collective needs are attributes that describe strategic cooperative communities (pp. 76–77).

Rorty (1979) suggested that ethical communication continues the dialogue between groups. In an issues management framework, online and offline communication “keep[s] a conversation going” and helps to build, maintain, and change organization–public relationships (Rorty, 1979, p. 378). The locus of analysis includes communication, relationships and involvement. Various types of communication help to build understanding of publics and help to build relationships between organizations and publics.

Ethical issues management solicits, listens to, and is the basis for the organization to adapt to public concerns and interests. Likewise, communication by publics will also be judged ethical if it contributes to the engagement of the relationship with the target organization. Engagement between organizations and publics creates an environment that fosters communication, informed public decision-making, and allows for ethical relationships. Engagement is observable in both the online and offline world. The next section explores how and which technologies are useful in expanding the role of issues management.

*Issues Management and New Technology.* “New communication technologies open many vistas for issues management. . . [and] offers increased opportunities for companies to display advertising and public relations messages to attract, persuade, and motivate customers” (Heath, 1998, pp. 273–274). Indeed, issue monitoring has changed dramatically over the last ten years and even more dramatically in the last five years. When the early issues management theories were formulated, the only thing that a professional could do to “monitor an issue” was to read newspapers and books, attend professional meetings, and conduct original research like a Delphi or focus group. Preparing for potential crises was also possible, but knowing what professionals, experts, and regular citizens were thinking on a week-by-week basis was not possible, much less knowing what people were thinking on a minute-by-minute basis. We now have that ability.

RSS, Web site analytics, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, phone applications (apps) and the Internet have opened a door to public opinion, political activities, marketing, demographic, psychographic, and other data that had previously not existed. For many issues, becoming an expert over the weekend with the aid of a laptop computer and a medium speed Internet connection is possible. Journal and professional articles, newspapers stories, radio and television broadcasts, RSS feeds, blogs and other social network postings, and governmental and statistical data are readily available for anyone who knows how to search.

To see issues management as simply preparing for crisis, shepherding legislation, or shaping public awareness about issues of economic concern, ignores a lot of what a public relations professional has to offer. Professionals now have access to information that ranges from “micro content” about individual preferences to “macro content” that provides big picture perspective on issues and organization–public relationships. In fact, so much information is

available, and so many powerful channels of communication, that the ability to reach stakeholders, customers, policymakers, and the media directly is within the grasp of even the smallest organization. Technology has expanded the potential of issues management. The new communication and research tools make public relations professionals' historic role as boundary spanners and environmental scanners even more valuable, especially if the technology is used to advance long-term strategy rather than short-term fixes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Issues management was initially theorized in the public relations literature as a proactive process of active environmental scanning and issue research (Cralle & Vibbert, 1983, 1985; Jones & Chase, 1979). Contemporary research on issues management has focused more on the management of issues as interruptions once they have been noticed, while technology has been viewed as little more than a dissemination tool and occasional sieve for limited feedback, or worse, another deceptive tool to "manage publics." In effect, issues management has been getting caught up in the short-term, quick-fix age of technology, while ignoring the potential for technology to shift issues management practice back to its ethical roots.

This essay argues for an expanded role for issues management in public relations that sees environmental scanning and issue monitoring as broader than short term predictions, and focused on long-term issues likely to impact an entire industry or area. We contend that public relations professionals have a both a moral imperative and an organizational imperative to act as organizational consciences and guide organizations to more fully embrace issues management practices. By utilizing technology to truly assess potential issues and adopting socially responsible initiatives, grounded in organizational ethics, issues management has the potential to shift its paradigm to include a broader range of publics and social issues and act as organizational counselors rather than mere technicians.

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