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Public Affairs and Social Constructionism: An Explanatory Paradigm

Ioan Alexandru GRADINARU¹

Abstract

Our paper focuses on some of the controversies concerning the field of public affairs. Considered to be a constantly evolving discipline, public affairs encompass a large and diverse repertoire of tools and techniques, amongst which the most renowned is, by far, lobbying. Regardless of the formal definition preferred (the simplest one, quoted by Phil Harris and Craig Fleisher, is the totality of government affairs or relations), the nucleus of public affairs work concerns the process of policy formulation and its possible impact on corporations. Evidently, the latter entails the involvement of further stakeholders (individuals, interest groups, communities) that could be affected by the issue at stake. Usually, solving this issue proves to be dependent on legislative or regulatory bodies. When lobbyists influence the government and its policies, they actually produce relevant modifications of the external environment in terms of politics, economics or the justice system. Although these practices have quite a long history in many countries, scholars still strive to find appropriate theoretical frameworks in order to provide better explanations. Using an idea articulated by Rob de Lange and Paul Linders, we argue that constructionism represents a valuable option both in terms of explanatory power and in terms of anti-essentialist standpoint.

Keywords: public affairs, social constructionism, lobbying, issue management, frames, digital advocacy.

Public affairs and the need for theoretical frameworks

Public affairs represents a field which lacks a solid, let alone unitary, scholarly framework. Even though there is a wide range of activities done by professionals (lobbying, political action committees, monitoring and research, juridical techniques, corporate advertising, web activism, coalitions, community and governmental relations and many others) and quite a respectable history of effective practice, theorists still search for suitable explanatory paradigms.

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Coordination of public policies (Matei & Dogaru, 2013), lobbying and public affairs in EU (Bouwen, 2002; Bitonti & Harris, 2017), the relationship between public affairs and public administration (Henry, 2018; McDonald, 2018), research on public value (Yotawut, 2017), public participation processes (Lee, Tsohou & Choi, 2017) constitute just a few examples of directions of study. Burstein and Linton (2002) illustrate the idea according to which interest groups shape the environment of political policy, while Donna Wood (1991) analyses the corporate social performance. But much of the research that has already been done is mainly descriptive in nature. The scholars that took up the task of discussing public affairs usually concentrate their efforts in providing in-depth descriptions of what actually takes place while a certain technique is used. This is, by no means, wrong, as it helps students overcome the schematic content that they usually work with. In the same time, though, it does not offer a theoretical ground for what is discussed.

Rob de Lange and Paul Linders (2006: 132) quote G. Getz who “presents a list of four possible disciplines (political science, economics, sociology and management theory) and no less than 11 more specific theories (from interest group theory and collective action theory to game theory and population ecology theory). She asks if we should seek consistency in our theoretical explanations and how we should cope with apparently incompatible explanations”. At first glance, this list seems too short and only includes the core disciplines: it is not so hard to make a case for social psychology, public relations, communication, symbolic convergence theory (Terry, 2001) or even advertising. Moreover, it feels obvious that even eleven theories cannot fully cover the complexities of the field, even if they certainly prove useful. For instance, *interest group theory* explains very well the way grassroots lobbying or coalitions work. Showalter and Fleisher (2005: 119) notice that “a coalition is simply an alliance of organizations representing different perspectives, all with a common issue. They are formed around a common interest or problem in order to unite resources and maximize each one’s influence with a particular legislative body. 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 identification of member resources”. The above theory elucidates, for example, the increase of coalition participation and, by consequence, the increase in terms of reach. The politicians who are in the process of developing legislation can be accessed in a less demanding fashion, especially when there is also grassroots presence. Also, coalitions are stronger when they focus on a clear, specific goal (reminding us the SMART definition of public relations objectives), a goal that makes people get involved and devote energy to. *Collective action theory*, to take another example, becomes useful when we meet again the free-rider problem (as in the case of a foreign commercial company which plans to sell its products profitably while cleverly avoiding domestic costs, and thus endangering local competitors) or when we discuss about lobbying (see Olson, 1993, for instance).

In any case, public affairs reflects the situation where we have established practices that actually work, but we failed, so far, to provide a suitable academic understanding of those practices. Public affairs have been defined in different ways. Gregor Caldwell (1976: 41) sees them as an ancillary activity for management, while Spencer (2001: 81) believes it to be a study of power, focusing on influencing the decisions taken by political systems. Public affairs represent an “evolving discipline” (McGrath, Moss & Harris, 2010: 2), keeping a “core and pivotal role” in our society: no less than 17 functions of public affairs activities are highlighted by the authors. Among them, we have to mention knowing the policy formulation and the policy-making process, dealing with parliament, ministers and regulators, maintaining close contact with party organizations, managing relationships with different think tanks, creating coalitions and managing relationships with community stakeholders.

Social constructionism revisited

Constructionism, at first glance, represents a worthy candidate in our search for theoretical frameworks. First and foremost, by implementing suitable strategies, professionals usually try to modify the social environment: they typically either create new political, economic or social possibilities (the general strategy is to support or even actively develop subsequent public policies) or to block dangerous (for their clients and for the respective grassroots groups) regulatory, governmental and parliamentary initiatives. When I use the word ‘dangerous’, what I imply is the simple, but decisive fact that the interests of certain groups are seriously threatened by incoming regulations or policies. Of course, the latter encompasses a virtually immense range, from cutting taxes and avoiding more limiting regulations to opposing large scale legislation (for instance, Hall & Deardorff, 2006) envisaged by local or central governmental authorities. For instance, Vining, Shapiro and Borges (2005) talk about how government can affect the competitive advantages of firms, thus affecting their profitability.

Discussions on constructionism have been intense and lengthy in the recent past. For the purposes of my research, I would mention several valuable contributions. Lock and Strong (2010) make a comprehensive list of sources for constructionism, while Fiona Hibberd (2005) considers social constructionism as a metatheory of psychological science (part of a postmodernist program). Brenda Allen (2005: 35) studies organizations and organizational communication using constructionist insights, and is interested to see how “organizational actors make, modify and maintain meaning about social identity”. Tom Andrews (2012) claims that social constructionism was instrumental for reshaping grounded theory, while

McGrath (2007) approaches the persuasive effect in framing lobbying messages.

As Michael Adorjan (2013: 10) argued, constructionism incorporates great imaginative potential, namely the possibility to produce *dialogic knowledge*. The latter may serve the purpose of orienting the public towards constructionist insights. However, constructionism should be interpreted not as a theoretical *passe-partout* (de Lange & Linders, 2006), but as a useful framework. For Harris and Fleisher (2005: xxxiv), “shaping the external environment by influencing government through lobbying activities or corporate campaigning is now typical of strategic marketing management, whether it be for business, public or not-for-profit sectors. The relevance of such activities stems, of course, from the fact that there is hardly an item of legislation passed through the EU, UK or US legislatures which does not in some way encroach upon business interests or impinge on organizational goals”. Shaping the agenda and transforming an existing environment into something else has always been a prominent feature of lobbying. To illustrate this, Showalter and Fleisher (2005: 110) note that “lobbyists who coalesce philosophically with certain legislators are also called upon to help draft legislation, amendments, and public policy pronouncements. The actual implementing legislation for the Contract with America was written, in part, by a group of lobbyists who financially supported the Republican Party and who agreed to support the entire Contract that came out of the process. The American Petroleum Institute helped draft legislation that would reduce liabilities from toxic wastes. Lobbyists for corporations wrote the legislation on regulatory relief that limited the ability of the bureaucracy to enforce existing environmental and worker safety rules”.

If we take another example, an electoral technique – “Get out the Vote” – we see again that it instantiates one of the key tenets of constructionism. The social reality has been quite simple for the past decades: a steady decline in terms of voter turnout, especially when it comes to non-partisan voter organizations (Showalter & Fleisher, 2005: 111). It is therefore expected that a lot of organizations would try to mobilize their voters to both make the effort of participating to the electoral process and voting for the candidates who are supported by that particular organization. Of course, any organization would pick and then support political candidates who share a certain philosophy concerning public policies. Even though it became increasingly difficult to prove that “Get out the Vote” techniques are the only deciding factor in elections, there are nonetheless at least some cases in which evidence points in that direction. The relationship with the

government and the subsequent regulatory bodies is essential for the well-being of the organization. On the one hand, the government can be a major source of income – government becomes a customer in this case – buying products or services provided by the corporation. On the other hand, the government can strongly influence the development of the corporation through different implemented rules (such as approvals, for instance). The NGOs and any pressure group have similar concerns regarding legislation, as it may support or not the interest of their beneficiaries.

The main reasons that determined an increased interest and, in the same time, more money into public affairs are the following. Firstly, the constant growing internationalization brings new challenges, and puts serious pressure on governments in terms of keeping a competitive environment (Harris & Fleisher, 2005). Secondly, the dynamic of the market shows the increasing number of mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances. The business environment changes very fast and more often than not companies are forced to create alliances in order to survive on such a market. This is easily seen in fields such as airline or automotive. Thirdly, the development of transnational governance led to even more legislation and regulations that could potentially harm business. This translates simply into the fact that companies must use lobbying in order to protect their interests.

Many textbooks and studies point to the well-known golden rule of lobbying: companies should act early. Now, this golden rule becomes even more obvious when we have in mind the speed of the interactions. If we add to the above the fact that the internet has drastically transformed the business environment, than we will have a detailed picture of how things developed and what social frames could be constructed. A mere look into the process of passing a bill will uncover the intricacies of shaping the environment. There are a lot of players in the game: interest groups, government, special departments and regulatory bodies, parties, politicians, parliament and so on (Kroszner & Stratmann, 1998). Moreover, the initial draft is discussed and modified several times until the final version is voted.

The phrase “issue management” has been widely used in the field of public affairs. Many times, any public affairs work that is planned and executed actually depends on the issue that is identified by the leaders of an organization. What that issue is, then, represents a matter of interpretation and construction. If we are to follow Vivien Burr’s (2006) characteristics of social constructionism, then we can notice that all of them apply to what happens in the field of public affairs. First, we have the critical stance. Getting rid of the old, essentialist view of the world according to which

things are exactly what they supposed to be, public affairs practitioners try to explain to stakeholders why, sometimes, what they consider objective is actually biased and can be changed according to their interests. The ever present assumptions about how a certain situation must take place should be questioned. Second, there is an important historical and cultural aspect of our interpretation in society: we assign meanings to events based on our previous experience and habits, which reflect strongly the traditions within a certain society. Third, what we define as knowledge depends on the myriad of interactions that arise among humans. If we are to understand our social “truths”, then we must study the above interactions. Forth, knowledge is intertwined with action. Our social constructions not only set the frame for our interpretation, but also lead to a concrete course of action. Burr gives the example of how the way we treat drunken people changed in the past decades: from imprisonment based on the assumptions that alcoholics are perfectly responsible persons (drunkenness as crime) to therapy (drunkenness as addiction). The addiction construction evidently leads to a completely different kind of action than the crime one. Stratmann (1992), for instance, wonders if contributors really are rational when they participate at political action committees (PACs), implying that this might be more of a social construct than actual fact.

Ian Hacking notes that renowned constructionists Berger and Luckman never opted for the idea that *everything* is socially constructed (1999: 25). Their *weak constructionism* – we may add – pointed out the fact that the meanings we assign to our experiences are, indeed, socially constructed. De Lange and Linders (2006: 135) argue that “in PA [Public Affairs] processes, reality as people experience it is the product of mental construction processes that are to a high degree social. Most of the time the PA practitioners involved are unaware of this. Often, facts and circumstances are regarded as independent, objective and concrete matters and not as mental constructions. [...] Overall, the respondents assume one undivided ‘objective reality’ that ‘exists concretely’; things were as they really happened”.

To paraphrase Ian Hacking, constructionism is handy especially when we think that public affairs not only create structures that represent the social world, but actually transform it. The non-constructionist scientist or philosopher is dominated by the idea that “the world has an inherent structure that we discover” (Hacking, 1999: 43) and it surely applies best to the physical world. When it comes to the social landscape, things are really different. While in the natural world the struggle for survival is key, in the social world the struggle involves groups and coalitions who try to impose

their definition of reality. In the same vein, using different sets of linguistic forms, groups also exchange power. Baldwin van Gorp (2007) discusses the fact that *framing* seems to have taken over the lead from *agenda-setting* and *cultivation theory* as the most applied theoretical structures in the field of communication. Van Gorp thinks it should be useful to follow Erving Goffman's approach, namely placing frames within the boundaries of culture. This move has, of course, the advantage of explaining the way frames work, but it doesn't actually say how new frames emerge.

Storytelling represents another very instructive tool. Although it is not classified as a public affairs device, nevertheless it is extensively used in the strategies put together by professionals. We could easily grasp this, De Lange and Linders (2006: 141) think, if we consider the problem of issue management. Generally, something becomes an issue if it stands against the background of a good story. Moreover, when a group desires to make a certain claim (and reinforce grassroots support or push for bills in the parliament), it usually wraps it in a colourful story. For instance, one cannot simply claim that guns are good – given the fact that so many killings happen – without using the *frame* of, say, freedom or the right to defend against enemies. This process also involves typification, namely adding strong connotation to a certain problem. De Lange and Linders (2006: 141) noticed that “experienced PA practitioners or consultants will make use of this insight. In the ideal case they are constantly aware of the relevant actions of claims-makers. They sometimes redefine their own claims in order to adjust them better to the dominant opinions at the time and thus increase their chances for success. We see here a clear link with van Schendelen's concept of *issue manipulation*. He gives a few examples: the question of ‘the import of cheap textiles’ may change into the question of ‘child labour’, ‘oil storage’ into ‘safety’, ‘the hazards of smoking’ into ‘personal freedom’ etc.”. Of course, one big problem is the alignment between the issue and the dominant ideologies within a society. There are multiple scenarios, but more often than not the public seems pretty much divided on most important subjects that have been discussed in the last decade in the USA. In conclusion, a moderate version of constructionism is not only an option, but an extremely useful theoretical structure that does not only explain how public affairs activities unfold, but also helps us make predictions about the political future.

A Constructionist Model of Public Affairs

For Michael Adorjan (2013: 11), “constructionism offers neither a validation nor an undermining of social problems but an exploration of the social processes that mediate their constitution and the points of social assemblage that affect their permutation”. Elaborating on previous academic contribution, Adorjan sums up the value of the constructionist approach, asserting that social constructionism can be linked to *strategies of intervention* that actually influence people’s lives. Adorjan endorses a form of cooperation between professionals and academics, with the goal of creating action plans and driving authentic social change. Having in mind the above aspects, I would like to propose a public affairs model based on the constructionist tenets. It encompasses five stages, namely: (1) Issue; (2) Awareness contexts; (3) Construction of interpretive frame; (4) Coordinated actions (use of public affairs tools); (5) Modification of regulatory environment.

I will give further details regarding these stages. First, issues range from *pre-existing* (alcohol consumption, the right to buy guns, tobacco) to *newly constructed* (use of a new type of antibiotics, with imported compounds). Second, a lot has been written about awareness contexts, as scholars easily grasped the fact that publics generally benefit from this deeper understanding of the social situation. From the original contribution of Glaser and Strauss (1964) that analysed death, we can enlarge the concept and include any type of awareness that is based on participant interaction. Lobbying, for instance, includes educative activities that are meant to illuminate the public or even the leaders of an organization about the aspects of an issue. The same goes for grassroots lobbying, when people are mobilized to support a certain cause after they find more details about how that particular cause might affect them. It is difficult to imagine an *intervention strategy* without getting all the parties involved (lest the possible opposition) informed and aware of the stake. Third, talking about news media, Baldwin van Gorp (2007) thinks that cultural frames create the link between news production and news consumption. For van Gorp, there is a “shared repertoire of frames” that has the function of enabling linkage. Forth, the stage of coordinated actions encompasses more than one phase, but I have preferred to simplify the model. For instance, the public affairs practitioners first create a plan, carefully selecting the suitable tools. Then, according to the specifics of the social situation present, develop the subsequent activities involving also the community.

Connor McGrath (2007: 273) thinks that we could better understand how lobbying works if we get inspiration from other fields, such as political communication, marketing or branding. For instance, some lobbyists confessed to the author that one essential ingredient in their work consisted in telling the right story effectively, using optimal language patterns. This means choosing tags, using metaphors and phrases that imply a certain solution to the problem expressed. Moreover, in the process of framing an issue practitioners use the method of selecting a convenient

part of the latter, subsequently making it more salient. Thus, the problem gets a definition, an assessment or an interpretation that suits the interests of the client. The frames constitute the ground for the process of elaboration of public policies, influencing both legislators and stakeholders. Lobbyists usually work so that the respective frame might be perceived as the “just”, “correct”, “appropriate” or “moral” one. Also, framing constitutes a clever endeavour to set the limits of the debate, to make the issue understandable in favourable terms and to create a sense of urgency; key stakeholders must get to the conclusion that supporting the initiative is the only possible option. The presence of alternative frames usually leads to reinforcement strategies, such as adopting a more appealing name or title or doing in-depth research to acquire new argumentative devices. By connecting a certain interpretive frame to a call-to-action attitude, the lobbyists not only stir people, but they also make them embrace more patterned behaviours. Distanced groups – but with a common issue – work together now and become responsive to the messages delivered by the practitioners. Now is the time to implement further activities (protests, letters to the authorities, meetings, for instance) that would eventually grow relevant enough to exert pressure on the decision makers.

Constructing tools for social transformation. An example

One of the valuable ideas put forward by the advocates of social constructionism is the fact that by designing new frames we can develop forms of social interventions. In the words of Kenneth Gergen (2001: 2-3), “many scholars and practitioners draw from constructionist ideas to fashion new forms of practice. In the social sciences, for example, both the focus of research and the methodological tools are affected. Mounting research into discourse practices, rhetorical efficacy, popular culture, the subtleties of ideology, colonialist influences and media representation among them all tend to manifest constructionist assumptions”. For instance electronic mobilization is an inexpensive way of trying to create coalitions or find groups with similar views. The more difficult task, as Showalter and Fleisher assert (2005: 125) is to maintain the attention of the audience at a high level. Also, many emails remain unopened, and thus lack efficacy. There is also the possibility of creating online communities using various tools such as chat rooms or forms of online advocacy. The general idea is to use as many tools as needed in order to get the attention and participation of parties involved. The practitioners must find a way to encourage stakeholders to read the emails and afterwards, hopefully, to act accordingly. Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy and Pitt (2012: 110) indicate seven building blocks of social media functionality that could be effectively used in order to understand the intersection between social media marketing and public affairs: presence, relationship, reputation, groups, conversations, identity and sharing.

To illustrate this, we have chosen the project coordinated by a public affairs company, named Southwest Strategies, USA (swspr.com), in 2015. The project

involved *social media* and *digital advocacy* assistance for a coalition tagged “What Price Main Street?” which tried to oppose a controversial developer, One Paseo. The coalition had been formed by community members of Carmel Valley (San Diego); they found out about the 23-acre site transformation and tried to raise *awareness* about the negative issues involved in the development of the One Paseo project. One Paseo, if achieved, would lead to an extremely dense area (exceeding limit), creating problems for, at least, traffic and neighbourhood comfort. Even though people reacted quickly, in order to produce desirable changes some accurate plan had to be established, especially if the goal of reaching and influencing the City Council had been previously set. The professionals at Southwest Strategies considered that social media would be a useful tool in this situation. The problem was that the number of followers on Twitter was extremely low (less than 50), and the same happened with Facebook (no more than 200 fans). The public affairs company started to both gather allies in the Carmel Valley and educate the public on the disadvantages produced by the One Paseo project. Information and education efforts were considered prerequisites for the purpose of engaging the community. After a few weeks of campaign, the next stage of call to action was introduced; regularly, the implementing team evaluated the results searching for the most appreciated ads and posts, and also allowed for generating new content based on the evolution of the situation. After three months of work, “What Price Main Street?” succeeded in obtaining a hearing in the City Council, a huge increase in terms of social media audience (more than 1000 fans on Facebook, for instance, outrivaling One Paseo’s supporter group), a giant number of letters addressed to the City Council (close to 2000) and solid presence in the day of the hearing.

If we try to analyse this case with the tools provided by the above model, we see that an *issue* was involved (opposition to the One Paseo development project). Then, professionals at Southwest Strategies created suitable *awareness contexts* (people were informed about the changes produced by such a large development project, educated on the possible negative outcomes) that led to the construction of a main *interpretive frame* (“One Paseo is toxic for our community. One Paseo must be stopped at all costs.”). In order to accomplish this goal, a plethora of *public affairs tools* have been used (construction of a vigorous online presence that constitutes the base for digital advocacy, construction of alliances, creation of ads and posts reviewed periodically, pressure applied on the City Council members, grassroots involvement and participation) according to a detailed schedule. This campaign ended successfully, with the City Council ruling against One Paseo, and thus repealing the initial approval.

Evidently, this is just a felicitous example in which the professionals reached their goal. In many other contexts, the situation is the other way around, with serious loss in terms of money and other resources. In this vein, it becomes quite clear that further theoretical constructs are necessary if we want to provide *valid evaluation* of any type of public affairs instruments.

Conclusion

The numerous and complex practices of public affairs make it difficult for scholars to provide good explanation for every case. It is even more challenging to create all-encompassing models. But, nevertheless, the need for theoretical structures is self-evident. Constructionism offers a few straightforward advantages. Firstly, it explains how practitioners create and the stakeholders involved adhere to interpretive frames. Secondly, it proves how language practices are inextricably linked to social phenomena and how we can shape the social landscape accessing various forms of performative language games. Thirdly, constructionism rightly points out that the dynamic interaction among individuals and groups leads to social change. On the one hand, a focus on interaction helps us clarify the social facts: as Vivien Burr put it (2006: 5), it does not suffice to develop theories starting with only the inner subject or the social structure. On the other hand, moving away from static objects of analysis and insisting on the processes involved in social interactions makes us sensible to the fact that although we possess certain information, knowledge is rarely something already given, but emerges during this very interaction. Fourthly, constructionism is instrumental in re-asserting the anti-essentialist stance, namely the fact that what happens in society is not pre-determined or already given, but the product of social and historical processes. The latter produces the consequence according to which a certain state of affairs is neither eternal nor immutable. In fact, we can alter that state of affairs using adequate tools: we can earn new rights, we can repeal unjust legislation, we can stop initiatives that constitute a threat to the well-being of a community, we can protect people, groups or companies that have common interests or we can extend our solidarity designing new social or linguistic frames that bring vulnerable groups closer to us.

Moreover, the construct of *global corporate citizenship* made companies more aware of their role and of the expectancies that people have. Profitability is not the only rule of thumb, as these companies are meant to work together with communities in order to accomplish mutual goals and expand what is usually coined as *commonwealth*. This can only be made if companies supplement their lobbying efforts with practices that are meant to strengthen the links with local groups and communities. Corporate giving, social investing, community involvement programs or development of relationships with civic, professional and non-profit organizations represent just a few options available. Also, in the field of politics and political communication there exists an obvious need to reconstruct the relationship between voters and representatives. Better voter turnout or more responsiveness to legislative issues can be achieved if we get people cognitively and emotionally involved again. I strongly believe that public affairs practitioners will definitely have a say in this.

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