

Talking with the silent majority: An interest–identity framework

Shirley Leitch*, Sally Davenport

University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand

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1. Introduction

The primary contribution of this article to public relations theory and practice is to provide an interest–identity framework for guiding the formulation of public relations strategy in relation to issues-related engagement with public. We draw upon an analysis of the public consultation and communication processes undertaken by New Zealand's Environmental Risk Management Authority (ERMA) following the lifting of a moratorium on field trials for genetically modified (GM) organisms.

ERMA is charged with the oversight of biotechnology research and the introduction of new organisms and dangerous substances into New Zealand. Following the lifting of the GM moratorium, ERMA identified a need to communicate with the general public, rather than just scientific organisations or those that identified strongly with anti-GM activist groups, about the way in which it would perform its role in the new environment. ERMA engaged in a wide variety of communication initiatives designed to appeal to the general public but was disappointed by the lack of response.

Drawing on a mobilization model from stakeholder theory that categorises stakeholder groups that take action with regards to a focal organization as being either interest-based or identity-based (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003), we explore the ramifications for organizations like ERMA of attempting to engage with the general public. According to Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003), interest-based stakeholder groups act to protect their interests while identity-based stakeholders mobilize as an expression of their identity. Consultation processes around issues, processes and events are usually designed to elicit views from publics and thus to awaken latent perspectives.

As the threshold for mobilization is much lower for identity-based than interest-based groups (Ibid), communication strategies are more likely to mobilize members of the general public who have not yet taken a position, towards identity-based positions. This response, which is likely to increase rather than reduce public dissatisfaction with the organization and/or the issue, raises a number of potential challenges for organizations.

2. Talking biotechnology

In 2003 two major events propelled ERMA into the public spotlight. The first event was a review by the Minister for the Environment of ERMA's structure and processes. The second was the lifting of the moratorium on field trials for GM organisms. The Ministerial enquiry produced what became known as the Nahkies Report, which provided recommendations intended to strengthen ERMA's capability to deal with the demands both of GM applicants and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 7 838 4494.

E-mail address: sleitch@waikato.ac.nz (S. Leitch).

of submitters who were opposed to GM. ERMA's communication processes were a major focus of the Nahkies Report.

Prior to the emergence of GM, ERMA was involved in public education about dangerous chemicals and the importance of bio-security. With the emergence of GM, ERMA's communication focus broadened to include creating opportunities for dialogue on GM independent of any particular GM-related application to ERMA. The Nahkies report was, however, critical of the way in which ERMA had performed this broader communication function.

The Report emphasised the need to involve more people in the GM debate and urged ERMA to provide information and communication forums that would draw in the 'silent majority'. Overall, the Nahkies Report sent a clear message to ERMA that it should be more open to views from outside of the scientific community and that it should proactively communicate with the general public about issues such as GM.

In October 2003, 7 months after the release of the Nahkies Report, ERMA was required to deal with the lifting of the moratorium on the release of GM organisms and the accompanying introduction of the New Organisms and Other Matters (NOOM) Bill. ERMA was very aware of the Report's recommendation that they communicate with the 'silent majority' who did not belong to either pro- or anti-GM organisations. ERMA chose to embark on a travelling road show, which provided people living in all parts of New Zealand with the opportunity to take part. The road show was well advertised and was structured to provide ample opportunities for dialogue and debate as well as to convey information about NOOM, the end of the moratorium, and ERMA's role and processes more generally. Despite ERMA's efforts, few people chose to attend the public sessions. The silent majority remained silent and invisible.

3. Interest- and identity-based communication

ERMA's major interest-based publics were research organizations and biotechnology companies who engaged with ERMA over particular applications. Some GM-opponents, such as organic farming groups, also fitted into this category. The interests of both of these publics could be characterised as economic or scientific. ERMA's identity-based publics were a more diverse group, which included Maori and other ethnic groups, church groups, environmental activists, and single issue groups, such as GE-Free New Zealand. It was ERMA's relationship with these identity-based publics that had been a major focus of criticism within the Nahkies Report.

Individuals and groups may initially be driven by interest-based concerns but as an issue unfolds may also adopt identity-based positions. This movement was certainly evident with some ERMA publics. As the anti-GM movement grew in strength in New Zealand, scientists found themselves having to argue, not just for particular research projects but in defence of science itself. The scientific worldview came under sustained attack from groups who rejected, for example, modern biotechnology on a variety of philosophical, religious, cultural and risk-based grounds. This third quadrant was also occupied by some organic farmers who felt strong identity-based concerns with the advent of GM.

4. Public relations strategies

The primary requirement of ERMA's interest-based publics was 'certainty of process', including detailed information about the rules of engagement between ERMA and applicants. Interest-based publics also had to trust in the integrity of ERMA processes and that the rules would be applied equally, consistently and fairly. Effective communication with such publics, we would argue, involves the provision of clear and consistent process-related information as well as ample opportunities for two-way communication to enable questions to be answered and to ensure that publics have the opportunity to fully explain the reasons for their support or opposition to particular applications. This group of publics is likely to be the major focus of attention for process-oriented organizations, such as ERMA.

ERMA's identity-based publics were far more likely to be opponents of applications than to be applicants. Communicating with such publics is problematic for process-oriented organizations because their concerns are likely to lie outside of the organization's decision-making parameters. The major task in such cases is to ensure that such publics are listened to and treated with respect. ERMA's public relations strategy with identity-based publics needed, we would argue, to be based on providing these stakeholders with the information they required to understand ERMA processes and the opportunity to ask questions and voice their concerns, while avoiding raising expectations about the scope of ERMA's powers.

Thus, 'reassurance and role clarity' are likely to be key elements of a public relations strategy for the identity-based publics of process-oriented public sector organizations. Publics motivated by both interest- and identity-related

concerns share the characteristics of both groups. They are, perhaps, best considered as interest-based actors whose concerns go deeper than the immediate process in which they are engaged.

ERMA's statutory role to protect New Zealand and New Zealanders meant that the final quadrant of the identity–interest framework was occupied by every group and citizen not otherwise situated within the other three quadrants. This 'silent majority' included all members of the general public who perceived neither an interest- nor an identity-based link with ERMA. The criticisms of ERMA's relationship with the general public within the Nahkies Report indicated a belief that if citizens were better educated about ERMA, the issues that it dealt with, and the role that it played, then they would make such a connection. However, it was not clear from the Report what exact purpose the forging of such a connection would serve for either the general public or ERMA.

In terms of the purpose of rousing the silent majority, it might be argued that a public sector organization serves the general public and so the general public needs to be well informed about the organization's activities. The most likely outcome of a campaign that increased the number of members of the general public who moved to become actors in relation to an issue, however, would be to create additional identity-based actors.

Process-oriented public sector organizations are not necessarily the appropriate focus of attention for identity-based actors. The absence of a response from a public to a public relations campaign, should not, therefore, be necessarily considered as a sign of failure. It may be that the main purpose of some campaigns is to ensure that a public is fully informed of its right or opportunity to engage with a focal organization rather than that it is actually driven to engage.

5. Conclusion

In this article we have offered an interest–identity framework as a way of understanding the engagement between organizations and publics in relation to issues. The primary innovation offered by this framework is that it incorporates the identity dimension that has been neglected within both the public relations and stakeholder literatures.

The interest–identity framework can provide organizations with an insight into why their various publics choose to engage and into the basis of their engagement. The communication requirements of interest-based publics are likely to differ from those of identity-based publics. However, the basis of a public's motivation to engage may change as, for example, an issue evolves or events occur. In the case of ERMA, many individuals moved over time to occupy the Issue- and Identity-based action quadrant as the GM debate became increasingly heated and moved from arguments over safety to a deeper questioning of the scientific worldview. Like any analysis of publics, an interest–identity analysis should always take into account the continuously changing character of an organization's multiple and overlapping publics (Moffitt, 1994).