
Old and new shores for responsible lobbying

Ensuring that economic power does not translate into disproportionate and undue influence on political decision-making is a fundamental challenge that accompanies countries through all stages of development. Failure to curb undue influence lays the foundations for a kleptocratic state, stunted economic and political development, and, perhaps most perniciously, a citizenry that loses trust in a fair democratic bargain, with dramatic consequences for the viability of the entire political and economic system.

A more refined and comprehensive system of checks and balances notwithstanding, the buck ultimately stops at corporate actors themselves. Corporations have arguably been slow to recognise that transparency and fairness in lobbying are core features of twenty-first-century corporate citizenship. Laws, regulations, transparency and watchdog groups are essential to reduce and mitigate risks, but they continuously have to play catch-up and cannot supplant a corporate commitment to fair and transparent engagement in public policy-making. Public pressure is increasing, and the templates for good practice are in place. It is time for more companies in more countries to step up to the plate.

Corporate lobbying's new frontier: from influencing policy-making to shaping public debate

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To obtain a more subtle and sustained impact, lobbying groups are increasingly targeting wider public debates on policy issues in the hope of framing specific issues, promoting the evidence that underpins their messages and building public support for a certain company or industry. Sponsoring dubious scientific research, manipulating media coverage and creating 'astroturf' organisations are among the strategies being employed to achieve these goals.

Shaping science

Shaping the focus and presentation of scientific research can be a key conduit for influencing public debate. With many universities cash-strapped and tasked to move towards industry-relevant research agendas, corporations are playing an increasingly important role in funding science, endowing academic chairs and sponsoring think tanks and research outlets. Some companies pay scientists to attend international conferences and arrange for public relations (PR) firms to ghostwrite journal articles 'authored' by scientists.²

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2 S. Krimsky, *Science in the Private Interest* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); D. Michaels, *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); L. Soley, *Leasing the Ivory Tower: The Corporate Takeover of Academia* (Boston: South End Press, 1995).

In such an environment, there are real risks that critical scholarship will remain underfunded and that inopportune findings will not be given their due visibility. The tobacco industry, for example, successfully muddied the waters about the health effects of tobacco for thirty years.³ Similarly, Exxon gave nearly US\$16 million between 1998 and 2005 to research institutes and policy groups that questioned global warming, prompting the United Kingdom's Royal Society to call on Exxon to stop this practice.⁴

Managing the media message

Worries about the loss of editorial independence and media diversity, both essential pillars of free democratic debate, have long accompanied the evolution of the conventional media into a more commercialised and concentrated sector. It is not uncommon for large business conglomerates to own major television, cable and radio networks, newspapers, magazines, movie studios and internet sites, or to be major advertising clients for these media outlets. This raises questions about conflicts of interest that are difficult to ignore.

A new concern arises from the fact that the media have become important resources in lobbying campaigns. One US PR and lobbying firm calls this phenomenon 'journal-lobbying'.⁵ A pioneering example is Tech Central Station (TCS), which appears at first glance to be a kind of think-tank-cum-internet-magazine. Look a little deeper, and it is apparent that TCS has 'increasingly taken aggressive positions on one side or another of intra-industry debates', and was actually published until 2006 by a prominent Washington public affairs firm.⁶

Such shrewd initiatives and the sheer scale of the lobbying sector makes it difficult even for professional journalists, not to mention the citizenry, to distinguish sponsored from independent information. In Germany, an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 PR workers provide input to and compete for public attention with 48,000 journalists.⁷

Landscaping the grassroots

Strategies to influence science and the media are complemented by the establishment of fake citizen groups – so-called 'astroturf' organisations. These appear to be genuine charitable organisations set up by or in the interests of ordinary citizens. In reality, though, they are often the brainchild of lobbying firms and their corporate sponsors. Astroturf groups work to inhibit or encourage particular policy changes by conjuring up the impression of a groundswell of public enthusiasm about a specific issue.

3 C. Mooney, 'The Manufacture of Uncertainty', *American Prospect*, 28 March 2008.

4 *Guardian* (UK), 20 September 2006; Union of Concerned Scientists, *Smoke, Mirrors & Hot Air* (Cambridge, MA: Union of Concerned Scientists, 2007).

5 D. Miller and W. Dinan, 'Journalism, Public Relations, and Spin', in K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch (eds.), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

6 N. Confessore, 'Meet the Press: How James Glassman Reinvented Journalism – as Lobbying', *Washington Monthly*, December 2003.

7 Netzwerk Recherche, *Kritischer Wirtschaftsjournalismus: Analysen und Argumente, Tipps und Tricks* (Hamburg: Netzwerk Recherche, 2007).

Myriad 'patient groups', for example, are working in the apparent interests of patients and their relatives. One such organisation, the pan-European Cancer United, was believed to be closely linked to Swiss-based Roche, a leading maker of cancer drugs. According to news reports, Roche helped fund the group and the research for the principal study on which it is based, had a senior company executive on its board and a PR firm served as Cancer United's secretariat.⁸

With such strategies, companies can populate the information environment with seemingly independent organisations and generate the impression of public support and authenticity, when both may actually be lacking.

Critical scientific analysis, independent media and authentic representation in public debates are prerequisites for a thriving democratic discourse. They help citizens as much as policy-makers to understand and form opinions about issues. Corporations and their lobbying agents are important participants in this discourse. If they are found to create and exploit dependencies, conflicts of interests and inauthentic representations systematically, however, they breach the rules of democratic fairness. In the long run they also undermine the legitimacy of the very public stage on which they argue their case.

⁸ *Guardian* (UK), 18 October 2006. Roche denied that the Cancer United campaign was about marketing for Roche.

View from the inside – Markets for carbon credits to fight climate change: addressing corruption risks proactively

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A general scientific consensus has established a relationship between the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and global warming. In response, more than 180 countries have ratified the Kyoto Protocol, which caps greenhouse gas emissions in industrialised countries at around 5 per cent below their 1990 levels.

Kyoto contains several important market mechanisms that are intended to ensure that the required cuts can be made most effectively and efficiently. One of them is the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), whereby the private and public sectors can invest in emission reduction projects in developing countries and receive related emission reduction credits, which are tradable in so-called 'compliance markets' and can be bought by emitters to offset their own emissions. Similarly, under Kyoto's Joint Implementation (JI) scheme,

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