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Monitoring the Complexities: Nuclear power and public opinion

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ABSTRACT

Interaction between organizations and stakeholders today takes place on virtual and physical 'issue arenas'. This study examined opinions on nuclear power and asked who are the players discussing nuclear power in Finland? Through content analysis, surveys and interviews, the study concluded that politicians, power companies and regulators were the ones with voice, as NGOs and citizens were hardly heard. The paper suggests the future role of PR practitioners to be to find the right issue arenas and facilitate corporate voice and reputation on those arenas.

INTRODUCTION

Public relations scholars have noted public relations theory to be late (Coombs, 2001; McKie, 2001) for surrounding phenomena, and new theory should be developed to enhance the changing needs of practice. Stakeholder theory is timely for public relations (Wu, 2007; Van Woerkum & Aarts, 2008), as it concentrates on the long-term social networks and relationships organizations have (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Wilson, 2001). Previous literature on stakeholders is mostly organization centered (Freeman, 1984; Bruning, Dials & Shirka, 2008; Mitchell et al., 1997), yet organizations today are rarely at the center of stakeholder attention. Instead, stakeholder interaction takes place on different stages and arenas, often around some specific topic or issue on both virtual and physical 'issue arenas'.

Issue arenas are places of stake exchange (Heath, 2006), negotiating interests (Cheney & Christensen, 2006) and spaces for enactment (Weick, 2001). A typical issue arena is formed around a topic, incident or a shared interest. Hence whoever perceives the issue early on and is able to establish sufficient credibility, may turn out to be the dominant voice on the issue, as others are left in the audience.

Method:

To test the idea of 'issue arenas', the timely topic of nuclear power was chosen, as Finland is now building a new reactor and nuclear energy is, worldwide, back on the political agenda. Six

research groups of PR students at university of Jyväskylä, Finland collected the data (January-September 2007), and to enhance reliability, each task was assigned to two separate groups. Two groups focused on traditional media, two on public opinion and two on communication online.

The research question was formulated: “Who are the players discussing nuclear power in Finland?” The methodology consisted of desk research, content analysis, surveys and focus group interviews. The desk research was conducted on existing surveys and material available on the topic. The content analyses of newspapers covered 7 major economic, national & local newspapers in Finland. The content analysis of the virtual arena included the websites of 16 relevant organizations (1 ministry, 2 plant surrounding municipalities, 1 safety authority, 3 research organizations, 6 energy companies, and 3 NGOs). Online surveys and focus groups interviews were conducted on several groups of Finnish & international students.

Findings:

Desk research mapped a diverse field of players, and confirmed that a majority of Finns supports the use of nuclear energy, as well as an increase of its use (Lappalainen, 2007). 48% of Finns see more advantages than risks in nuclear power, while 33% is the average in Europe (European Commission, 2007).

About 300 articles about the topic were content analysed. The tone of the debate was not considered very passionate, as political aspects dominated and pros and cons were not discussed in great dept. Most active players in the news were politicians, government representatives and energy companies. The EU was most often indirectly referred to and NGOs were a minor player. Because of the climate change discussion, nuclear energy was depicted in the traditional media as emission free, but rather a temporary solution than as a sustainable source. All in all, news

reporting on the topic was observed as rather positive, as new nuclear power plants were not seen a safety threat because accidents have not occurred.

The focus group interview results showed that most people were more concerned about older plants across the border in Russia than they were of Finnish nuclear power. Participants noted that nuclear power was accepted until a better solution was found. Energy dependency emerged as an important topic. The analysis of the websites revealed that public sector organizations remained neutral, while NGO communication was more persuasive and one-sided.

Timing proved to be important: power-companies and regulators were the first to address the issue, and hence have had time to establish a strong role. Individual people and the civil society actors such as NGOs that try to be active and get on stage, had somehow failed in the case of nuclear power and were left in the audience. Blogosphere was not very active. Both the physical and virtual arenas were dominated by the large players: the power companies, the traditional media, regulators and politicians.

Analysis & conclusion:

‘Issue arenas’ was presented to describe how today issues and discussions, not organizations, are at the center of communication. This idea was tested in the context of public opinion on nuclear power in Finland. The issue was not owned by one single organization, but several players contributed to the discussion that took place mostly online and in the print media. That the new media did not play a major role, might be due to the fact that issues requiring expert knowledge are not easy for NGOs and individual bloggers to tackle. Whether this would be the case across cultures, would be an interesting question for future studies. As nuclear energy was not just related to environmental and safety issues, but also to the political issue of energy dependency on other states, future studies may investigate the inter-relatedness of the various issue arenas.

As issues arise, many players such as organizations and stakeholders will try to present their point of view, and gain support (Heath & Nelson, 1986). Success in the issue arenas results from “balancing the organization’s interests with the community of stakeholders” (Heath, 1997). On some issues, a mutually beneficial or total win-win is not feasible, also considering that there are conflicting interests among stakeholders (Flynn, 2006), and public relations practitioners will need to minimize damage with some parties.

Issue arenas are important places for organizational reputation management (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Organizational reputation is mutually negotiated in the issue arenas (Williams & Moffitt, 1997). Stakeholders who are willing to work together on issues with the organization are valuable for the organization and may even add to organizational social capital (Luoma-aho, 2005).

Moving from organizational centered thinking to issue arenas will have its affect on the practice of public relations as well. Instead of defining the stakeholders, practitioners should identify the various issues that in turn may lead to new stakeholders. Increased monitoring (Vos & Schoemaker, 2006) will mean keeping ahead on both the physical, traditional issue arenas as well as the new, virtual issue arenas. Future studies should focus on a variety of strategies needed to find a balance in a diversity of dynamic issue arenas.

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