

## Practitioner Paper

# Of fireworks, the Shaman and Machiavelli

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The fireworks of the 1 January 2000 are perhaps the best example of a visual image that stressed the apparent unity of mankind in a globalising world. Everyone had their own preferred display, but the response to the albeit artificial event of three zeros in the Christian calendar, looked unanimous. Some months later pundits declared the anti-globalisation riots in Seattle to be the true symbol of humanity struggling with its globalisation at the beginning of a new century. The much more deadly images of the Twin Towers have, however, evoked responses which underline the continuing divisions of humanity.

The European Centre for Public Affairs has been riding the roller coaster of the response to 11 September, attempting to distil its significance for the long-term practice of public affairs. A group of 50, largely mother-tongue English-speaking, participants met at Chatham House in London on 9 January at a conference co-sponsored by the ECPA, the *Journal of Public Affairs* and *Public Affairs Newsletter*, entitled 'Public Affairs and the World Crisis: What has changed since September 11th?'. The four panels considered the implications for government, for civil society, for business and for public affairs practitioners. An eight-page summary report written up by Alex Evans is available from the ECPA.

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The executive summary expresses the participants' views in the following words:

'What does September 11 mean for the public affairs function? When asked about the impact of the French Revolution, Cho En Lai is supposed to have replied "It is too early to tell." It is not surprising therefore that the conference concluded that, rather like an iceberg, 90% of the impact was not yet visible. Some impacts, however, are blindingly obvious. There will be more government and more regulation. Governments will be more interdependent and less open. The era when "the business of government is business" is over, yet paradoxically business may find itself more dependent on government. There will be marginally less mobility and a great deal less optimism. There will be changes in the relationship between business, NGOs and government.'

Companies and their advisors will have to care more about risk and the external environment in shaping corporate strategy. Over-worked in-house public affairs specialists will have to continue to fight for budgets and access to senior management, and strengthen skills of intelligence gathering and early warning. The public affairs world in general will need more specialists, new skills and an ability to distance itself from the 'good day to bury news' syndrome.

'Public Affairs has performed adequately in the crisis months; now it must prepare itself strategically for the long haul. Whether the world returns to "business as usual", a "new world disorder" or an "interdependent world" may largely depend on whether subsequent attacks occur and create a perception that we all have to live permanently in a world of radical insecurity. Common sense dictates preparedness to deal with all three scenarios. Working in public affairs is like farming on the flank of a volcano. It pays to keep your eyes on the horizon for signs of trouble.'

Just over a month later the ECPA held its first public Annual Conference in the Faculty

Club at Leuven. Sixty-five participants, with a much broader national mix, spent the morning in 'best practice working groups' and the afternoon in general debate on the state of public affairs. This session was made up of linked debates looking at the consequences of 11 September and its impact on globalisation issues, corporate social responsibility and the governance debate in Europe.

The quality of debate was high, but I was struck in particular by interventions from Professor Rinus van Schendelen of Erasmus University. I therefore invited Rinus to write up his comments as part of the ECPA's continuing mission to remind the English speaking world that its linguistic domination of the planet's airwaves does not entitle it to equate its thoughts with those of humanity at large. I had been similarly struck a week earlier, while at the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre in southern Brazil, by the richness and diversity of the contributions from Latin America in Spanish and Portuguese.

Rinus offers an observation, a combination, an application and some consolation.

'First the *observation*. The events of September 11, 2001 caused the perception of a crisis of global scale among both leaders and people in the Anglo-Saxon and the Islamic worlds. In this perception at least, the two populations were emotionally united. The rest of the world, including continental Europe, has remained much more relaxed about the events of September. It considers the destruction of the Twin Towers as unique by its location, media coverage and sudden toll of victims, but not as an unprecedented drama, let alone a crisis. However, the perception of a crisis can always turn an event into a crisis. The strong reactions of the US government with regard to Al-Qaeda and Afghanistan almost caused such a sequential crisis at the global level.'

This observation makes necessary a *combination* of two schools of empirical thinking. One, public affairs management (PAM), with its emphasis on stakeholders and issues, together

forming an arena and always creating new threats and opportunities, needs careful thought before action. The other, crisis management, which refers to the control of a sudden and dramatic deviation from the normal state of affairs, needs rapid action. If widely believed as true, the perception of a crisis usually puts formal authorities more in the driver's seat, downsizes the normally broad range of issues to one single issue, accelerates the decision making and narrows the arena of participants. A so-called crisis situation is, therefore, only a special case of public affairs. It provides new threats and opportunities, dependent of course on where one stands. The incumbent authorities gain from a crisis both good excuses for failure in the past or present and strong levers for realising hidden agendas. Combining the two schools, we should give more attention to what I call public affairs crisis management (PACM).

An *application* of this analysis is possible in the case the Twin Towers. Political leaders, such as George Bush and Tony Blair, meeting informally or in formal sessions as in NATO, have clearly taken stronger positions in their national driver's seat. 'Security' has become the dominant single issue. Decision making has gone into top gear, exemplified by the NATO declaration one day after 11 September to decide to apply Article 5 regarding 'common defence'. All this has been decided in small groups behind closed doors. Those inside such circles can now enjoy the opportunities of excuses and levers, but there remains a credibility gap.

For the moment some outsiders have their share of the opportunities as well. For example, those who are close to the national leaders, have their business in security, want fast-track decision making and hope to get rid of opponents.

Other outsiders, however, suffer from the new threats, possibly because they need participatory government, open markets, accountable decision making or a level political playing field.

For the latter there is the *consolation* from PACM. In the management of public affairs, including crises, there is always room for optimism, as every event has two sides. One is opportunity. The other is threat, which can be turned into an opportunity. Those feeling threatened now, should lobby close to the leading authorities, reframe their interests in terms of security, speed up their own decisions and form stronger coalitions. Applied to the level of the European Union, they should now, for example, lobby more in the three main capitals (London, Paris, Berlin), launch new issues like 'food security' and 'transport security' (so replacing the label of sustainability), push for more delegated legislation under comitology (being fast-track too) and join the EU Governance project (regarding participatory decision making). If they fail to turn the coin of crisis swiftly to the side of opportunity, they can always exploit the aforementioned credibility gap, which is the main threat to the authorities living on crises. One has only to ask for the evidence regarding Al-Qaeda or to refer to Yugoslavia, where in the 1990s the number of victims has been equal to the Twin Towers, not once but every month, ten years long. A crisis, original or sequential, is always short lived. Leaders and people come to their senses and the management of public affairs can begin again as usual.

It is easy to see from Rinus's text why his next book is entitled *Machiavelli in Brussels: the Art of Lobbying the EU* (Amsterdam University Press, 2002, isbn 9053565736). E-mail: vanschendelen@fsw.eur.nl

During the 'best practice working group' at Leuven my attention was turned to the challenge of putting such public affairs experience into training sessions. Most public affairs training concentrates on transmitting either information or knowledge and shies away from the more difficult task of teaching public affairs wisdom. I offered the following four archetypes as a contribution to the discussion. Each archetype embodies a qual-

ity of the successful public affairs practitioner.

**Janus:** The Roman God of Doorways looks in both directions. The public affairs practitioner needs to cultivate a certain distance in his or her relationship to the organisation that they serve. They need to be ‘in it’, but not exclusively ‘of it’; to carry messages from the outside world inwards with the same enthusiasm that they have in acting as the organisation’s spokesman.

**The Shaman:** The key skill of the Shaman is ‘to know what to do, when you don’t know what to do’. Public affairs practitioners need to develop this instinct. Shaman are also renowned for ‘cleansing the doors of their perception’ and transcending the human tendency to only see what they expect to see. They cultivate a peripheral vision. Public affairs practitioners need to develop their own vision, such that they spot the little detail early, before it becomes the trend that everyone can see.

**The Sherpa:** Very few chief executives reach the top of their institutions on the basis of their political sensitivities and skills. I have met very few CEOs who would be successful in the world of politics. In mountaineering, the Sherpa is essential in guiding his boss through the dangers of high altitude. Public affairs Sherpas need the political instinct to know what is going to happen six weeks ahead of the crowd. They need to spot the potential political deal, to shape the compromise and to find the words.

**The Crazy Wise One:** In the Hindu tradition there is a place reserved for those whose ethics go beyond merely the application of a checklist or a code of practice. Ethics in the world of public affairs today cannot be spelt out on the basis of what is merely legal. It is more than the Eleventh Commandment, ‘Thou shall not get caught.’ It involves a sensitive awareness of what can be ethically justified in a world where what is acceptable practice changes with bewildering speed.

The challenge is how to cultivate such skills in the context of public affairs training and utilise such insights in the real world. The Shaman in me notes that the general mood at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre was for the anti-globalisation movement, in response to 11 September, to move beyond ‘critique’ towards the creation of new institutions to control corporate globalisation. In the light of Enron and Andersen, their faith in self-regulation was at low ebb. Their political antennae had decided to focus on the practice of public affairs as the key link between corporate power and governmental decision making. The public affairs community will need all its creativity to defend the proper practice of public affairs and to remind its critics that public affairs still means different things in different parts of the world. Expect a new round of debate on the validity of our function, but take consolation from the fact that all the answers are to be found within the smart green covers of the *Journal of Public Affairs*.