PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

Is issue management evolving or progressing towards extinction?

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After almost 40 years of development, issue management has reached a point where it could either fade out of fashion or continue evolving into new forms. Reviewing both the past and possible future, four major trends are identified – migration of the discipline beyond the corporation to Government agencies and NGOs; the impact of social media and the rise of new community expectations; continuing developments in the relationship between issue management and crisis management; and the challenge of how issue management is positioned within organisations and among other management activities. Each of these trends is analysed to assess its impact on the future of issue management, and how the different roles of corporate and non-corporate players can help shape its future.

Introduction

Issue management has evolved dramatically over almost 40 years. The question now is whether that evolution will continue with a firm place for issue management as a robust, discrete discipline – or whether it will become virtually extinct through encroachment and incorporation into other mainstream communication activity.

The term issue management[1] was coined by Howard Chase (1976, p. 1) and by the early 1980s had become a popular and fashionable discipline. But since that time it has changed substantially from its original conception.

Chase (1977, 1980, 1982, 1984a) and his early disciples (Jones & Chase, 1979; Ewing, 1980, 1987; Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Heath & Nelson, 1986) viewed issue management very distinctly as a management response to what executive champion Archie Boe (1979) called "an unprecedented battering of business" (p. 4).

Chase himself described issue management as "a methodology by which the private sector can get out of the unenviable position of being at the end of the crack-the-whip political line" (1980, p. 5). And he later asserted that it would enable the private sector to be "co-equal with the government and citizens in the formation of public policy, rather than being the tail of a

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[1] Early advocates introduced this field of practice as *issue* management not *issues* management. Chase reportedly argued this was for the same reason that brain surgery is not called brains surgery.

policy kite flown by others" (1984a, p. 10). Indeed, the newsletter founded by Chase in 1976 continues today under the unequivocally business-focused title *Corporate Public Issues and their Management.*

Further sustaining this initial strong corporate positioning, one of the first 'how to' manuals on issue management (Brown, 1979) was produced by the Conference Board, an organisation committed to the prosperity and security of business and improved business leadership (www.conference-board.org).

Over the intervening years, four major trends have shaped the evolution of issue management. Examining that evolution provides not only insight into those trends, but also a lens to examine how each trend in turn may influence the development of issue management into the future.

1. Migration beyond the corporate world

The first and most evident trend has been the migration of issue management far beyond the corporate and business environment so firmly established by Chase and the other pioneers. Their unambiguous corporate conception was reinforced in early literature which emanated from business schools, such as Fleming (1980) at the University of Southern California, Fahey and his colleagues (1981) in Pittsburgh, and Buchholz (1982) at the University of Texas. Indeed, much of this early scholarship positioned issue management as closely aligned to strategic planning, and focused on its use as a vehicle to resist in the contest between corporations and third parties – primarily Governments and NGOs – attempting to establish controls through public policy.

But this changed quite rapidly as some corporations began to move from using issue management as a reactive response to adverse public policy towards recognising it as a vehicle for participation. Heath, who co-authored the seminal monograph *Issue Management: corporate public policymaking in an information society* (Heath & Nelson, 1986), typifies this evolution from the corporate persuasion perspective to what he now calls a social harmony viewpoint. Thus, in his more recent writing, Heath has defined issue management as "a strategic set of functions used to reduce friction and increase harmony between organisations and their publics in the public policy arena" (Heath, 2005, p. 460).

Two important changes lie at the heart of this aspect of evolution. The first is the adoption of issue management techniques by government legislatures and government agencies, not to resist or modify public policy as originally conceived by the corporate founders of the discipline, but to promote and implement such policies. For example, Ferguson (1993) has described the use of issue management by Canadian Federal Government agencies, while Galloway (2005) has examined its application by Australian local governments in community engagement. This use is particularly evident when governments mobilise issue management tools and processes in relation to controversial issues, such as genetically modified organisms (Henderson, 2005) or to respond in the aftermath of crisis situations such as a major public health scare (Gregory, 2005).

The second important change has seen the development of new technology such as the Internet encourage adoption of issue management by 'resource poor' community and NGO groups, giving them a new facility to frame issues and to compete on a more level playing field (for example Demetrious, 2001; Walton, 2007). As Titley (2003) commented: "Resources that were once the preserve of governments and large corporations, such as

access to intelligence and an ability to communicate and mobilise (both globally and instantaneously), are now available to anyone for the price of a cup of coffee in a cybercafé" (p. 86).

In fact some writers argue that new technology has actually tilted the playing field in favour of organised and vocal activists and corporate critics, helping reinforce NGOs as 'superbrands' (Wootliff & Deri, 2001) or 'political corporations' (Blood, 2004) or as 'new rule makers' (Maclean & Nalinakumari, 2004).

Significantly, activist organisations tend not to use the business language and terminology of issue management (Jaques, 2006; Bakker & den Hond, 2008), but there is no doubt that the democratisation of issue management through technology has changed the discipline forever and will continue doing so.

2. Social media and the expectation gap

The second key trend also arises from this democratisation, but addresses particularly the rise of social media and its impact on societal expectation.

While it is not helpful to get bogged down in the quicksand of duelling definitions, since early in the development of issue management, a broad agreement seems to have emerged that there are three distinct constructs to define an issue:

1. The disputation theme – an issue as a public dispute or contestable difference of opinion between parties;
2. The expectation gap theme – an issue as a gap between the actions and performance of an organisation and the expectations of its stakeholders and the public; and
3. The impact theme – an issue as an event, trend or condition which creates, or has the potential to create, a significant impact affecting the organisation (Jaques, 2009a).

The disputation theme attracted only limited support, largely because there are many disputes in business and society which would not be classified as 'issues' in the sense of mobilising the full application of formal issue management. In other words, while every issue involves matters of dispute, not every dispute constitutes an issue.

Similarly, the expectation gap theme began to lose popularity, particularly in the scholarly literature, because it is passive and lacks the proactive bias which should characterise issue management. (Some early scholars, including Sethi (1979), prefer the alternative term 'legitimacy gap').

Consequently, the impact theme gained considerable support and currency during the 1990s. But it too has a key limitation, namely that it is less applicable to community/NGO groups, which sometimes elect to participate in an issue which they feel impacts society as a whole rather than impacting their particular organisation. Once issue management increasingly migrated beyond the corporate world to these non-corporate groups, this limitation became more apparent and there has been a revival of interest in the expectation gap theme, greatly accelerated by the more recent rise of social media.

The democratising force of social media is commonly understood to have created a more level playing field between those with power and those affected by the exercise of power. But a more specific implication for the future of issue management is the way in which social

media is changing community expectation and with it the nature and extent of the expectation gap.

In fact the impact can be seen in two complementary ways. Firstly, social media has fostered a major change in the community's expectation of what is acceptable corporate behaviour, opening new areas of debate and raising the bar for corporations and executives. Secondly, social media has dramatically increased the community's capacity and willingness to express those expectations and demand improved performance.

Working from the platform provided by social media, stakeholders are now reviving and reconfiguring the traditional expectation gap, and there is every expectation that this development will continue to expand and increasingly define the role of issue management.

3. A new relationship between issue and crisis management

The third trend is less obvious, but no less significant for the future development of issue management – namely the relationship with crisis management.

From its earliest days issue management was seen as an early-warning or pre-crisis mechanism, closely aligned with strategic planning (Fahey & King, 1977). Indeed issue pioneer Archie Boe, then CEO of Allstate Insurance, Illinois, went so far as to state:

> Crisis and post-crisis management have been the only responses open to chief executive officers until recently. During the past few years, however, intensive study of the processes and forces which have brought about these changes has resulted in the belief that business can move to a pre-crisis management posture and participate in the public policy process that resolves these larger demands on business. The pre-crisis management approach is called issues management and is an important management tool available to today's business leaders (Boe, 1979, p. 4).

Crisis management as a formal discipline began a few years later, at the same time that issue management was becoming established. It has been argued (Mitroff, 2001; Heath & Palenchar, 2009) that the modern field of crisis management began in the United States with the notorious Tylenol poisonings of 1982, while Falkheimer and Heide (2006) argue that the Chernobyl nuclear crisis of 1986 was the event which galvanized a similar development in Europe.

Although issue management contains a strong focus on early, proactive identification of threatening issues in order to influence their course and avoid escalation into a crisis, it is clear that some scholars and practitioners were keen to maintain a discrete distinction between issue management and crisis management. The reason is somewhat less clear, possibly driven by a desire to maintain a unique identity for the two disciplines. Or possibly it was a belief that issue management is a strategic, executive activity, while crisis management is more operational and responsive. This belief is reinforced by an early bibliographical analysis which found that 90 per cent of the literature on crisis management fell into the category of 'what-to-do-when-the-worst-happens' (Pauchant, 1988).

The main development which countered this tactical approach and opened the way to a core repositioning of issue management has been the emergence of the so-called process approach to crisis management (Jaques, 2010).

The concept of crisis 'incubation' began in the 1970s, well before the establishment of crisis management as a formal discipline. Turner (1976) described the incubation period before a disaster as characterised by "the accumulation of an unnoticed set of events which are at odds with the accepted beliefs about hazards and the norms of their avoidance" (p. 381).

This idea sat rather uneasily with the traditional *event approach,* which presents crisis management as a largely tactical activity focused mainly on what to do in the event of a crisis and how to prepare for it in case it happens.

It was only in the 1990s that crisis scholars began to formulate the alternative *process approach,* which presents crisis management as a contributory function in a comprehensive series of management activities extending well before the crisis itself. Typical of this approach are the Dutch academics, 't Hart, Heyse and Boin (2001) who defined crises as "not discrete events, but rather high intensity nodes in ongoing streams of social interaction" (p. 185). Similarly, Forgues and Roux-Dufort (1998) and Roux-Dufort (2007) have further characterised the process approach, and Smith (2005) concluded that: "to be effective, crisis management should almost by definition include systematic attempts to prevent crises from occurring" (p. 312).

From this process approach to crisis management it was almost inevitable that a model would be developed to position issue management within the broader continuum of management activities. One integrated, relational design (Jaques, 2007) presents issue management as a key element of crisis prevention, taking steps to identify and reduce the risks of crisis before they occur. But it also views issue management as an important part of the post-crisis phase, when the legal, reputational and organisational risks which exist in the aftermath of a crisis can sometimes be even greater than during the crisis itself (Jaques, 2009b).

The evolution of the relationship between issue and crisis management is far from complete, and a consensus is forming only very slowly. But the idea that issue management and crisis management should be kept entirely separate is no longer sustainable, and only time will tell if either or both will continue as distinct entities.

4. The challenge of organisational positioning

The fourth area of discussion is rather more opaque, with neither a distinct history nor any firm indication for the future. While the positioning of public relations within organisational structures has attracted extensive research and literature (e.g. Botan & Taylor, 2004; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Moss, Newman & DeSanto, 2005), there has been less attention to the organisational positioning of issue management. Yet this is an important consideration which could directly impact the future of the discipline.

Issue management began as a tool for business executives, and its initial development strongly paralleled the closely linked activity of strategic planning (Jaques, 2009c). But whereas strategic planning was rapidly adopted by business executives as a core activity, and has remained largely as it was first conceived, issue management has changed dramatically over the same period and has yet to be comprehensively endorsed in the executive lexicon.

A number of factors have contributed to this ongoing ambiguity, not least the fact that strategic planning is firmly established in the curriculum of business schools, while issue management continues to span across the business/public relations/corporate communications divide.

Apart from the changing nature of issue management itself, as previously outlined, another challenge is the duality of the discipline, which is both a management philosophy and a set of tools and processes. In other words, on one hand is the 'issue management approach' to identifying and proactively managing risks and problems, and on the other hand are operational models and tools designed for tactical implementation.

Referring to this dichotomy, Heath says: "Issue management periodically has an identity crisis" (pers. comm. 2007), and while this ambiguity continues, the future of issue management must remain under question.

At a practitioner level, the preferred way forward is reasonably clear – that issue management professionals 'own' the process, while business and functional leaders 'own' the issues. This approach is spelled out in detail in the Best Practice Indicators established by the Issue Management Council of Leesburg, VA (2003).

These state (inter alia) that stewardship of the issue management process should be clearly assigned, with mechanisms in place to build organisational expertise, but at the same time that ownership of each issue is clearly assigned at both operational and top management levels, with Executive Committee or Board oversight, and with management of current and future issues well embedded within strategic planning as a core management function.[2] However IMC acknowledges that these are aspirational standards, which have not yet been universally acknowledged or adopted.

In the educational context, issue management is most often taught as an element of public relations or communications, and occasionally within a business school. Meanwhile, in the corporate environment, where the discipline was born, issue managers may typically be located within the communication function, yet their reporting line is frequently through HR, strategic planning, business development or even legal, rather than directly to the executive suite.

The reality is that the proper focus of issue management is not issues, but management, and the future of proactive issue management in the corporate context may well depend on the degree to which it is embraced by overloaded and risk-averse executives.

Looking forward

Titley (2003) has argued that the public affairs industry needs to master trends if it is not to become their victim. "The choice for practitioners," he said, "is whether they want the industry to mature into a supplier of business-critical strategic consultancy, or decline into a provider of ad hoc tactics" (p. 84).

Facing similarly powerful trends, the central question for issue management is whether it will continue to be an ambivalent discipline subject to further evolution; whether its status and position will begin to stabilise; or whether it will be subsumed into other mainstream management or communication activities.

There is no doubt that issue management faces encroachment or dilution by other more fashionable or more established activities, such as reputation management, community

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[2] The full Best Practice Indicators and associated implementation reference points are available at www.issuemanagement.org.

relations, anticipatory management, corporate citizenship, risk management, litigation communication, environmental issue management, managing sustainability or the newly expanded conception of crisis management.

It can be argued that this 'mainstreaming' is a positive move, which acknowledges the wider value of issue management processes. But it can also be argued that it diminishes the distinct identity of issue management and threatens its continued existence as a standalone discipline.

The possibility of virtual extinction is not exaggerated, as is demonstrated by the previous description of the way in which issue management has been widely adopted by NGOs and community groups, but without the issue management terminology, which some regard as 'tainted'.

A stark example may be seen with the gradual decline of Corporate Social Responsibility. Even though corporately responsible activities continue strongly, and CSR remains a firm fixture in the textbooks, CSR as a brand appears to be trending out of fashion in the corporate world, particularly in Western practice. It may even possibly be facing the same fate which befell the once-fashionable 'triple bottom line reporting'.

So, could issue management also fall victim to 'management fashion'? Early in the story of the discipline, two skeptical public relations scholars used a survey of PRSA[3] members to question whether issue management was in fact a new concept or a simply "pretentious" new term for everyday activities with "nothing that is scientific either in the conceptualisation or in analytical techniques" (Ehling & Hesse, 1983, p. 23).

Shortly afterwards Chase, then aged 74, hit back in an opinion piece for The Wall Street Journal which he impishly entitled *No Matter How Well Packaged, Corporate Fads Fail Fast* (Chase, 1984b). He declared:

> Issue-oriented management process, systematically integrated into line-management decision-making, is the enemy of corporate faddism. Once the high-priority issue is identified, filtered through issue task forces drawn from both line and staff, the designated issue action program produces more lasting results than any quick-fix dreamed up by the most inventive faddists. When all is said and done, the issue management process offers the opportunity for alleged rugged individualists to act less like sheep (p. 28).

The idea of issue management as a fad was also taken up in a still widely cited paper by Pennsylvania State University academic Steven Wartick and his practitioner colleague Robert Rude (New York State Electric and Gas Co.) which bore the provocative title *Issues Management: Corporate Fad or Corporate Function?* After a very thorough analysis of the first ten years, they warned: "If issue management is to be anything more than a passing corporate fad, both practitioners and academicians must work toward resolving the identity problem related to issue management" (Wartick & Rude 1986, p. 139). They said this did not mean everyone doing issue management must use the same exact model, or produce the same results, or be evaluated on the same success criteria. However they concluded that if those involved in issue management could work toward establishing the filling of a void and professionalisation as complements instead of substitutes, then the future of issue management was bright.

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[3] Public Relations Society of America. Howard Chase was one of six founders in 1947 and was President in 1956.

Wartick and Rude in 1986 could not have predicted the changes which issue management was to undergo, yet their concluding optimism supports the perspective that issue management is not so much going out of fashion but is evolving to meet changing demands and will soon establish a new 'identity'.

As summarised above, the impact of emerging technology is certainly a driving force in this evolution, although Kent, Taylor and Veil (2011) have warned there is a risk of "getting caught up in the short term quick-fix age of technology while ignoring the potential for technology to shift issues management practice back to its ethical roots" (p. 539).

They conclude that by "utilising technologies to truly assess potential issues and adopting socially responsible initiatives, grounded in organisational ethics, issues management has the potential to shift its paradigm to include a broader range of publics and social issues" (Kent et al. 2011, p. 539).

But this approach does not give sufficient weight to the role of corporate management in determining the fate of the discipline. In the same way that Triple Bottom Line Reporting lost favour at the corporate level, regardless of the enthusiasm of environmental advocates, so too the ultimate fate of issue management as a standalone discipline may be decided not by community and activist groups, but by corporate managers.

Recent history has demonstrated the enthusiasm with which NGOs in particular have adopted the 'issue management approach' and some of its tools and processes, though not necessarily its language and terminology.

Issue management began as an unabashed corporate concept and it seems that survival as a recognised distinct entity is more likely to be determined by the commitment of corporate leaders and the work of professional issue managers, with academic support as required. Through decades of development, issue management has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. Its proponents and practitioners now need to demonstrate those same qualities to ensure that evolution continues and issue management remains relevant in a rapidly changing world.

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