Introduction

Influence and Advocacy: Revisiting Hot Topics under Pressure

Núria Almiron and Jordi Xifra

Interest groups are said to have the potential to make a difference in policy processes and the shaping of public opinion. The traditional disciplinary division of research topics has assigned research on interest groups, also called advocacy groups and mainly referring to lobbies and think tanks, to the field of political science. Yet, as these actors are largely involved in the use of communication strategies and tools, a multidisciplinary approach that includes the perspective of communications in its widest sense (public relations, public affairs, marketing, political economy of communication) has the potential to be more effective in the study of such groups.

A plethora of books already cover interest group activity in the United States, while a large number of publications have appeared on lobbying in the European Union. Most of these, however, are handbooks or how-to guides; there is still a paucity of critical research, even in academic journals, on the issues targeted by interest groups and interest actors themselves—think tanks, lobbies, or direct corporate advocacy actors. This is understandable, as much of the literature has been produced by former professionals from the field of advocacy. However, this lack of critical research that could contribute to understanding the main actors and issues in the European lobby scenario is detrimental to democracy.

This special issue aims to fill this gap by drawing together some of the most prominent research on current advocacy that targets hot issues from a multidisciplinary and critical approach. The selected topics include climate change, animal ethics, the arms industry, finance, and human rights.

Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller examine, from a political economy and North American point of view, various communication strategies for advocating acceptance of climate science in the face of psychological and ideological impediments. Case studies on Lego, Shell, Greenpeace, Edelman, and a recent Papal encyclical are addressed to unveil the propaganda machine behind the false controversy over climate science.

Relying on information is not enough to mobilize people against global warming, as recent decades have shown. The groups allied against the truth on behalf of economic interests
are too powerful. Maxwell and Miller advocate for scientists and activists alike to draw on psychological, ideological, and political-economic analysis to establish their best course of action to initiate change. From a European perspective, Xifra approaches climate change denialism within the framework of the situational theory of publics. While also acknowledging that the gap between the results of scientific research and social responses to climate change is a wide one and that the mere provision of information does not seem to narrow it, Xifra suggests that the three independent variables posited in situational theory—problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement—might help us understand the processes of information seeking and processing in publics. To analyze these variables is actually to analyze the political economy of publics, or what prevents them from or provokes them to react.

The political economy perspective, merged with critical discourse analysis, is also the approach Almiron and Khazaal adopt to address a much-neglected ethical challenge: the vivisection-industrial complex (the business of animal testing and related services). These authors analyze lobbying activity relating to this industry in light of the natural compassion increasingly aroused in the public toward experiments that cause immense suffering to millions of nonhuman animals. This article discusses how the political economy of the vivisection industry supports the speciesist business of animal testing by mimicking the language of animal welfare in order to increasingly obstruct the public’s compassion. Almiron and Khazaal’s nonspeciesist approach unveils the interests behind vivisection and the need to ethically assess the real value of the industry’s scientific output.

Political economy is also the central perspective of Jordi Calvo’s article on an industrial sector, the arms industry, which is even less transparent than the vivisectionist. In his article, Calvo provides evidence to support the thesis that the European Union’s military-industrial complex is not only strongly lobbying to protect its own interests but is in fact playing a determining role in shaping the security and defense policies of this region. To this end, it endorses so-called defense economics, a branch of the economy devoted to promoting military responses to security and defense challenges.

The area of finance is targeted in contributions by Ötsch, and Parrilla, Almiron, and Xifra. Ötsch analyzes a topic widely ignored by both academics and policy makers: offshore jurisdictions most commonly known as tax havens. Drawing on literature studies and an Austrian case study, the author concludes that there is a permanent tendency toward offshorization by the offshore coalition, consisting of economic elites building coalitions with wider parts of society, strengthened by tactical interventions through lobbies. In turn, Parrilla, Almiron, and Xifra present the findings of research on the great Spanish recession and the role think tanks played in this. Their article analyzes the inputs and constituencies of the most influential think tanks in Spain during the economic crisis that began in 2008, concluding that these think tanks experienced a total lack of autonomy regarding the
challenges posed by the most devastating economic and financial crisis the country has faced since the recovery of democracy.

With very few exceptions, their profile was unambiguously aligned with Spanish government policymaking during the crisis, based on the dominance of austerity politics and the fulfilment of the elite’s interests.

Finally, Ana Fernández-Aballí addresses a very different case by critically examining an international nongovernmental organization and powerful human rights advocate: Amnesty International. The article analyzes Amnesty International’s (ab)use of discursive power from an innovative combined perspective: a methodology based on a reconceptualization of critical discourse analysis (with an epistemological approach according to Freirean understanding of power, cultural, and dialogic structures), on the one hand, and a methodological approach that introduces Arnold and Amy Mindell’s concept of deep democracy as awareness of diversity, rank, and privilege in discursive interactions, on the other. Although acknowledging their goodwill and importance in global power relations, the article raises the urgent need to question the identity and role that lies behind the existence of transnational nongovernmental organizations.

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