



## Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 13(2) 2020: 1002-1021

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v13i2p1002

Published in July 15, 2020

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Intelligences in Strategic Issues Management: Challenging the Mutually Beneficial Relationship Paradigm

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**ABSTRACT:** Mutually beneficial relationships (MBRs), a concept used to conceptualize public relations processes and outcomes, has been featured relatively uncritically for many years. This normative concept became an elixir for collective problem solving and shared decision making. Careful consideration of highly contested issues reveals evidence that within-group MBRs can prevent overarching solutions, decisions between issue groups, and can constitute stalemating or hegemonic tribalism. Strategic issues management (SIM) provides decision-making intelligences by which conflict between businesses and other members of society can be understood and resolved. Issue advocates' adversarial strategies can frustrate any society's ability to solve problems and make meaningful decisions, even when parties share a common motivating value. Stalemated public policy interpretations create sores that cannot heal; complex problems cannot be solved. Thus, MBRs are not the promised panacea or even a normative approach. Within-group MBRs can prevent between-group MBRs. An ethically engaged and rhetorically astute SIM process offers a constructive alternative to understanding complex, contested issues and offering informed problem resolution. Relationships do not have to be mutually beneficial to be included within the realm of public relations. In fact, relationships can span a continuum while still warranting and requiring the attentions, expertise, and activities of public relations. As long as ethical standards are maintained, those relationships can exist in whatever form is most intelligent for the handling of issues. In that view, public relations truly joins strategic management.

**KEYWORDS:** Mutually beneficial relationships, Strategic issues management, Conflict resolution, Ethics and legitimacy, Sound science, Activism, Intelligences as argumentation

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## 1. Introduction

Conflict resolution through issues debate is a foundational paradigm in the study and practice of public relations. Concepts such as zones of shared meaning (Heath, 1997) and of engagement (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018) characterize discourse processes and opinion sharing outcomes. Functional and moral aspiration is normatively driven by ethical problem resolution (Bowen, 2010) or as paradigmatic corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Suchman, 1995). Accordingly, public relations through strategic issues management (SIM) can help organizations to resolve conflict, solve problems, and manage issues by achieving normative moral responsibility and functional moral satisfaction with stakeholders. Such strategic matters become societal issues that challenge the limits of self-governance: “*Governance defines the process by which citizens collectively solve their problems and meet society’s needs, using government as an instrument*” (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001, p. 11).

The mutually beneficial relationship (MBR) paradigm of public relations can fail, especially if competing organizations speak to, for, and with supportive stakeholders that are resolutely engaged in conflict; societies and communities can suffer stalemated issues debate when mutual benefits enjoyed within groups leave or increase unresolved conflicts between groups. Within networks MBRs can so polarize issue conflict that constructive engagement becomes nullified and conflict resolution is impossible. The situation worsens if blame-placing vilification becomes weaponized. MBR interest-driven policy debates frustrate conflict resolution, relationship development, problem solving, and mutual benefit.

To demonstrate this governance challenge, competing/conflicting sides of the climate change issue controversy will be analyzed to investigate how stakeholder MBRs can magnify and solidify issue division thereby making mutually beneficial conflict resolution difficult, if not impossible. Solid MBRs with supportive stakeholders can be at substantial odds with opposing stakeholders, and offering no strategic options and no mutual options for collective gain. Thus, MBRs fail as a normative paradigm for public relations.

To frame this discussion, this paper reviews the MBR literature to understand stalemated decision making and problem solving using a case study of climate change. It critically examines strategic MBRs and SIM intelligences by which corporate-centric societies can make (and fail to make) unifying decisions in the face of opposing opinions. As issue opposition creates resistance, organizations’ top strategic management teams can challenge the legitimacy of policies as well as the character of policy-maker advocates. Functional fact-based reasoned arguments and shared values, such as environmental quality, can polarize issue opponents against each other rather than resolve issue differences that drive them apart.

## 2. Functional and Moral Legitimacy of Engagement: MBRs

How do societies make decisions? One means is by imposing public policy via monovocal authoritarianism. Another is polyvocal conflict resolution through democratic representation whereby societies develop decision-making intelligences that align corporate responsibilities and citizen preferences. That disputatious rationale for self-governance, through rhetoric, reaches back in western culture to ancient Greece. As reported by Aristotle (1954), rhetoric was a means by which to decide contestable matters regarding politics (deliberative rhetoric), guilt/innocence (forensic rhetoric), and praise/blame (epideictic rhetoric). Civic discourse employed the intelligences of reasoning based on fact (logos), emotion and passion (pathos), and ethics (ethos) as demonstrating values-based character. One person speaking (statement) and another responding

(counter-statement) constituted the agonistic paradigm of self-governance whereby issues resolution constituted enacted citizenship (Burke, 1969, especially pp. 52-53; Ihlen & Heath, 2019; Marsh, 2012).

Critical governance through engagement injected SIM into public relations theory and practice as decision-making intelligences about contested issues. Gardner (1983) reasoned that individually identifiable, complex intelligences come into play as shared means for effecting a functional society. Intelligences are multidimensional and interpenetrating within each individual mind. When viewed as collective intelligences, that perceptual, decision-making power is amplified but also made more complex as a means for addressing collective decision uncertainty. The communication studies position entails listening to and speaking with, to, and for one another to facilitate analysis of competing hegemonies.

One way to conceptualize conflict resolution suggests that relationship quality and strategic issue debate can produce MBRs. The normatively desired outcome of public relations is a win-win solution through dialogue (speaking and listening) between an organization and its stakeholder/publics that balances the interests of all parties. As a moral and ethical obligation, public relations is “the management function that *establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships* between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994, p. 6, italics added). Numerous definitions of public relations offer a similar dependence on *mutually beneficial* relationships.

Four decades ago, Broom (1977) advocated measuring the qualitative outcome of relationships: “the function of public relations is to establish and maintain communication linkages between an organization and its various publics in order to maintain mutually beneficial relationships” (p. 111, italics in original). Measurement required understanding corporate-public relationships as depending “on issues of mutual concern” (p. 111), mutual interest and mutual satisfaction. Qualitative, as well as functional/strategic, measurement presumes, according to Broom’s coorientational analysis, mutual understanding, accuracy, congruency, and agreement. Broom and Dozier (1990) worried that “rarely is [public relations] program impact on the relationships themselves measured” (p. 82).

An unsettled matter is whether (and when) relationship quality is an independent, dependent, or mediating variable. This configuration, Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) observed, demands analytical enquiry regarding antecedents, definitional/functional strategies, and observable consequences. Among the conclusions they pose: “The formation of relationships occurs when parties have perceptions and expectations of each other, when one or both parties need resources from the other, when one or both parties perceive mutual threats from an uncertain environment, and when there is either a legal or voluntary necessity to associate” (p. 95). This conceptualization presumes *mutual* influence and contextually strategic entanglements relevant to collective resource management in the face of relational, contextual, and situational uncertainty.

This view depends on “mutual” processes and outcomes, costs and benefits. Ehling’s (1992) cost-benefit analysis of public relations reasons that mutuality presumes that all parties’ benefits should be equal to or exceed costs of public relations. Ehling coupled the Cutlip/Broom legacy on MBR (p. 622) with integrative negotiation (p. 623) to justify win-win logics: “in public policy disputes, zero-sum agreements that favor business interests over the public interest are often short-lived or are overturned by lawsuits initiated by unsatisfied public stakeholders” (p. 623). Such analysis presumes that ultimate conflict resolution presumes sufficient satisfaction for all stakeholders. This goal is daunting, but insightfully multidimensional, polyvocal. Bartoletti and Faccioli (2016) agreed, “Civic collaboration is characterized by a mixed communication ecology” (p. 1). Add to that understanding the likelihood that dissatisfied stakeholders are motivated to -- and capable of -- raising the cost suffered by a focal organization by engaging in public relations efforts to seek satisfaction of their interests.

Responding to those whom Gower (2006, p. 177) called “first generation theorists,” Flynn (2006) proposed, “A new role of the public relations practitioner is to maintain an equilibrium that satisfies the mutual interest of all parties” (p. 193). Emphasis on multiple stakeholders presumes much more than a one organization-one public paradigm; a problematic presumption is that what might be mutually beneficial to one cadre of publics and organizations is not “mutually” beneficial to others.

Grunig (1992) has been particularly insistent that public relations is ideally situated as a part of strategic management. Yet, the field of strategic management relies on competition; competition has not been emphasized as a definitional value in public relations and MBRs have almost ubiquitously. In 2018, Grunig used MBRs to justify his two-way symmetrical paradigm: “... it helps organizations achieve their objectives because they use communication to establish mutually beneficial relationships with publics and behave in responsible, sustainable ways that are more likely to result in good relationships and favorable reputations (a modernist, or more accurately, an instrumental perspective)” (p. 1459).

Preferring a problem-solving to a decision-making paradigm, Kim, Grunig, and Ni (2010) reasoned that, “resolution is an important area to explore, and whether the organization can resolve conflicts with publics in a mutually satisfactory way largely depends on the extent to which they use symmetrical communication” (p. 150, emphasis added). Sharing information to achieve compatible views of reality is constructive to integrated problem solving. Kim, et al., (2010) argued that conditions of coorientation increases publics’ and organizations’ collective abilities to solve problems if information sharing creates shared reality and a sense of community dependent on three communicative behaviors: information acquisition, selection, and transmission. The view of community which Kim et al., (2010) attributed to H. Edwards (2006) is rhetorical (Aristotelian), much more discursively dialogic than information sharing/forefending in which debates discursively shape and share community.

In their discussion of MBRs, Heath and Coombs (2004) emphasized how “Building MBR’s calls for high ethical standards, strategic thinking, responsible planning, and effective communication. Quality relationships exist when people and organizations have compatible interests and share compatible views of the world” (p. 79). They expanded, “Win-win situations benefit both an organization and the people of society as a whole” (p. 79). Societal engagement “seems to be broader in context of its societal function in that the specific reality and identification go beyond the connection of publics and organization, to the community (of which the organization is a part) as a whole. This is a particularly important distinction when companies become involved in social issues that extend beyond the public-organization relationship” (H. Edwards, 2006, p. 844). Moreover, a look at the larger context of these definitions begins to reveal problematics.

### 3. Problematics in the Common Definitions of Public Relations

The definitions of public relations that are commonplace often include MBRs as both process and outcome in a normative sense, but a deeper examination reveals the naivety of that approach. The basic presumption is that all parties have a shared interest and that mutuality is a normative goal, when often no common benefit exists. In 2019, Bowen, Rawlins, and Martin reviewed the Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA) definition, based on MBRs, and concluded that the definition was flawed:

A main weakness of that definition is that it requires public relations “to bring private and public policies into *harmony*.” In reality, we know that the relationship an organization has with all of its publics and not always be

harmonious. Further, that definition obligates us to act in the best interests of both the organization and its publics, which could be logically impossible if those interests are diametrically opposed. A few examples would be class action litigation, boycotts, and oppositional research and lobbying. (p. 12, emphasis added)

Requiring harmony, or balance, as a normative goal in the PRSA definition goes beyond the moving equilibrium desired by Grunig (2018) and his symmetrical paradigm of public relations, “to establish mutually beneficial relationships with publics” (p. 1459). In fact, PRSA’s elevation of “harmonious relationships” to normative status has more in common with the concept of control mutuality or shared decisional control as a relationships management variable than it does with the competitive practice of the public relations industry in market-driven societies.

Bowen, et al. (2019) found PRSA’s MBR definition to be logically impossible, and therefore offered a competing definition from IABC as building relationships through facilitating communication (p. 11). Further, Bowen, et al. (2019) offered a normative definition of public relations as building relationships on trust to offer an ethical obligation to the function, fully realizing that not all relationships can be trusting, but using ethical behavior as a normative goal for public relations activities -- rather than mutual benefit to all parties. Using ethical behavior as a normative value for the field once again allows strategic management and competition.

The sociopolitical context in which much public relations operates, as noted above, is based on competition in democratic capitalism. Through fair competition in an open environment, the ethical behavior behind a meritorious product/service/organization wins in the marketplace by becoming successful, through the support or votes of buyers/consumers/stakeholders/publics. In the normative sense this system is based on pure competition, yet it is complicated by matters of regulation, trade policy, and labor relations; yet, this approach still rewards the industrious, innovative, and efficient organization with market share and profit.

Competitiveness rewards the organization which innovates and also profits the consumer who benefits from increased efficiencies, innovations, and options to drive down cost. These benefits are derived from enhanced competitive advantage, through strategic management, not from acting toward “harmonizing” MBRs. Therefore, public relations is pitted against organizational success when it is defined as only seeking MBRs rather than furthering strategically managed organizational effectiveness. Logically, if public relations does not help the organization succeed, it has by definition removed itself from strategic management.

Using ethics as the basis for public relations solves this conundrum because it does not require all relationships to be MBRs, or harmonious, but ethical in nature. It does not specify outcomes, but a process for analyses and engagement. Thereby, competition is allowed, efficiencies are sought, innovation and competition are values, intelligences are prioritized in SIM, and relationships are allowed to be conflictual, just not unethical (illegal, deceptive, exploitative, ill intentioned). Some relationships are most strategic for management when defined as conflictual, or competitive rather than MBRs. Consider, for example, the race between technology competitors to innovate and capture the market on a new AI sensor: competition spurs on the best achievements at each organization, creates innovation, drives down prices, and spurs investment. They do not seek to harmonize findings or innovations with one another; to do so would be unethical.

Ethics is also at odds with MBRs when one or more parties engages in unethical behavior. Bowen’s (2002) research found that an ethically strong SIM executive reported that MBRs could result in unethical compromise: instead, the only outcome that should be considered is “doing the right thing” (p. 280). Consider a class action lawsuit: Is it more strategic to argue about the organization’s correct interpretation of data or to achieve a MBR with litigants? MBRs are not only logically impossible with some publics or stakeholders (Bowen, Rawlins, and Martin, 2019), they may be self-defeating in terms of competitive strategy. Strategy is

rendered impotent when a specified outcome of MBR precludes more efficient solutions. For this reason, SIM prioritizes issues, stakeholders, and publics, so that organizations move ahead with strategic priorities in place and create outcomes that can enhance competitive advantage. Relationships do not have to be mutually beneficial to be included within the realm of public relations. In fact, relationships can span an entire continuum from hostile to accommodating while still warranting and requiring the attentions, expertise, and activities of public relations. As long as ethical standards are maintained, those relationships can exist in whatever form is most intelligent for the handling of issues.

Ethically, Bowen (2004) argued that MBRs are not possible as a normative outcome for public relations because that allows potential unknown future consequences to drive a decision, rather than the moral principle or ethical rectitude involved. In principle-based moral philosophy, deontology, potential consequences bias decisions, making an ethical resolution impossible (Kant, 1948). Bowen (2004) explained, "The deontological ethics statement commands that decisions be made that hold moral worth, without being based on the specific consequences of the decision" (p. 318). In other words, seeking the consequence of MBRs biases a moral decision and makes it unethical because it is not based on reasoned moral principle alone. Being morally responsible should drive public relations, not seeking certain outcomes -- that can also result in non-strategic decisions.

Public relations can make organizations more responsible members of society by paying attention to taking the ethically correct action rather than attempting to create MBRs for all without discernment of moral principle (Bowen, 2010). Attempts to create MBRs often result in satisficing, a short-term state of semi-satisfaction, in which publics or stakeholders get some of that they want (Lewicki et al., 1993). Yet, because their needs are not truly satisfied, they will raise the issue again and may often feel cheated by half-efforts. Satisficing creates short term solutions that are unstable. Working to create ethical and responsible SIM with prioritized stakeholders and publics offers the organization the ability to create satisfaction while working in a competitive environment. Creating satisfaction for publics is far more strategic than creating MBRs for all because often the organization loses competitive advantage in broad MBR situations with varying priorities and mixed obligations. By attempting to satisfice all, none are actually satisfied, and the issue begins its lifecycle anew, wasting time and resources that could have better been honed toward an ethical SIM.

SIM allows public relations to focus on the strategic, using competition as a shared value for ethical behavior, enabling strategic management and organizational effectiveness in a competitive environment. Logical theory should be tested empirically, so we arrived at the following research question to test this problematic lying at the definitional core of the field:

**RQ1:** Given current conceptualization of MBR, is the known logic, intelligences of relationship management, sufficient to address a conflict impasse between (and among) those in definable relationships?

We use a case analysis of a complex issue, climate change, to discuss two research questions. The case analysis shows that organizations and opponents each have allies: Definable segments of the lay public, experts, organizational interests, and elected officials (and those seeking election). If the logic of intelligences in MBR is correct, we can expect to see MBRs emerge as the most advantageous relationship and outcome dimensions of this paradigm battle. If the logic is incorrect, we expect to justify other strategies in the management of the issue, especially the development and use of strategic issues management.

## **4. SIM: Addressing Resistance to Collective Decision Making**

Strategic issues management (SIM) originated in the United States during the 1970s, a time when corporations, industries, and other organizations (including universities) encountered public criticism, social unrest, robust social movements, and activism. In response to this shift, public affairs was added to the corporate strategy arsenal in the 1950s (Public Affairs Council created in 1954) and clarified through issue(s) management in the late-1970s when the Issue Management Council formed. Public relations icon, John W. Hill, was especially influential in this innovation; strategic insights were put in place by W. Howard Chase (Heath & Bowen, 2002). Issues management resulted from the wide-spread recognition that business was suspect, authority was questioned, and government had become ineffective for protecting citizens' (and corporate) interests and unable to align organizational activities and public/stakeholder expectations (Chase, 1982, 1984; Jones & Chase, 1979).

Scholars examined these challenges (c.f., Alinsky, 1971; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton & Duncan, 1987; Heath & Nelson, 1986; Heath, 1988, Heath, 1997; Marx, 1986; Post, 1979). Substantial scholarly and professional interest and resources devoted to SIM continues (for instance, Hallahan, 2001; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Heath, 2018; Jaques, 2010; 2014). SIM was conceptualized by Heath (1997) as building four pillars of legitimacy: Strategic (reflective) management, issue monitoring and analysis (listening), corporate functional and moral responsibility (CSR), and strategic issue communication where influencers and decision makers engage in public, rhetorical arenas (Heath & Cousino, 1990). Issue responses include changes in strategic management, proactive strategies emphasizing ethical responsibility, enhanced CSR standards in operations, and collaborative issue communication. Bowen, et al. (2019) recommended that the SIM process be augmented by using moral analyses to consider the ethical responsibility and moral obligations surrounding issues from a multiplicity of perspectives, including those of many stakeholders and publics.

As an integration of strategic actions of various kinds, SIM offers an intelligence that can guide and account for corporate efforts to achieve legitimacy, but which also serve critics as points of criticism, emphasizing the legitimacy gap between strategic actions and stakeholder expectations. For instance, critics know that planning and strategic implementation provide critical access to challenge corporate management decisions. Thus, SIM is not inherently one sided but an integrated decision-making resource: an intelligence.

### **4.1 Strategic management (planning and operations)**

Intelligences inform strategic means for adapting to a competitive commercial marketplace and public policy arena dynamics when organizations meet resistance. Strategic resource/reward management benefits society when it enjoys reflective positive relationship alignments with and among stakeholders. Public policy can support business interests or harm them. Regulation can incentivize success or constitute resistance, a burden; legitimacy-interest alignment battles often result.

Organizations' business and public policy plans provide means by which to achieve their missions, visions, goals, while enacting core values. Marketplaces and public policy arenas, for these reasons, require vigilance. Stakeholders often work to apply intelligences that constrain business planning, implementation, and outcomes. Stakeholder participation is of many kinds: other companies within an industry (intraindustry), interindustry conflict, government public policy, and activist social movements. Issue arenas are multi-dimensional, multilayered, multivalued, as well as polyvocal.



## **4.2 Issue monitoring and analysis**

Core intelligences employ issue monitoring and analysis to achieve vigilance of the positive/negative impact issue position advocates can bring to bear on management decision making. This complex, multilayered process requires technical analysis to provide judicious insight into how societies affect marketplace and public policy decision making. Intelligences inform business and public policy planning, refine the challenges of meeting CSR expectations, and support strategic issues communication.

This SIM pillar requires much research: scanning, identifying, analyzing, trend monitoring, and priority setting. As issues emerge, an issue steward should bring expert judgment and attention to bear on them. Monitoring looks for failures in planning and implementation that may lead to conflict and concomitant crises.

## **4.3 Corporate (social) responsibility (CSR)**

CSR is an intelligence by which the functional and moral character of each organization is examined as its legitimizing relationship quality with stakeholders; organizations' willingness and ability to meet or exceed stakeholder expectations are scrutinized as public discourse. The ethical implications of these standards, Gollant and Sillince (2007; Suchman, 1995) reasoned, are both evaluative (moral legitimacy) and cognitive/pragmatic (financial/material legitimacy).

This social productivity approach to CSR challenges organizations to responsibly broker private and public interests. If they are legitimate, so goes SIM logics, they deserve society's support, and if not, stakeholder pressure builds to constrain current policies and operations and correct offensive actions and misjudgments in order to reduce legitimacy gaps. Such gaps reveal differences between what stakeholders expect/prefer and what they perceive to be corporate performance.

## **4.4 Strategic issue communication (SIC)**

Communication engages the intelligence of issue contest; issues are unsettled matters and unreconciled differences (Ihlen & Heath, 2019). Issue communication is inherently agonistic because various voices assert pro and con positions. Some voices support issue positions that rationalize private sector business planning. These voices likely encounter (and respond to) issue positions advocated by stakeholders in polyvocal issue arenas that resist corporate management preferences. Rhetorically, conflict resolution seeks enlightened choice, wise judgment, morality, responsibility, compatible identities, and issue alignments. As such, strategic issues communication (SIC) centers on the existential, consubstantial definition and justification of organizations as legitimate resource brokers in the public interest.

Issue debate contests issue positions that provide rationale for issue identification, identity, and interest alignment. Burke (1969) featured identification as a universal means by which people associate with and dissociate from one another. Identification can result from textual sharing (climate change scientists, climate change deniers, climate change activists, insurance companies working to forecast and manage property damage recovery) that defines and attitudinizes humans' views of issues, reality, and one another. Identifications can bring people together, but also silo them based on shared meaning, shared text. *Intelligences* are



grounded in text and the processual value of text. As Burke (1968) reasoned, “Even if a given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must also function also as a deflection of reality” (p. 45).

In contrast to the MBR approach, issues are by definition inherently agonistic: argument, contention, conflict, and counternarratives. Issue-centric intelligences are means through which decisions can be assessed through selection, reflection, and deflection, including moral examination. Issue position advocates seek to create relationships with those who agree on issue positions, and for those who welcome comments favorable to their interests. When viewed as collective intelligences, such perceptual, decision-making power is amplified but also made more complex as a means for addressing collective conflict resolution. Counternarratives can be temporal: they may reflect the intelligences of past, present, and future. They may strengthen support or resist strategic planning and operations as they offer contextual continuity to help navigate uncertainties and risks.

Issue involvement, a belief that some problem can personally affect one or another entity (such as an endangered species or farm families), motivates communicators to seek information. They make moral judgments to support those who they perceive as engaged in ethical, informed advocacy for issue positions that solve problems and foster legitimacy. Motivated by issue strain, the discrepancy between what is desired and what is encountered, polyvocal activism seeks new solutions to issues through conflict resolution and enlightened decision making. Understanding these dynamics, pressures, and intelligences in SIM allows us to conceptualize the function as a complex interaction among numerous actors, all with varying degrees of issues involvement, issue strain, moral preferences, temporal understandings, motivations, and desired outcomes. SIM allows for both strategic management and competition.

## 5. Methodology: Case Analysis

Germane to this study, SIM intelligences display management planning and public policy positioning that leads to and results from shared views on the climate change issue. Key MBRs include, but are not limited to, climate scientists’ concurrence, deniers MBRs, climate change activist MBRs, and corporate interest groups, such as the insurance industry. SIM intelligences support analysis of the strategic management of the climate change issue, especially as it seeks legitimacy and works to encounter and overcome resistance.

When the ethical expectations of polyvocal groups end in disagreement, there appears to be a logical impossibility to create MBRs among each cluster of stakeholders. Our case analysis will examine this multivocal issue for indications of MBRs and SIM intelligences. In addition to RQ1, we ask:

**RQ2:** Can SIM intelligences include MBRs as normative, functional, and moral explanations of issue conflict, impasse, and resolution?

Given the amount of influence exerted around climate change, the question is how well the US government, as well as industry groups and other governments, and citizen stakeholders cooperate to make decisions in the public interest. Public interest is aspirational, but illusive. Public policy governance and conflict resolution battles require intelligences that facilitate decision making that can balance and align private and public, societal and business interests. Conflict on each side of this issue plays out daily as competing points of view, issues, among influencers, profit-seekers, and governmental bodies who all seek to create relationships of shared opinion. Examining the real-world data of this complex case will allow us to draw conclusions about these groups uses of MBRs, SIM, and the role SIC plays regarding of each perspective. Such intelligences are useful for assessing the nature of issue conflict, the constructive or destructive nature of

MBRs, and the theoretical inadequacy of such logics. Understanding the dynamics of such relationships might guide conflict resolution and governance.

Unity in purpose can also produce decision-making dysfunction: Within group MBR's may compromise between-group MBR failure. Although this case is not generalizable to others, we believe that the insights gained can help us to understand and move toward resolution of the conflict between the MBR and SIM approaches.

## **6. Results: MBR's and Climate Change**

As a topic of public policy interest, the questions of whether the worldwide climate is changing has been debated for decades. Three central questions accompanying climate change are: (1) whether it is measurably and predictably occurring; (2) whether human activity contributes to the nature and magnitude of change; and (3) whether corrective responses are sufficient to prevent climate disaster. If climate is not affected by human activity, then adaptation and mitigation is likely to be different than if it is the result of human activity. That point is especially relevant for, for instance, the hydro-carbon based industries which do not want to lose control of their business plans and become a focal point of mitigation.

This issue debate has led to the formation of crucial relationships. The nature of such relationships is that some have potential mutual benefit. But, combat over the issue of climate change (cause, mitigation, and trajectory) is sparked by relationships of asymmetrical benefit, open hostility, and the creation of relationships to battle other relationships. Also, other industries engage in the issue because of their risk/benefit problematics. The insurance industry, for one, reasons that the magnitude of the problem seriously threatens its business model. It contends that since it does not add to climate change, it claims to bear no moral responsibility to abate its societal impact.

### **6.1 Climate scientists: MBRs based on sound science**

The fundamental relationship in the climate change battle is that among climate change scientists (Le Treut, Somerville, et al., 2007), those in policy positions who use scientific data-based conclusions in the public interest, and climate change activists who call for vigorous, dramatic actions such as the Green New Deal. As relationships go for climate scientists, the most relevant is the membership of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This self-vetted group of scientists uses peer-review of studies to draw policy conclusions and to collectively shape the funding protocols for subsequent research. Critics of this process, climate change deniers claim that once funding protocols come into being, they lead to the funding of studies that appear likely to support the cause of climate change while denying funding for those who oppose that science: an intractable, seemingly irresolvable governance conflict.

According to Le Treut, Somerville, et al. (2007), climate-focused scientific conclusions led to the IPCC's first report on climate change in 1990. The scientific method presumes that the fundamental standard of scientific research: the testing and falsifiability of theory-based observations and conclusions. Related to this presumption, peer-review defines and expresses the relationship standard among scientists; within or among cadres of scientists, "peers" create specific standards for testing context-relevant hypotheses which presume

that if data do not justify rejection, then the veracity of an hypothesis stands, until it is, if it is, falsified (Cook, 2019).

In that regard, the IPCC not only monitors reports in scientific publications, but also “contributes to science by identifying the key uncertainties and by stimulating and coordinating targeted research to answer important climate change questions” (p. 95). This statement simplifies the multidimensional complexity of climate science research. Two relevant facts are important. One is that the atmospheric changes intensify the sun’s rays which heat the earth surface making it less reflective. The second is that carbon has insulating effects which traps heat in ever increasing feedback loops; the IPCC concluded that the focal point of analysis is complex feedback mechanisms: “There are many feedback mechanisms in the climate system that can either amplify (‘positive feedback’) or diminish (‘negative feedback’) the effects of a change in climate forcing. ... Detecting, understanding and accurately quantifying climate feedbacks have been the focus of a great deal of research by scientists unravelling the complexities of Earth’s climate” (p. 97). And the MBR could be stated as this: “Climate change science is now contributing to the foundation of a new interdisciplinary approach to understanding our environment” (p. 121). That conclusion would seem, at face value, to serve the interests of all.

By April 2014, the IPCC was able to express substantial concurrence regarding climate science conclusions and thus issued a report on the matter, which was endorsed by 1250 scientists and nearly 200 governments, a substantially important MBR. Sufficient scientific concurrence existed to justify striving to reduce carbon emissions and even seek to decarbonize the environment (Rowell, 2014). Scientists, presumably acting on their sense of public interest, worked with public policy leaders to create MBRs dedicated to evermore encompassing, interdependent, and structured responses to carbon emissions. Thus, the Kyoto Protocol was proposed in 1992 to extend the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; it was adopted in 1997 and went into force in 2005. Countries either embraced the protocols or withdrew from them (Canada and USA, for example). The science behind the protocols pointed to adverse impact of CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons, and sulphur hexafluoride. Next, the Paris Agreement (2015) asked member nations to address “green-house” emissions in terms of mitigation, adaptation, and finance. Although there is scientific agreement on climate change among experts, publics have become polarized over fundamental questions such as human-caused global warming. Communication strategies to reduce polarization rarely address the underlying cause: “ideologically-driven misinformation” (Cook, 2019, p. 281). Polarization is a MBR reality, but information and reasoning should be a corrective rather than disorienting or diverging factor.

Norway and Sweden have undertaken emission reduction and remediation, combined with aspirational sustainability, for instance. Other countries have made some commitment, others may have eschewed commitment to the Paris Agreement. Such policy decisions gave critics such as Heath and Waymer (2019) reason to emphasize how hydrocarbon discourse is inherently public interest discourse. What is important to this analysis is the recognition that what some believe to be in the public interest (an MBR), as rationale for relationship development, is perceived to be contrary to the interest of others, with different MBRs: Within-group MBRs battle other-group MBRs in a zero-sum game of intentional conflict.

## **6.2 Alternative Interpretations: Denier MBRs**

Rather than “consensus,” a preferred parsing of the status of the climate change issue is best seen as concurrence (sufficient agreement by key players to act) based on preferred facts, values, policy preferences, and

identifications shared as MBRs. Others include critiques of science (as mistaken or wish-fulfillment); sun temperature variability; as God's will; as cyclical natural trends, which include glaciation as well as warming temperatures. Books such as *Climate Change* (Abbot, Armstrong, Bolt, et al., 2015) point out scientific flaws in data gathering and interpretation, offer alternative interpretations of observable phenomena, and emphasize the extraordinary cost of carbon abatement which would be (and is being) squandered if based on bad science. This book, first published by the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, brought together voices of scientists, public policy discussants, politicians, and media commentators. The IPA is characterized as a conservative public policy think tank. It was founded in 1943 to offer an alternative voice to the politically progressive voice in Australia. It is funded by industry groups to champion limited government and de-regulatory causes. Skepticism was a key theme.

The research question asked was whether a full list of potential causes had been identified and whether each had been properly explored to determine whether it was a cause (correlate). Companies, especially those engaged in carbon emission, voiced caution. The cost of change is enormous. Some argued, the full impact of ocean current heating and cooling had not been fully explored. Others point to the variability of the temperature of the Sun: "Our ultimate aim is to quantify more precisely the role of the Sun in the natural forcing of climate variability and climate change" (de Witt, Funke, Haberreiter, & Matthes, 2018). Companies such as Exxon contributed to natural cause discussions (Rowell, 2014) by supporting organizations that funded researchers who use scripture to account for a theological influence on all matters. Interdependent with that reasoning, commentators point out how the atmosphere (as climate) has changed.

Skepticism in decision making is desirable. However, if groups (defined as within-issue MBRs) approach science with different worldviews, polarization may increase rather than decrease. Cultural worldviews which contribute to politically polarized beliefs about climate were predictive of perceptions of sea level rise risk" (Akerlof, Rowan, La Porte, et al., 2016, p. 314). In part for that reason, conservative thinktanks create MBRs with individuals who are uncertain and persuadable in ways that account for decreases in poll results regarding expressed confidence in climate change data and in the human causes of climate change (McCright, & Dunlap, 2000).

### **6.3 Alternative Interpretations: Activist MBRs**

In the strictest sense this category of voices is not actually contrary to scientific interpretations, but it reflects the fact-based and moral incentive to call for change. In one sense, climate activists reason that either enough science exists for a call to action or that action is unwise because the science so far has been inadequate. The last voice is an extension of the deniers MBR discussed above, which also translates into activism rather than scientific criticism. Proactive MBR versus reactive MBR is very much at play. Emphasizing the persuasive effects of collective efficacy, researchers have found "that efforts to increase citizen activism should promote specific beliefs about climate change, build perceptions that political activism can be effective, and encourage interpersonal communication on the issue" (Roser-Renouf, Maibach, Leiserowitz, & Zhao, 2014, p 1). Collective efficacy is a defining rationale for activist MBRs.

Some scientists have achieved the status of activists, but that can be seen rhetorically as evidence of "wish-fulfillment." And relevant to understanding MBRs, those voices that influence them not only communicate with the MBR members, to them, but also on their behalf. Their platform gives voice to the interests shared with those in the MBR, often with immediacy or urgency. Swedish activist Greta Thunberg em-

phasized that point: Right now. She speaks as a climate change influencer for young people: A crucial MBR. Similarly, a group dedicated to climate civil disobedience, Extinction Revolution, seeks to speed up change.

Such voices address what Aitken (2019) called a dysfunction of climate science in the public interest: “Ultimately the dominant framing of climate change as an issue of universal public interest has had detrimental effects on the extent to which strategies for addressing climate change in fact reflect or serve public interests” (p. 72). She continued:

While in some countries (notably the United States) climate change policy remains highly politicized, resulting in debate regarding the veracity of claims about the realities or causes of climate change, the concept itself is depoliticized as the nuances and complexities of what climate change means, how it is investigated and whose voices are heard in debates regarding approaches for addressing climate change are consistently overlooked. (p. 72)

Whose interests are served or harmed by the positions various voices take? What are the benefitting arguments of the case: Cost, scientific fact, variability versus stability of climate impact, and harm burden versus reward? Consequently, Aitken presumed that the quality of dialogue, the dialectics of public interest controversies (Heath & Waymer, 2019), require open dialogue to avoid facilitating interests to speak for other interests (a challenge to the MBR paradigm).

Questions around how climate science is framed and interpreted, what its implications are within particular geographical, social, political or cultural contexts, and how policymakers should respond to the challenges that it poses could all benefit from the inclusion of diverse voices and interests. (Aitken, 2019, p. 87)

Assuming that interests are a relevant, perhaps the defining condition of MBRs, critical inquiry center on how well interests are folded into MBRs and served by them.

#### ***6.4 Climate change: Sound science and shared interest management***

Insurance companies, a powerful industry, are recalculating the cost of climate change. If it costs more to insure properties, such as those along coast lines prone to hurricane, tidal surge, wind, and erosion damage, companies can raise rates or decide not to include communities in their risk pools. Such industries have a variety of (within-group) MBRs which are not mutually beneficial in the largest scope (between-group). Why should homeowners who live away from coastlines pay higher rates to cover others who do? Then, flooding becomes an inland problem. Some insurance companies want to cherry pick their customer base, but that always leaves some insurance buyers having to pay more, which defeats companies CSR commitments and/or reduces the opportunities to buy affordable insurance. Then, the question is what is the role of governments?

The insurance industry is currently using climate scientists’ data-based projections (at the same time that climate deniers are challenging such projections) to estimate long-term high exposure risk. The industry relies on research reports (based on 2018 estimates) by the IPCC” that global economic damages by 2100 would reach \$54 trillion with a 1.5-degrees Celsius of warming of the planet, \$69 trillion with 2 degrees Celsius of warming and \$551 trillion with 3.7 degrees Celsius of warming” (Jergler, 2019). Such extraordinary costs require collaborative decision making to mitigate risk.

Interest-sharing, burden sharing, reward-sharing: These conditions of risk governance pose complex competing interests and risk management challenges. The climate change controversy exhibits “the essential dialectic of the self-interest of individual organizations against the aggregate risk management of society” (Heath & McComas, 2015, p. 119). What issue positioning might constitute as MBR with some can create unrewarding relationships with others.

The aggregate strategic management of issues, such as climate change, suggest battles over legitimacy of three kinds: Pragmatic (which address the calculations of risk harm-benefit ratios), cognitive (sociocultural intelligences requisite to joint decision making), and moral (ethical justification of any organization, as organized interests, deserving to be judged good, as legitimate broker of interests) (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Apropos to the climate change controversy, the ultimate question is not merely one of scientific veracity, but of the ability of competing interests to achieve MBR. So, the ultimate question is not whether the science is exact, but sufficient to prepare individual and organizations, as interests in conflict and alignment, to plan for a future driven by the public interest.

## 7. Discussion

The heritage of MBRs, as outlined earlier in this paper, presumes that as participants in relationships recognize mutual benefits they increase consensus, or at least concurrence, regarding shared benefits as the consequence of relationships. Rather than noting reconciliation of opinion differences, critics such as Cook (2019) point to the polarizing perils of misinformation (see also, Cook, Lewandowsky & Ecker, 2017; McCright & Dunlap, 2000; Painter & Gavin, 2016; van der Linden, Leiserowitz, Feinberg, & Maibach, 2015). Regardless of concurrence regarding scientific data and conclusions, engaged discourse, personal and public policy change, effective risk management can be compromised by comfortable MBRs. “Mounting evidence from across the behavioral sciences has found that most people regard climate change as a nonurgent and psychologically distant risk—spatially, temporally, and socially—which has led to deferred public decision making about mitigation and adaptation responses” (van der Linden, Maibach, & Leiserowitz, 2015, p. 1).

Given shifts in opinions measured by pollsters, and the influence of groups seeking to speak for those in a MBR is important. “Given the political stakes involved, the scientific findings specific to global warming have been selectively interpreted in ways that fit the political goals of elected officials, interest groups, and even scientists” (Nisbet & Myers, 2007, p. 444).

In the case of climate change, issue discourse is both agonistic and issue driven. Organizations and individuals seeking to express and hold opinion positions that are rewardable, beneficial, negotiate huge amounts of ambiguity and issue complexity. Trust, relationship, benefic/cost ratios, and other dynamics define such relationships. But is that enough? In **RQ1** we asked: Given current discussion of MBR, is the known logic, intelligences of relationship management, sufficient to address conflict impasse between (and among) those in definable relationships?

No. However tantalizing a MBR perspective has been, this case illustrated that it is incapable of explaining the discourse means by which differences of opinions are resolved between groups. MBRs simply cannot explain how, by what micro process, the resolution of competing between-group MBRs and influences can be resolved. In some instance, there may not be a reward/cost imperative for achieving such issue resolution. In fact, as evidenced by conflicting issue positions on climate change that imperative may be severely threat-



ening, or at most mildly foreboding. We offer that the MBR approach is not easily suited to an environment of issue conflict and market-driven capitalism in which organizations will seek self-gratifying ends when issue contention is high.

Ironically, the trend toward mutually beneficial decision making may be more driven by changing consumption patterns than by either corporate strategic management or public policy. “Global warming and consumer activism beliefs predict people’s green purchasing goals, which in turn predict green purchases and opinion leadership. These results suggest that communication that creates concern about global warming and enhances beliefs about the power of consumer action is likely to stimulate green consumption” (Roser-Renouf, Atkinson, Maibach, & Leiserowitz, p. 2016, p. 4759). NGOs and influencers are able to collaborate effectively in this public policy arena. However, the MBR approach fails to offer reasonable explanation for a competition-based corporate response of management to complex issues such as climate change. For further discussion of that point, we turn to SIM intelligences.

In **RQ2** we asked: Can SIM intelligences include MBRs as normative, functional, and moral explanations of issue conflict, impasse, and resolution? The case reveals a negative answer to this question and identifies numerous problematics of MBRs.

As much as MBRs predicate functional relationships within relational networks, across (between) such networks the tension between contested points of view can (and powerfully does) suggest that no common ground exists on which issue agon can be decided discursively. Efforts to create aligned MBRs tend to produce dysfunctions. Willis (2015) perceived a tendency within organizations toward inaction, or withholding crucial information and non-engagement, with stakeholders, constituting a “sugar-coated hostility” (p. 222). This stance, often presented as an attempt to engage in mutually-beneficial dialogue, disguises hegemonic and “privileged organizational interests” (L. Edwards, 2006, p. 229). CSR may be the MBR incentive to collaborate for agonistic processes and outcomes but does not assure the powerful do not exploit mutual benefits for self-interest. This can be paradigmatically (but incorrectly) “a turn by scholars toward advocating consensus-oriented communications and the seeking out of mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders” (Davidson, 2018, p. 301). Rather, Davidson aspired for “the agonistic ethos” which emphasizes “vibrant rhetorical exchanges, and dissensus, as essential in ensuring democracies do not slide into the control of narrow elites” (p. 301). An MBR can be operationally, agentially, and functionally a corporate hegemony. Each needs to be critically evaluated to see if the benefits are mutual and generalized.

Decisions that can be made by members benefitting from that relationship need not reflect the interests preferred in other relationships. If neither side of an issue can prevail but must prevail for the issue to be resolved, the paradigm of MBRs has limited application beyond the qualitative and functional scope of each relationship. MBR is too narrow a paradigm to explain how major, divisive issues can be resolved – especially if public relations is truly to operate as a part of strategic management. SIM intelligences offer a competing paradigm for a competitive environment, one shaped by public policy debates. The pressure on management to include ethical responsibility, reflexiveness, and CSR in their SIMs is high, yet the implementation of those moral demands remains, for the most part, ambiguous. Integrating ethics as the shared definitional value of public relations frees it from seeking pre-determined outcomes to pursue moral responsibility and strategic management of organizational goals within a competitive environment.



## 8. Conclusion

SIM intelligences developed to help businesses to succeed by serving societies' need for legitimate business and government practices. SIM serves best when managements' strategic business planning is reflectively based on carefully considered implications of business planning and practices that align interests between the organization(s) and stakeholders. Stakeholders, in a resource dependent arena, can affect organizations' success by creating resistance to management objectives by granting or withholding symbolic and material resources. Efforts to enlighten such decisions are issue-driven texts that consider opportunities as well as threats for those affected by managements' actions and policies. SIM presumes that relationally value-aligned interests can foster advocates' ability to concur on issue positions, in this case environmental standards. When text fails to conjoin and align interests, issue resolution cannot occur and conflict continues.

As much as self-interest is a motive to yield to others' expectations, so too is the cost of friction which in various ways increases the incentive of critics to exert pressure for change. Unresolved tensions between, especially in this case, business and society long for intelligences that can make society fully functioning by forecasting the opinions and strategic management practices that can keep societies functioning. Climate change science will in various ways, as will proactive policy, allow humans to navigate a risk-filled and uncertain future. The quality of scientific investigation and corporate as well as public policy will be tested, not only by competing argument, but also by the march of time. Issue argument can make societies smarter, or not; time will tell whether intelligences formulate and test competing perspectives, ethical standards, and refine corporate and public policy decisions.

One might imagine the power of a shared motive for resolving public policy issue battles, but this case emphasizes how fact-based, rational and moral arguments and shared values can be construed by the entities in conflict to impede aligned decision making, ethical problem solving, and the building of functional relationships based on aligned interests. The problem, and that is the footnote on public relations theory, having a "mutually beneficial relationship" as the key theme of effective and ethical public relations is not a panacea, and may be a dysfunction. Reactionary MBRs can trump proactive MBRs. Yet a more nuanced, adaptive, and resilient approach may be needed in competitive and capitalist environments. SIM offers a means of exploring decision options ethically – but optionally. SIM offers a superior theoretical and interpretive paradigm than MBRs for understanding complex conflict between competing interests. Using SIM intelligences without a prescribed outcome seemingly allow more resourceful management and more ethically responsible organizations to emerge as leaders. SIM allows the ethical advantage of moral principle, rather than potential unknowable consequences, to drive decisions. SIM also affords the ability of public relations to truly earn a seat at the management table as a contributor to strategic management, ethics, competition, innovation, conflict resolution, and moral responsibility of the organization as a functional member of society.

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