Debating NBN policy – the influence of issue management

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Faculty: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
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“The NBN project needs, more than anything, an end to spin.”

Minister for Communications, the Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP, 12 December 2013
Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Addendum:

During the course of the PhD enrolment I have not been a member of any political organisation.

All opinions, views, findings and conclusions expressed in this PhD (not referenced as belonging to other individuals or entities) are my own, and not those of any employer I have had during the course of the PhD enrolment.

Signature of Student: Ivor King

Date: 31 July 2015
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC    Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACCAN  Australian Communications Consumer Action Network
ACCC   Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
ACIG   Australian Content Industry Group
ACIJ   Australian Centre for Independent Journalism
ACMA   Australian Communication and Media Authority
AFACT  Australian Federation Against Copyright Theft
AFR    *The Australian Financial Review*
AGD    Attorney-General’s Department
AGM    Area General Manager
ALP    Australian Labor Party
Anon   Anonymous
APH    Australian Parliament House
APRA AMCOS Australasian Performing Rights Association, Australasian Mechanical Copyright Owners’ Society
ARIA   Australian Recording Industry Association
ASIO   Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
ATO    Australian Taxation Office
AWU    Australian Workers’ Union
BPI    Best Practice Indicator
CBA    Cost-Benefit Analysis
CCC    Competitive Carriers Coalition
CEO    Chief Executive Officer
CEPU   Communication Electrical Plumbing Union
CFA    Country Fire Authority (Victoria)
C-level Corporate/Executive level within an organisation
CM     Crisis Management
Comms Communications
Comms Alliance Communications Alliance
CommsDay *Communications Day*
CSG    Customer Service Guarantee
CSIRO  Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CSR    Corporate Social Responsibility
CWU    Communications Workers Union
DBCDE  Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy
DCD    Disconnection Date
DEAN   Data, Evidence and Analysis Network (NSW)
DoC    Department of Communications
DSLAM  Digital Subscriber Line Access Multiplexer
EBP    Evidence-based policymaking
EDM  Electronic Direct Mail
EFA  Electronic Frontiers Australia
Fin Review  The Australian Financial Review
FSLAM  Fibre Subscriber Line Access Multiplexer
FTTB  Fibre-to-the-building
FTTN  Fibre-to-the-node
FTTP  Fibre-to-the-premises
GRS  Graduate Research School
HFC  High frequency cable
HREC  Human Research Ethics Committee
HSB  High Speed Broadband
IABC  International Association of Business Communicators
IAP  Issue Action Publications
IBES  Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society (changed to MNSI)
ICCO  International Communications Consultancy Organisation
ICT  Information & Communication Technology
IIA  Internet Industry Association
IM  Issue Management
IMC  Issue Management Council (US)
IMT  Issue Management Team
IPTV  Internet Protocol Television
ISO  International Organisation for Standardisation
ISP  Internet Service Provider
ITS  International Telecommunications Society
Journo  Journalist
LIFD  Telecommunications (Low-Impact Facilities) Determination 1997 (Commonwealth)
Mbps  Megabits per second
MNSI  Melbourne Networked Society Institute
MRA  Music Rights Australia
MTM  Multi-Technology Mix
NBN  National Broadband Network (referring to the infrastructure)
nbn  National Broadband Network Company Limited (trading as “nbn”, referring to the company itself)
NBN Co  Previous trading name of nbn
NGO  Non-Governmental Organisation
NSA  National Security Agency
NSW  New South Wales (in Australia)
NZ  New Zealand
OAIC  Office of the Australian Information Commission
OECD  Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
op-ed  Opinion-editorial
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<tr>
<td>OTT</td>
<td>Over The Top</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Public Affairs Council</td>
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<td>PoI</td>
<td>Point of Interconnect</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army (of China)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM&amp;C</td>
<td>Prime Minister &amp; Cabinet</td>
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<td>PR</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
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<td>PRIA</td>
<td>Public Relations Institute of Australia</td>
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<td>QDA</td>
<td>Qualitative Data Analysis</td>
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<td>QoS</td>
<td>Quality of Service</td>
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<td>RDA</td>
<td>Regional Development Area</td>
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<td>RM</td>
<td>Risk Management</td>
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<td>RMCP</td>
<td>Regional Mobile Communications Project</td>
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<td>RQ</td>
<td>Research Question</td>
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<td>RSP</td>
<td>Retail Service Provider</td>
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<td>SAU</td>
<td>Special Access Undertaking</td>
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<td>SIM</td>
<td>Strategic Issue Management</td>
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<td>SIMS</td>
<td>Strategic Issue Management System</td>
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<td>SME</td>
<td>Subject Matter Expert</td>
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<td>SMH</td>
<td><em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
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<td>SSU</td>
<td>Structural Separation Undertaking</td>
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<td>SWOT</td>
<td>Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats</td>
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<td>Telco</td>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
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<td>USO</td>
<td>Universal Services Obligation</td>
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<td>UTS</td>
<td>University of Technology, Sydney</td>
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ABSTRACT

Many writers have discussed the merits of evidence-based policy and the deliberative public sphere in which “rational critical debate” determines government policies and decisions. Citizens expect governments to deliver policies that lead to beneficial outcomes for society – not just special interests.

However, media reporting about a proposal or issue and representations by special interests – often referred to as lobbying – can affect policy development and political decision-making; and this was demonstrated in interview data for this study.

The practice of “issue management” (IM) involves PR and specialist public affairs practitioners employing practices to “manage” issues “behind the scenes” and/or in the media, for example, using agenda setting, priming and framing. Yet there has been limited study of these invisible forces and their influence on public debate and related policy outcomes.

This study used in-depth interviews to examine the practice of IM in PR and public affairs, in the context of a case study – the National Broadband Network (NBN). It largely confirms existing IM theory, and its applicability in a public policy context, finding that IM is practised across roles and levels within organisations involved in the debate. IM was seen to directly influence policies, including the underlying NBN policy initiative, and the move to a “must-opt” position on battery backup. Policy practitioners were able to use IM to place policy ideas on the public agenda and to create the necessary conditions for policy change.

The study expands on existing public sphere theory, by tracing the impact of IM on public debate, society and democracy – within the bounds of the NBN case study – finding that the influence of IM is likely to be more far-reaching than has hitherto been acknowledged.

Data analysis revealed that making submissions, utilising research, providing information and conducting in-person meetings were common IM practices employed by issue managers in the NBN debate. Analysis revealed that providing one-to-one briefings and making submissions were both effective in influencing policy processes – and in the case
of submissions, this also held true for organisations that were otherwise outliers on the data.

This study assesses IM lifecycle and practice models in light of the findings, expands on existing theory of IM practice, and considers the application of these models in an Australian public policy context. The profile of the NBN, and the breadth of public policy issues it involves, also means the study has transferability to other cases in a similar context.