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Public Relations, Issue Management, and the Transformation of American Environmentalism, 1948–1992

MELISSA ARONCZYK

This article examines the case of U.S. corporate environmentalism as a dramatic instance of issue management over four decades. Drawing on administrative and trade publications, archival sources, and personal interviews, the article tracks the gradual adoption of issue management and strategic planning techniques by the environmental public relations industry, demonstrating the increasingly powerful role of PR in influencing environmental policy making in the United States. By tracing its origins in the realm of environmental issues, the article argues that issue management became, over a forty-year period, a key strategy to define, limit, and control the concept of the environment in American society. The issue management tactics deployed by public relations actors to counter environmental activism and regulation offer a paradigmatic example from which to derive critical insights about the twin evolution of American social movements and the public relations industry.

Introduction

In 1973, after thirty years in corporate public relations, W. Howard Chase was tired of American companies seeing their public relations directors as “glad-handers, courtiers, and mouthpieces.”¹ It was time for CEOs to recognize PR’s strategic role in corporate leadership.

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1. Chase, *Issue Management*, 81.

Chase, a founder of the Public Relations Society of America and a former assistant secretary of Commerce under President Eisenhower, developed a program that would become standard fare in multinational corporations and American university seminars: issue management. It advocated that corporations adjust their focus from day-to-day concerns with profit margins to incorporate long-range planning, risk assessment, research, and analysis to identify potential obstacles to productivity.

Chief among these obstacles were regulatory barriers. Having achieved their legitimate role as leaders of society in the postwar era, corporations now had “every moral and legal right to participate in *formation* of public policy—not merely to react, or be responsive, to policies designed by government.”² Chase, who taught at Harvard University and later in the Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Connecticut, offered up his Issue Management Process Model as a method to predict, identify, and control issues in the “external environment” so as to maintain the peak performance of the corporate system.

The model’s success was predicated on the authoritative role of PR actors. The proper role of PR, Chase believed, was not to communicate preestablished corporate points of view but to manage the cultural and political conditions in which firms could successfully communicate their priorities and win in Washington, DC. Over the next two decades, corporate PR agents and firms built advocacy structures to anticipate and manage public policy issues: constituencies, coalitions, and networks; public–private sector partnerships, events, and sponsorships; industry benchmarking and reporting; awards and certification programs; media training seminars; and international technology transfer systems.

The case of environmentalism is especially relevant to the social and political contexts in which Chase developed his model. Issue management was developed in the 1970s with a clear enemy in mind: “Coordinated anti-establishment issue protagonists,” “Ralph Nader” types who deployed “emotional power to turn the passive middle into activist foes.” These activist groups aimed to set the public policy agenda “by combining propaganda techniques with computer-age technology.”³ In the early 1970s, environmental activists became some of corporate leaders’ most powerful adversaries. Public awareness of and concern for the environment was amplified in the United States following the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in

2. Jones and Chase, “Managing Public Policy,” 7.

3. Chase, *Issue Management*, 16. See also Waterhouse, *Lobbying America*, Chapter 1.

1962, which raised concerns over the misuse of chemical pesticides and their effect on plant, animal, and human life. International parallels with nuclear fallout raised further alarms. Subsequent publications and events helped to mobilize opposition to corporate business as usual.⁴ Dramatic increases in environmental legislation held major implications for corporate production and profits. The issue management tactics deployed by public relations actors to counter environmental activism and regulation offer scholars a paradigmatic example from which to derive critical insights about the twin evolution of American environmentalism and the public relations industry.

This article has two aims. First, it considers the implications of issue management for the conception of environmentalism in the American public sphere. Today, issue management is widely used to predict citizen, investor, and consumer engagement around multiple social and environmental concerns.⁵ By tracing its origins in the realm of environmental issues, I argue that issue management became, over a forty-year period, a key strategy by corporate leaders across industrial sectors to define, limit, and control the concept of the environment in American society.⁶ Second, the article examines the legacy of issue management as a means of legitimacy for the PR profession in the postwar era. Drawing on social scientific notions of rationality and pragmatism, PR counselors sought to demonstrate the value of strategic communication in public policy debates, attempting in the

4. Among many other signals, see Meadows et al., *Limits to Growth* (1972); the legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam (1961–1971); and the first United Nations conference on the environment (1972).

5. See, for example, Jones, Hillier, and Comfort, “Fracking and Public Relations”; Lim, Greenwood, and Jiang, “Public Engagement Model”; Panwar and Hansen, “U.S. Forest Products”; Trowbridge, “Lake Ontario.”

6. There are in fact multiple origin stories about issue management, some proprietary and others more stochastic. It is likely that Chase’s own insights borrowed considerably from those of John Wiley Hill. The founder of the multinational PR firm Hill & Knowlton and one of the most important figures in public relations in the mid-twentieth century, Hill had long called for PR to be conceived of as a management function (Hill, *Corporate Public Relations*). According to Heath and Bowen (“Public Relations Philosophy”), Hill anticipated in the 1950s many of the principles of issue management that Chase and his colleagues would develop two decades later. Hill & Knowlton was also the first PR firm to have any kind of environmental specialization, establishing in 1966 a department on environmental health as well as an employee–client newsletter called *Opinion Today: The Gist of Current Thinking on Developments Affecting Business*, which prominently featured environmental issues (Hill & Knowlton, Inc., “Pollution: A Comprehensive Survey of Business and the Environmental Crisis,” 1970, Tobacco Institute Records, Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library, UCSF Library and Center for Knowledge Management). Chase is the focus in this article because of his attempts to systematize the practice of issue management and to imbue it with scientific rationality as well as his intentions to adopt issue management as a specialized area of public relations.

process to elevate their work from salesmanship to leadership among business elites. Also in the process, public relations actors achieved the authority to transform the terms by which environmental communication is framed and characterized in public discourse.⁷

While many others have described the increasingly central role of the corporation in environmental change, they have not focused on the specific ways that public relations actually worked to accomplish this reorientation. Some scholars describe PR as one arm of the many-tentacled efforts of “corporate environmentalism,” the “greening” of business, and the gradual embrace of “social responsibility” by the corporation over the last fifty to sixty years, whether for good or ill.⁸ Others describe “greenwashing” by corporations, whereby PR firms help companies manipulate, distort, and suppress information and actions among various publics, professing environmental compliance but in actuality maintaining the status quo.⁹ Rather than attempting to parse which of these stories is the more “accurate,” the argument in this article is that none of these accounts addresses the culturally important ways that public relations has functioned to transform the meaning of the environment in the American mind.

The article is divided into three sections, corresponding roughly to the evolution of postwar corporate public affairs strategy Chase and others have described.¹⁰ The first section (“The Environment Resisted”) details the prehistory of issue management from the immediate postwar era through the late 1960s, a period in which public relations counselors struggled to convince their clients of the need for a public face on corporate operations relative to environmental hazards. To the extent that there was any attention at all to environmental concerns at this time, corporate communication was defensive and reactive.

7. Primary material for this article was obtained from four sources: (1) industry document archives (Public Relations Society of America Records, 1938–2013, Mass Communications History Collections, Wisconsin Historical Society, hereafter PRSA Records; Chemical Industry Archives: A Project of the Environmental Working Group; and Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library); (2) trade journals, 1948–1991 (*Public Relations Journal* and *Public Relations Review*); (3) fifteen personal interviews with issue management specialists and environmental public relations counselors; and (4) management texts and casebooks from the 1970s onward on business strategy and public policy, with a focus on environmental management.

8. Hoffman, *Heresy to Dogma*; Sicilia, “Corporation under Siege”; Conley, *Environmentalism Contained*.

9. See, for example, Beder, *Global Spin*; Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*; Rowell, *Green Backlash*; Switzer, *Green Backlash*.

10. Chase, *Issue Management*; Benson and Kirsch, “Capitalism”; Buchholz, *Business Environment*; Marx, “Strategic Planning”; Post et al., “Public Affairs”; Sethi, “Corporate Political Activism.”

The second section (“The Environment Accommodated”) shows how corporations, beleaguered by growing regulatory responses to environmental concerns in the 1970s, allowed PR a greater role in producing and communicating environmental information. Strongly influenced by dominant trends in futurism, long-range planning, technological change, and opinion research, PR actors developed models for anticipating and assessing public problems, in the process assuming a more authoritative position in management paradigms.

The third section (“The Environment Anticipated”) describes specific discursive tactics initiated by environmental PR actors to diminish legal and public challenges to their corporate clients’ practices in the 1980s. Public relations became an authoritative social and political technology, one that sought continually to align private interests with public concerns. By promoting companies as relevant and necessary participants in public deliberation and policy making around environmental hazards, PR helped to cement the active role of business in interpreting the possibilities and limits of environmentalism.

The Environment Resisted, 1948–1973

American environmentalism is deeply shaped by the public relations industry. In a certain sense, this is not at all surprising. The monopoly companies of the early twentieth century in environmentally compromising industries like rail, steel, and coal faced considerable anxiety among Americans over their size and power. Corporate public relations emerged out of this anxiety, charged with a mission to invest the corporation with a “soul.”¹¹ While the concept of “the environment” as a social and moral problem would not be named until the 1960s, many pre-WWII public relations campaigns focused on mitigating the noxious effects of the corporation in their communities, whether direct ecological effects such as pollution and waste management or indirect effects such as employee health and welfare. In this era, public relations constituted the “feminine” face of the corporation’s “masculine” ethos of production and independence. Such feminine corporate practices involved “consciously catering to public opinion, adopting show-business techniques of display and publicity, and institutionalizing welfare and public relations programs.”¹²

In the postwar years, the PR industry enjoyed a relative boom. The Public Relations Society of America was founded in 1947–1948 (a merger of two regional associations) and professional journals

11. Marchand, *Corporate Soul*; Tiffany, “Bethlehem Steel.”

12. Marchand, *Corporate Soul*, 4.

appeared to catalog the profession's development (*PR News* 1944, *PR Journal* 1945, *PR Reporter* 1958). Public relations research and education, as the historian Scott Cutlip has chronicled, also mushroomed in American academic institutions.¹³

Despite these efforts at respectability, corporate PR was still seen by many as a disreputable profession in the United States. This status was partly linked to business–government relations more generally in this era. In some corners, the taint of “big business” as an unchecked power over government that had dominated the first half of the twentieth century persisted even after WWII.¹⁴ Part of it also lay in the seemingly ad hoc salesman-like aspect of the job. As one professional mused in the *PR Journal* in 1948:

We know that any profession must have a “science” as well as an “art.” And one of the things that bothers us most is that so much of what we are called upon to do depends to an uncomfortably large part upon the “art”—the knack, born of experience, of appraising a public relations problem, the knack of knowing what to do to meet it. For the fact remains that only a start has been made toward building a science of public opinion and large scale human behavior.¹⁵

During this time, as Andrew Hoffman writes, the environment was not an “issue” for corporations or for the public interest: “Particularly within the U.S. petroleum and chemical industries, the perception was that engineers and scientists were improving the quality of life for individual Americans and the strength of the nation as a whole.”¹⁶ The corporate mood could be summed up in the DuPont chemical company's famous slogan, “Better Things for Better Living ... through Chemistry.” Companies saw themselves as providers of progress through technological and scientific advancements.

This is not to say there was no public awareness of the environment. Conservation groups, naturalists, and wilderness lovers, both in word and in deed, have been part of the American landscape since at least the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁷ By the end of the 1950s, public concern mounted over the impacts of industrialization and the industrial ethos more generally; this concern would soon feed into a bona fide movement organized around controlling the environmental impact of industrial output, spurred especially over the next couple

13. Cutlip, *Unseen Power*, 529.

14. Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*; Marchand, *Corporate Soul*.

15. Newsom, *Public Interest*, 1.

16. Hoffman, *Heresy to Dogma*, 48.

17. See, for example, Muir, *Our National Parks*; Nash, *Wilderness*; Thoreau, *Walden*.

of decades by the revelation of risks contained in environmental accidents. Within corporate organizations in the 1950s, however, developing sound relations with the general public or with local residents where plants and communities operated was, if anything, a minor concern.

The activities of the Chemical Manufacturers' Association (CMA) offer a case in point. Founded in 1872, the CMA was the major trade association for the chemical industry, which in 1960 was a \$26 billion industry.¹⁸ A large and well-fed organization, the CMA's duties for its 195 member companies included monitoring legislative matters of importance to the industry; managing the sale, patenting, and taxation of chemicals; developing statistics and best practices for chemical-related issues such as food additives, labeling, transport, and medical concerns; preparing and distributing publications about and for the industry; and initiating partnerships and contractual agreements with government bureaus and other industry organizations (for example, plastics and atomic energy) for research projects. On its board sat representatives of some of the largest companies in the country: Shell, Monsanto, W. R. Grace & Co., Kaiser Aluminum & Chemical Corp., Allied Chemical Corp., Dow Chemical, and Du Pont, among others.¹⁹ The CMA did maintain a public relations advisory committee, made up of representatives from these same companies, which promoted the industry in a general way—the CMA hosted, for instance, an annual “Chemical Progress Week” in various communities across the United States—but no sustained programs were in place to develop positive rapport with, or stem negative reactions by, public citizens.

In February 1961 the CMA's Public Relations Advisory Committee attempted to draw its members' attention to this fact in a thirty-page report. In hindsight, the report is the proverbial canary in the mine of public perceptions around environmental problems.

“There can be no doubt of the increasing public interest in pollution control,” reads the report. It was not only the growing slate of government controls on taxes and patents that were gaining public attention but also the surprising number of articles appearing in popular magazines in 1960 with titles like: “Subtle New Pollutants Endanger Health” (*Time Magazine*); “The Danger in Your Water” (*Good Housekeeping*), and “Our Polluted Inheritance” (*Science Newsletter*). The report noted:

In each of the problem areas discussed in this report, public opinion should be based on public understanding of *all* the facts, and the ability of people to reject falsehoods and misleading arguments

18. Manufacturing Chemists' Association, Inc., *A Report to the Board of Directors by the Public Relations Advisory Committee*, February 14, 1961, 19.

19. *Ibid.*, 18.

being presented from a variety of sources. It is obvious that the mind of the public is being reached, almost daily, by those who hold views contrary to our own ... our responsibility is to see that the public hears our side of the story.²⁰

The PR committee proposed a three-pronged strategy to reach the public. First, they advocated greater use of “mass communication media,” with increased staff devoted to press relations. Second, they advocated for the deployment of “Chemical Industry Councils” to become “the local voice of the chemical industry,” dedicated “to foster[ing], through responsible inter-relationships with neighbor communities, an environment of public acceptance and goodwill in which the chemical industry can continue to function profitably.”²¹ The third idea was “to secure the support of those special groups, or opinion leaders, whose influence will enhance the possibility of favorable solutions to each of our problems.” The report concludes:

While we cannot expect any communications program to provide solutions for all of our problems, and while we recognize that many of these problems will require a multi-pronged approach over a long period of time, we are convinced that failure to provide an adequate public information program now will ultimately cost the industry many times the dollars which we suggest be spent.²²

Fifteen months later, the publication of a singular book, *Silent Spring*, by the journalist Rachel Carson, propelled “the environment” into the public consciousness. Excerpted in the *New Yorker* magazine, which immediately galvanized its shocked and panicked readers, Carson’s flowing prose imagined a world without birdsong, a landscape ravaged by pesticides. A former federal employee with the Department of Fish and Wildlife, a naturalist, and a longtime science writer, Carson’s credibility was augmented by her clear and well-documented argument. Connecting government agencies with chemical industry irresponsibility and the collusion of academic scientists, her text had a damning effect on all three pillars of society.

Within the CMA, the reaction was immediate and sobering. As a member of the association’s PR Advisory Committee at that time recalls:

So I was there a while working with the trade association, when Rachel Carson’s book came out. Lit the firecracker there. I came in one day, my boss, the head of P.R., was sitting in his office, called

20. Ibid.

21. Manufacturing Chemists’ Association, Minutes of Meeting, Environmental Health Advisory Committee, April 6, 1966, EH23-4.

22. Manufacturing Chemists’ Association, Report to Board of Directors, 31.

me to come in. “Allan [Allan E. Settle, a former PR executive with the Monsanto Chemical Company], what is it?” He picked up a *New Yorker* magazine and said, “This is Pearl Harbor for the chemical industry. This woman, Rachel Carson, says that chemicals are killing birds and implies a lot more than that. So I’m gonna assign you this area. Get involved and figure out what this is all about.”²³

At the request of Settle, “a master of high-risk, high-profile chemical public relations,” the PR Advisory Committee swung into action.²⁴ The committee was made up of well-positioned counselors from major chemical companies: Glen Perry (DuPont); Bud Smith (Dow); Dan Forrestal (Monsanto); Art Northwood (Shell Chemical); Bud Lane (Goodrich Gulf); and Dick Moore (W. R. Grace), with E. Bruce Harrison coordinating as the CMA’s Manager of Environmental Information.²⁵ The scale and scope of the public relations war to counter the impact of *Silent Spring* was unprecedented. The chemical and agribusiness industries threw themselves into the attack, preparing damning book reviews, newsletter mailings, TV appearances by “expert” scientists, and letters to editors questioning the legitimacy of the book and its author.²⁶ Nevertheless, the public had been awakened and would not be lulled back into complacency.

At the same time, as Patricia Murphy has shown, the intensive media attention to the book’s impact did not only report on the rising antagonism between public and corporations but also helped to create it. “By the very fact of its advocacy, *Silent Spring* presented the media with the prospect of an ongoing story that was both larger and journalistically more attractive than pesticidal hazards—namely, a public debate.” Rebuttal to the book in any form, regardless of its accuracy, was a “reportable event.”²⁷ Media coverage, amplified by the placement of stories by the PR campaigns, accentuated the “battle” between “man and bug” or “man versus nature,” and subsequent actions related to environmental concerns were reported in this form as well.²⁸

If this was a “battle,” corporations were losing. As Christopher Bosso writes in his study of the life cycle of a public issue, a number of factors converged in this period to ensure the lasting impact

23. Personal interview, February 23, 2017.

24. Harrison, *Going Green*, xiv–xv.

25. Ibid.

26. Murphy, *What a Book Can Do*; Rachel Carson, dir. Michelle Ferrari (TV film), American Experience, produced by WGBH, aired January 25, 2017.

27. Murphy, *What a Book Can Do*, 121.

28. In a 2008 report, journalist Eric Pooley asserted that the “us versus them” approach of contemporary reporting around climate change was a major problem in developing awareness of climate change issues. Pooley, *Save the Planet*.

of *Silent Spring*: the presidency of John F. Kennedy and the federal administration's active sympathy to the book's argument; the spirit of reform, which spurred social movements to counter dominant beliefs about scientific and technological progress; and the thalidomide tragedy in Europe, which had already caused a ban on the chemical in the United States.²⁹

Despite the increasing criticism by advocates of "nature" leveled against the foibles of "man" during this period, the chemical and oil industries persisted in seeing the environment primarily as a technological problem that could be solved within the company, not as a social problem in need of public response.³⁰ Articles in PR journals and speeches by PR men at professional industry events of the era described the public with marked disdain. Public concern was characterized either as misinformed, irrational, or unaware of the economic "reality" of environmental change. Throughout the 1960s, environmental public relations dealt with the public overall by either presenting environmentalism "realistically"—as a tradeoff between economic and environmental needs—or accusing public critics, along with government regulators, of making unreasonable demands on companies.

Such a tone-deaf response would have a devastating impact on company operations. It perpetuated a growing perception of business as rapacious and uncaring. Civil society and government concern over environmental hazards only accelerated throughout the decade, punctuated by a massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California, in 1969.³¹ Between 1967 and 1972, two federal environmental laws were passed, two more laws were amended to tighten earlier restrictions, and five national environmental organizations were established. The new laws were the National Environmental Policy Act (1969) and the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1970); the important amendments were to the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act (1972); and the organizations created were the Environmental Protection Agency (1970), the Environmental Defense Fund (1967), the Natural Resources Defense Council (1970), the Union for Concerned Scientists (1969), and Environmental Action (1970).³² It was a watershed moment for the environmental movement, made more meaningful

29. Bosso, *Pesticides and Politics*, 115; see also Murphy, *What a Book Can Do*, 203.

30. Hoffman, *Heresy to Dogma*, Chapter 3; my analysis extends the period of "industrial environmentalism" to 1973, three years later than Hoffman's 1960–1970 chronology.

31. There were four additional spills over the next five months. Hoffman, *Heresy to Dogma*, 56.

32. Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*, 65.

still by the participation of twenty million people in America's first "Earth Day" on April 22, 1970.

In 1973 the *PR Journal* hosted its first special issue devoted to the environment, but even then the focus was still on environmental-economic tradeoffs and technical fixes. The energy crisis later that year made environmental issues still more urgent for firms and their extant slate of responses even more anachronistic. By this time, environmentalism now had a self-defined "public," and it had incontrovertibly become an "issue." Nevertheless, business leaders remained on the defensive. Some challenged the "advocacy" of environmental journalism and pushed for less "biased" reporting.³³ Others complained that the technical requirements of stringent federal legislation exceeded companies' innovative capacity. Still others continued to claim that environmental legislation was too expensive and would affect employment.³⁴ In any case, as far as managerial elites were concerned, the issue of the environment was best handled internally. CEOs wrung their hands over "the growing burden of government regulation on business" and thumped their chests over the moral benefits of entrepreneurialism, remaining essentially blind to the public implications of their actions.³⁵

The Environment Accommodated, 1969–1979

On November 18, 1969, at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles, California, W. Howard Chase addressed a roomful of PR practitioners at the annual conference of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Chase, who grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, was a founding member of the PRSA in 1947–48 and its president in 1956. A onetime partner at the agency Selvage, Lee, & Chase (now Manning, Selvage, & Lee), president of the PR arm of the multinational advertising agency McCann-Erickson, and founder of an eponymous PR firm in 1959, by October 1970 the PRSA would call him one of the top ten outstanding PR figures of the twentieth century.³⁶ For now, however, Chase's

33. Box 171, Folder 5, John J. Spano, "Remarks for PRSA Environmental PR Panel," Detroit, November 14, 1972, PRSA Records.

34. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America*, 197–198.

35. J. P. Donlon, "Witness at the Revolution," *Chief Executive Magazine*, August 1, 1997.

36. David L. Lewis, "Outstanding PR Professionals," *Public Relations Journal*, October 1970, 78–84, 80; W. Howard Chase, speech to Public Relations Society of America, Los Angeles, CA, November 18, 1969, Institute for Public Relations, "By Any Other Name." https://instituteforpr.org/wp-content/uploads/Chase_1969_Lecture1.pdf.

lecture mingled paternal pride and professional devotion with deep dismay.

“Public relations—like theology, law, medicine, and journalism—is under fire,” Chase told his colleagues. “I don’t believe that we—even as comfortable and well-fed as we now are—can ignore significant evidences of apathy or even disrespect for what we are or what we stand for.”³⁷ The problem, in Chase’s view, was that PR professionals had not demonstrated their worth to the leaders of organizations at which vital decisions were being made. The “managers of money, men, machines and marketing” needed now a “fifth M”—a manager of the mind. This was the new role that public relations ought to occupy.

Chase envisioned a systematic approach to information, one that not only communicates preestablished ideas but also forms them; that would not only “create broad public awareness of how smart or innovative someone else may be” but also makes others aware of how smart and innovative PR can be; one that not merely manages client objectives but also anticipates and constructs them. Rather than asserting that the values of the corporation are in the public interest, the PR professional ought to *create* the public interest by helping to direct and indeed make public policy.³⁸

Chase was a strong proselytizer and a savvy strategist in his own right. In addition to his prolific writings on the topic of corporate issue management, he created a series of institutions to accommodate his ideas.³⁹ In 1963 “Chase created the Council for Management of Change, with the monthly newsletter, The Innovation and Management of Change (IMC), as an incubator of his ideas.”⁴⁰ As the founder of another newsletter, *Corporate Public Issues and their Management* (wherein he introduced the term issue management) in 1976, Chase created the Institute for Public Issues Management and taught a graduate MBA course in Public Issues Management at the University of Connecticut in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Public Affairs Council offered the first of several seminars on issue management in 1977; and, starting in 1979, George Washington University offered semiannual seminars on the topic.⁴¹ Buoyed by a two-paragraph mention in the *Wall Street Journal* of the growing trend in companies to hire issue

37. Institute for Public Relations, “By Any Other Name.”

38. Chase, *Issue Management*, 6–7; Sonnenfeld, *Corporate Views*; David Rockefeller, “Free Trade in Ideas,” *Chief Executive Magazine* (Autumn 1978).

39. For a review of the entirety of Chase’s publications on issue management, see Jaques, “Howard Chase.”

40. Crane, “Chase, W. Howard,” 106.

41. Chase, *Issue Management*, 108.

management directors in 1981, in 1982 Chase cofounded the Issue Management Association.⁴²

Chase furthered his mission to promote the legitimacy of issue management by drawing connections to ongoing social scientific, market, and government research. Making these connections allowed Chase to situate other initiatives as precursors to his work as well as project his ideas into a range of organizational fields.

“Futures” research was a major influence on Chase’s ideas, as the subtitle of his book indicates (*Issue Management: Origins of the Future*). Economic futures research and forecasting gained popularity throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Companies assembled economists, accountants, statisticians, and computer scientists to control for risks inherent to physical planning and budgeting. Such efforts spawned societies and journals to report on and analyze these long-range planning processes.⁴³

In the 1970s, futures research took on a more social-behavioral aspect. Company analysts began to see the value of psychological principles of decision making, referring to “mental models” and managers’ “worldviews.”⁴⁴ Company futures research combined numerical or statistical analyses with improvisatory, image-based techniques such as decision scenarios, Delphi polls, and models or simulations.⁴⁵ These “soft” methods for assessing future problems were seen as important complements to quantitative econometric evaluations. The head of the governmental issues management team of the American oil company Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) explained to the *Wall Street Journal* in 1982, “Single-line numbers forecasting, typically done by economic planners, didn’t predict the Arab oil embargo or the environmental revolution. ...We needed a wider, more qualitative approach to supplement the other work.”⁴⁶

The federal government tried its hand at futures research, forming a Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future and sponsoring hearings and workshops in 1981 and 1982 on “congressional foresight

42. Robert Greenberger, “Labor Letter: Issues Managers: More Concerns Seek Top Advice on Coming Trends,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 1981, 1. The Issue Management Association was later renamed Issue Management Council.

43. See, for instance, writings on “Fayolism,” named after French mining engineer Henri Fayol, who developed a management theory of planning. Additionally, see the Society for Long-Range Planning, founded in 1966, and its journal, the *Journal of Long-Range Planning*, begun in 1968; as well as the North American Society for Corporate Planning, formed in 1966.

44. See, for example, Wack, “Scenarios.”

45. Linneman and Klein, “Multiple Scenarios”; McHale and McHale, “Futures Studies Worldwide.”

46. Earl Gottschalk, “Firms Hiring New Type of Manager to Study Issues, Emerging Troubles,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 1982, 33.

capability and the strategic future.”⁴⁷ Chase capitalized on the growing interest, inviting one of the group’s representatives, Senator Al Gore (D-Tenn.), to be the keynote speaker at the third annual meeting of the Issues Management Association on May 18–19, 1983.⁴⁸

Recent developments in public opinion polling and mass media analysis were also inputs to Chase’s thinking. Chase advocated the study of opinion polls from well-known pollsters such as Yankelovich, Skelly & White, and Cambridge Survey Reports as well as think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research; surveys of “opinion leaders” based on studies by Everett M. Rogers and Paul Lazarsfeld; media content analysis using methods advocated by W. J. Paisley; and legislative trend and voter behavior analysis via the views of V. O. Key.⁴⁹ Here, Chase drew on the postwar tendency to “scientize” public relations and the management of public opinion. G. Edward Pendray, owner of an eponymous PR firm and founder of the American Rocket Society, had decades earlier proposed the application of semantics, social psychology, and social physics to PR.⁵⁰ These principles were applied by major public relations firms such as Hill & Knowlton. During labor negotiations in the steel industry in 1959, Hill & Knowlton used semantic and psychological tactics to influence steelworkers and sway public opinion.⁵¹

One major object of this research was to analyze and ultimately neutralize public policy influence by “activists.” Public interest groups (pressure groups, reformists) such as environmental activists were the clear antagonists and obstacles to corporate affairs, and PR actors spilled considerable ink searching for ways to deal with the challenge. In a lengthy review of research on environmental public relations conducted for the Foundation for PR Research and Education in 1977, the public relations theorist James Grunig noted that activists ought to form a key “public” for corporate communicators to engage with:

Most people do not perceive many environmental situations as issues which involve them ... thus a polluter—unfortunately—need not worry too much about adverse publicity directed at a general audience. Nor should a conscientious company expect

47. Silver, “Issues Management Group,” 562; David Shribman, “Now and Then, Congress Also Ponders,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1982.

48. Chase, *Issue Management*, 111–112. In his book, *The Future*, Al Gore credits his work with futurists as a wellspring for his later ideas on environmental protection.

49. Chase, *Issue Management*, 46.

50. Pendray, “Fundamentals in Public Relations.”

51. Hill, “Steel Negotiations.”

too much from a campaign to inform people about how it is rectifying environmental sins. The polluter should, however, worry about the educated activist who may lobby against him and the conscientious firm should devote most of its efforts to communicating with the activists—since they are the ones seeking the information.⁵²

Similar concerns were voiced within firms, which created charts and offered case studies to define environmental group actions. Public relations counselors carefully tracked initiatives such as the National Coal Policy Project (NCP), which employed a “consensus” approach to resolving environmental issue management, and subsequently promoted them to colleagues and clients.⁵³ The NCP forum adopted a “rule of reason” negotiation method, developed by corporate attorney Milton Wessel, which advocated that corporations take rational control of antagonistic situations in order to sidestep government intervention and legislation.⁵⁴ Wessel, general counsel of the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology, had already worked closely with Dow Chemical on a series of arbitrations and was therefore familiar with the framing tactics used by environmental groups. Notably, Wessel was a staunch advocate of the concept of risk–benefit analysis, a theme he explored in detail in his 1980 book, *Science and Conscience*.⁵⁵ Risk–benefit analysis, as the environmental historian Joe Greene Conley II has documented, was a core strategy by corporations to narrow and weaken environmental politics by forcing cost-centered analyses of pollution control.⁵⁶

In some cases, the goal was not only to define but also to discredit the claims of activists. A 1978 *PR Journal* opinion piece by an electric utility company manager about antinuclear activists supports harsh tactics:

These activists want to stop energy production ... the nuclear debate isn't over whose facts are correct, but, instead, who can come up with the greater hazard and have it successfully perceived so by the people. So forget the facts once in a while. Counter the activists not with facts but with closed factory gates, empty schools, cold and dark homes and sad children.⁵⁷

52. Grunig, “Environmental Public Relations,” 54.

53. Academy Forum, *Coal as an Energy Resource*. On the promotion of the NCP, see e.g., Harrison, “Environment Energy,” and Harrison, *Going Green*.

54. Wessel, *Rule of Reason*.

55. Pasley, review of “Science and Conscience.”

56. Conley, *Environmentalism Contained*.

57. Shantz, “Anti-Nuclear Activists,” 10; see also Coruth, “Grassroots and Nuclear Power.”

If the ostensible aim of these publications was to assist corporate managers in understanding the need for action around environmental issues, the actual effect was to reinforce the “us versus them” perspective begun with the public relations around Carson’s *Silent Spring* (Table 1). Environmental groups were “perceived as representing the public interest,” and this was a threat to corporate business as usual. Beginning in 1978, the Foundation for Public Affairs began publishing a periodic review entitled *Public Interest Profiles*, which identified and described prominent activist groups in environmental arenas (among others).⁵⁸ For Chase and other management thinkers, activist groups were leading the charge in defining public problems and pressuring governments to take action. Companies needed to move from accommodating activist pressures and public controls to anticipating and shaping them. “Politically astute activists demand that business leaders change the way they do business. In the face of such challenges, a CEO is left with two choices: Inaction or action. If he doesn’t act, his adversaries will. And then he will be defending himself on their turf, not his.”⁵⁹

Issue management—the anticipation and control of an issue before it becomes a legislative problem—offered a pathway for companies to move the action onto their turf. Management journals began to describe a “life cycle” for public issues according to which an issue moves from social concerns to social controls through the medium of government regulation (Table 2). The goal of issue management (if the issue was not in the company’s interests) was to head off the issue before it became a matter of policy. As a General Electric manager explained the cycle: “The societal expectations of yesterday become the political issue of today, and the legislative requirement of tomorrow, and the litigated penalties of the day after.”⁶⁰

As professor of Management Thomas Marx put it,

The missions of public affairs in many companies have been changing since the late 1970s from “reaction” to “pro-action” and even to “inter-action” in some companies. With these changes in mission

58. Congressional Quarterly, *Public Interest Profiles*.

59. Jones and Chase, “Managing Public Policy,” 10–11.

60. Quoted in Marx, “Integrating Public Affairs,” 144. Two sources cite Daniel Bell as an inspiration for their issue management concept, referring to a quote from a speech Bell had given called “Dilemmas of Managerial Legitimacy,” at the First National Conference on Business Ethics, at Bentley College (Waltham, MA) on March 11–12, 1977: “The corporation operates in a social and political context in which it has to be responsive to external issues. In fact, one can say that that which is social today becomes political tomorrow, and economic (in costs and consequences) the day after.” Given Bell’s subsequent writings, it seems his words were misappropriated. See Chase, *Issue Management*; Coates, *Issues Management*.

Table 1 Comparison of factors affecting environmental communication

Industry	Environmental Groups
Purpose of the organization Generally favors industrial growth, which in current society may require “self-serving” defense.	Generally opposes industrial growth, siding with public fears about presumed pollution.
Internal support Inconsistent (competitive) perspectives on environmental issues within the company and among companies within an industry.	Intergroup rivalries generally sublimated in interest of united impact.
External support Perceived as generally unfavorable regarding environmental aims and actions.	Varies, most often by geographic area, but generally enjoys public support for pro-environment aims, actions.
Relationship to government Regulated at many levels; regarding current environmental regulations, position generally is to seek legislative relief from current or additional regulatory control and cost burdens; believed to have self-interest in legislative positions.	Not regulated; subject to some tax, lobbying laws; advocate maintenance and strengthening of environmental laws and regulations, with little concern for industrial cost and control burdens; perceived as representing public interest.
Relationship to news media Generally responsive, not aggressive on environmental issues. Seeks thoughtful, interpretive coverage of issues; often does not provide simple messages and good spokesman, or “wrong” person, is found by media for response.	Varies but are often symbiotic: they deliver what the media need; aggressive on environmental issues; seek dramatic, people- and fear-oriented coverage of issues, as well as thoughtful, interpretive coverage.

Source: Adapted from Harrison, *Environmental Communication*, 163.

comes a clear recognition of the need to integrate strategic planning and public affairs. Such an integration would facilitate the achievement of legitimate social goals with less economic disruption to the firms’ business plans.⁶¹

In the next section I describe how corporate PR counselors succeeded in taking control of the environmental issue by framing corporate responses to environmentalism in terms of existing cultural structures in the post-Watergate era: transparency, public participation, and the public interest.⁶² This cultural alignment contributed to renewed confidence in private companies as stewards of environmental protection.

61. Marx, “Strategic Planning,” 16.
62. Schudson, *Right to Know*.

Table 2 The life cycle of an environmental issue

Issue	Social Expectation	Political Issue	Legislation	Social Control
Environmental protection	Carson's <i>Silent Spring</i> (1963)	McCarthy's political platform (1968)	Environmental Protection Agency (1971)	Emissions standards, pollution fines, product recalls, environmental permits
Energy conservation	Arab oil embargo (1973)	Foreign policy debate over U.S. dependence on OPEC oil	Energy Policy and Conservation Act (1975)	Manufacturer fines for exceeding CAFE (fuel emission) standards

Note: A General Motors' executive's depiction of the life cycle of two issues: environmental protection and energy conservation.

Source: Adapted from Marx, "Integrating Public Affairs," 145. See also Marx, "Social Legitimacy."

The Environment Anticipated, 1986–1991

The Watergate scandal was a point of inflection for the public relations industry. Increasing public scrutiny in the mid-1970s, as well as congressional reforms distributing power among subcommittees, made old-style centralized lobbying ineffective.⁶³ For many PR firms, the solution was to gain distance—at least in appearance—from lobbying activities. As managerial elites began to consider a stronger role in public policy making, business groups sought more, not less, access to Washington corridors.

In this context, some corporate communicators proceeded to make two structural changes that would have major impacts on both the PR industry and on environmental regulation. First, PR firms and companies began to employ well-connected lobbyists to operate from within their firms.⁶⁴ Traditionally, the tasks of negotiating with power brokers in Congress ("government relations") and appealing to audiences in state and local arenas to gain support for a policy position ("public relations") were discrete functions carried out by separate and not necessarily related authorities. Companies integrated the two types of advocacy, either by assembling an in-house public affairs team or by working with external PR/public affairs firms (some of which were staffed with former employees). By connecting government relations with public relations, the effect was to dramatically increase the channels of communication of an issue, so that constituents "back home"

63. Sethi, "Corporate Political Activism," 40.

64. Wittenberg and Wittenberg, *How to Win in Washington*.

effectively joined Washington negotiators in lobbying around questions of public policy.⁶⁵ This allowed contentious industry players to “decentralize” their efforts, impacting municipal or state populations instead of just on Capitol Hill. For example, in the 1980s, the tobacco industry encouraged states to adopt laws that preempted cities from approving antismoking ordinances. This strategy not only projected the idea of a tobacco industry supportive of new regulation but also “shifted the battle from the halls of Congress to states and cities,” as the *Washington Post* observed.⁶⁶

A second change was both structural and conceptual. Increasingly, articles about corporate political involvement characterized companies as “activists” in their own right.⁶⁷ Writing in the *California Management Review*, Business professor Prakash Sethi described an evolutionary process by which companies became “activist” organizations to influence public policy. Companies were moving from (1) a defensive, adversarial mode devoted to maintaining the status quo, past (2) an accommodative mode engaged in short-term campaigns in response to external factors, into (3) a stage of “positive activism.” The positive activism mode involved long-term strategic planning “on the basis of a normative concept of ‘public interest’ and ‘policy agenda’ supported by the corporation.” In this mode, senior management moved from “informal and secretive lobbying of key legislators” to “speaking out on public issues and offering advice and assistance to executive and legislative branches [of Congress]”; from noncontroversial community affairs and corporate contributions to the “development of new groups ... in support of a national policy agenda”; and from resistance to other groups’ viewpoints to “emphasis on the development of third sector as bulwark against increasing government encroachment in the social arena” as well as public communications and education to advocate for specific policies and programs.⁶⁸

“The essence of corporate political activism,” Sethi concluded, “is for the corporation to develop a cogent view of the public interest and,

65. As Donald Colen, vice president and director of public affairs of New York Citibank claimed: “In public relations now, all roads lead to the Hill” (quoted in Harrison, “Washington Focus”). This alliance between lobbyists and PR would shift again in the late 1980s in the aftermath of news investigations into “honoraria” paid to congresspeople. See Brooks Jackson, “Easy Money: U.S. Lawmakers’ Take from Honorariums Hits \$10 Million a Year,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 1988; Tom Kenworthy, “Courting the Key Committees: Industry Honoraria Flow to Those with Jurisdiction, Analysis Finds,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 1988, A15.

66. Gary Lee, “Tobacco Lobby Lights a Preemptive Strike,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 1991, A13.

67. Harrison, “Green Communication.”

68. Sethi, “Corporate Political Activism,” 38.

then, political positions and strategies that embody this notion.”⁶⁹ Corporate communicators helped their clients become “activists” by adopting not only the title but also the techniques of public interest groups. This approach caused the director of one of Ralph Nader’s research groups to complain to the *National Journal*, “[Business coalitions] have taken the techniques, such as working with the press and grass roots, that we’ve been successful with, but they do it better because they have more money and manpower.”⁷⁰

In the environmental arena, the role of corporations as “activist” organizations was crystallized in the preparations for the United Nations Conference and Environment and Development (UNCED, or “Earth Summit”) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. With the support of Maurice Strong, secretary-general for the UNCED, the Business Council on Sustainable Development was formed, and a coordinated network of business organizations assembled to prepare a series of publications, codes of conduct, and a Business Charter for proactive environmental management.⁷¹ These guidelines for the management and communication of corporate environmental principles were formalized and coordinated at the World Industry Conference on Environmental Management in Rotterdam in 1991 and fed back to the UNCED organizers.⁷² By the time of the conference in 1992, the business sector had not only crafted a tightly organized and coherent response to the environmental issues but also had participated in creating them.

One public relations counselor who had been part of the UNCED preparations described the outcome of UNCED as a turning point for “corporate environmental activism,” explaining that while companies have been practicing “corporate green reactivity” for some time—such as pollution prevention and partnerships with activist groups—proactive measures “seek to institutionalize contact and cooperation among industry, activists, government agencies and other groups.”⁷³

69. Ibid., 34.

70. Cohen, “Business Lobby,” 1050.

71. Network members included the United Nations Environment Program, International Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Council on International Business, Chemical Manufacturers Association, Global Environmental Management Initiative, International Public Relations Association, International Network for Environmental Management, and Business Roundtable in the United States. Publications prepared to coincide with this event include Bruce Smart, *Beyond Compliance: A New Industry View of the Environment*, Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 1992; Stephan Schmidheiny, *Changing Course: A Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992; and Jan-Olaf Willums and Ulrich Golücke, *From Ideas to Action: The ICC Report on the Greening of Enterprise*, Paris: International Chamber of Commerce, 1992.

72. Princen and Finger, *Environmental NGOs*.

73. Harrison, “Green Communication.”

Three of the most prominent proactive measures around environmental issues were grassroots public relations, issue coalitions, and educational initiatives. Each of these tactics borrowed from the activist repertoire, adapting established norms of dialogue and deliberation to corporate communication. Grassroots public relations, or “the art of advocacy stimulation to affect public policy,” was especially popular in the environmental arena.⁷⁴ PR counselors saw grassroots communications as the means of aligning public and private interests:

The tactics pioneered by public interest groups have been adopted by businesses. Corporate communicators seek to discover which public or publics have an interest in parallel with their point of view. They investigate ways to enlist support by casting their arguments in terms that convey personal meaning to potential allies. And they present the case through channels likely to garner attention and to reach the right people at the right time with information that hits home.⁷⁵

An example provided in the article quoted above dealt with CAFE standards. During the energy crisis in 1975, Congress passed the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) law to regulate auto emissions standards. The law would have the greatest effect on heavy and large motorized vehicles. In the mid-1980s, authority to adjust emissions standards resided with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Corporate leaders therefore focused their attention on convincing the NHTSA to relax the standards. On behalf of the Motor Vehicles Manufacturers Association, the environmental public relations counselor E. Bruce Harrison formed a group called the Coalition for Vehicle Choice (CVC) to reframe the debate from one of fuel efficiency to one of consumer preferences. In 1986, the American public, it seemed, wanted larger, gas-guzzling cars. The CVC was funded by large auto manufacturers: General Motors, Chrysler, and the Ford Motor Company.⁷⁶ Harrison’s consumer polling revealed that framing the CAFE law in terms of a restriction on consumers’ right to drive any car they wanted would sway public opinion. In addition, as Harrison explained,

The polling was only one way this campaign depended heavily on the grassroots. The primary goal of the communication program was to mobilize the press, allied organizations, and consumers across the United States to send Washington the message that a CAFE adjustment was good public policy.⁷⁷

74. Harrison, “Grassroots Public Relations.”

75. Ibid.

76. Jill Abramson, “Car Firms Kick Lobbying Effort into High Gear in Bitter Fight over Fuel-Economy Legislation,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 1991, A14.

77. Harrison, “Grassroots Public Relations.”

The result: after six months of an intensive media and grassroots campaign, the NHTSA voted to lower the emissions standards.

Coalitions were another important tactic to influence public policy. Indeed, by the mid-1970s, forward-looking companies had begun to use coalitions to their advantage in multiple policy matters. In 1980, an article in the *National Journal* listed fifty-nine legislative strategy coalitions in which the Chamber of Commerce actively participated, of which twelve addressed environmental issues.⁷⁸ In 1973 the E. Bruce Harrison public relations firm—the first to specialize in environmental public relations—created a coalition called the National Environmental Development Association (NEDA), made up of contractors, shipping operators, labor unions, “and other interests opposed to some kind of environmental control.”⁷⁹ NEDA quickly became an umbrella organization of single-issue coalitions organized around specific U.S. environmental bills, including NEDA/Clean Air Act Project, assembled in 1973 to counter the effects of the 1970 Clean Air Act; NEDA/Clean Water Project, also put together in 1973 to manage industry interests against the 1972 Water Pollution Control Act; and NEDA/RCRA, mobilized in the mid-1980s against the pollution limitations established by the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976.

A third tactic lay in educational initiatives. The publication of *Managing Environmental Issues: A Casebook* by three management professors in 1992 was a curriculum-building effort for business schools.⁸⁰ Sponsored by the National Wildlife Federation’s Corporate Conservation Council—comprising business leaders mainly from the chemical and petroleum industries—the casebook was meant to “begin the process of correcting the mythology that ‘business as usual’ can be conducted without attention to environmental performance.”⁸¹ At the same time, the book was clear that “public policy and economics provide an analytical alternative to the environmentalists’ perspective” and that “rather than limits to growth, the emphasis is on the role of human ingenuity in overcoming these limits. ... The public policy and economic approaches intend to introduce a sense of realism into the debate about environmental protection.”⁸²

78. Cohen, “Business Lobby,” 1054.

79. “D.C. Agency Created First Client,” *Publicist*, March/April 1982, 1–4, 1.

80. Buchholz, Marcus, and Post, *Managing Environmental Issues*. Waterhouse describes a similar initiative by the Business Roundtable’s Environmental Task Force in 1984. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America*, 197.

81. Buchholz, Marcus, and Post, *Managing Environmental Issues*, x.

82. *Ibid.*, 72.

Companies in the chemical, automotive and oil industries—that is, those whose fortunes stood to be most affected by environmental regulations—appear to have taken issue management the most seriously. Monsanto, Gulf Oil, Royal Dutch/Shell Group, Sun Company, Dow Chemical, and General Motors all adopted or developed schemes of public affairs management between 1971 and the early 1980s.⁸³ Royal Dutch/Shell may have been the earliest adopter with its program of scenario planning, a set of techniques inspired by physicist Herman Kahn's pioneering work on forecasting for the RAND Corporation. Shell compiled lists of potential "uncertainties" facing the company; that is, a cultural scan of the domestic and international horizon to complement its already existing "hard" economic and energy supply data. It then established a series of possible "futures," or scenarios, that the company narrative could follow should the issue rise to the top of the public or political agenda.⁸⁴

Corporate political activism was so successful that PR men claimed there was less and less difference between what businesses did and what activists did: "Having accepted the enduring power of the environmental consciousness and acquired wisdom during the expenditure of billions of compliance dollars, industry has begun to get ahead of the curve. Corporations have not only become activists, they have begun to define what activism means."⁸⁵ It was not so much co-optation as it was a matter of redefining the public interest to suit the corporate interest, since by this point corporate leaders had decided that "business management is primarily responsible for the way the environment as an issue is perceived and the way it was handled."⁸⁶

Conclusion

Ultimately, issue management was not really about addressing the issue at hand. It was rather about coming up with ways to reframe the terms of the issue so that it did not interfere unduly with the primary profit-oriented objectives of the firm. In this sense, issue management is better seen as public interest management. This was both a structural and a conceptual achievement. Structurally, companies across contentious industrial sectors developed public affairs

83. Jones and Chase, "Managing Public Policy"; Ford, "Long Range Planning"; Marcus, Kaufman, and Beam, *Business Strategy*; Wack, "Scenarios."

84. Wack, "Scenarios."

85. Harrison, "Green Communication."

86. Harrison, *Going Green*, 16.

departments or contracted with public affairs specialists to place people around the government table during important decisions about environmental policy.⁸⁷ Conceptually, companies reinterpreted their role from private producers to active members of the public, with a stake in the public interest. By becoming “activists” in their own right, company managers took reformist tactics into their own arsenal and effectively downplayed or neutralized the efforts of environmentalists.

The evolution of corporate response to external pressures levied by the environmental movement since the 1970s has been to “bring the environment in”—that is, to turn environmental issues into market opportunities for the firm.⁸⁸ The role of public relations in this setting is to frame the environment in different ways for different audiences both within and outside the organization: as a risk management issue, as a form of competitive strategy, or as a source of shareholder value. While some are critical of what they see as a “takeover” of norms of environmental protection by liberal economic principles, others see this merger of business and environment as a net positive: “In each case, the firm already has a structure and language with which to conceptualize the issue and formulate a response. By realizing this ‘fit,’ firms can begin to see environmental issues as something internally manageable rather than externally directed.”⁸⁹

Despite the coordinated and protracted efforts of public relations counselors for their clients to “manage” American environmentalism, these efforts were ultimately far more effective as political and cultural sustainability than as environmental sustainability.⁹⁰ Issue management was at heart a self-sustaining strategy for corporations. By framing “the environment” as a management problem, company leaders and their public relations counselors could assess the issue in terms of cost efficiencies, technological innovation, or employment, and then offer “solutions” rooted in their own expertise, maintaining a firm hold over the public’s capacity to imagine legitimate futures for the global environment.

87. Although it is always problematic to reify “business” as a monolithic entity, this article corroborates extant studies of the trans-industrial coordination of strategic information across contentious sectors, including tobacco, fossil fuels, and chemicals. See Union of Concerned Scientists, *Smoke, Mirrors and Hot Air*; Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*; White and Bero, “Corporate Manipulation”; Center for International Environmental Law, *Smoke and Fumes*.

88. Vogel, *Market for Virtue*.

89. Hoffman, *Heresy to Dogma*, 183. More critical perspectives are found in Bernstein, *Liberal Environmentalism*, and Sklair, *Transnational Capitalist Class*.

90. Levy, “Political Sustainability.”

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