

Issues Watch

In this edition of Issues Watch, we reflect on the growing influence of special interest groups and their influence on the policy and business landscape.

The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference (COP15) has come and gone, leaving a cloud of uncertainty in its wake. If the meeting made anything clear, it is that attempts to achieve international agreement in a global age promise to be fraught with peril.

The terrain has always been difficult, but for COP15 negotiators, technical complexity was compounded by intense lobbying from partisan stakeholder groups. The growing influence of activists, special interest groups and other non-governmental voices has partly informed and partly distorted the management of difficult issues, with important implications for the business world.

Over the past five years, non-governmental voices have increasingly directed their attention towards the issue of climate change. As the chart below indicates, the prominence

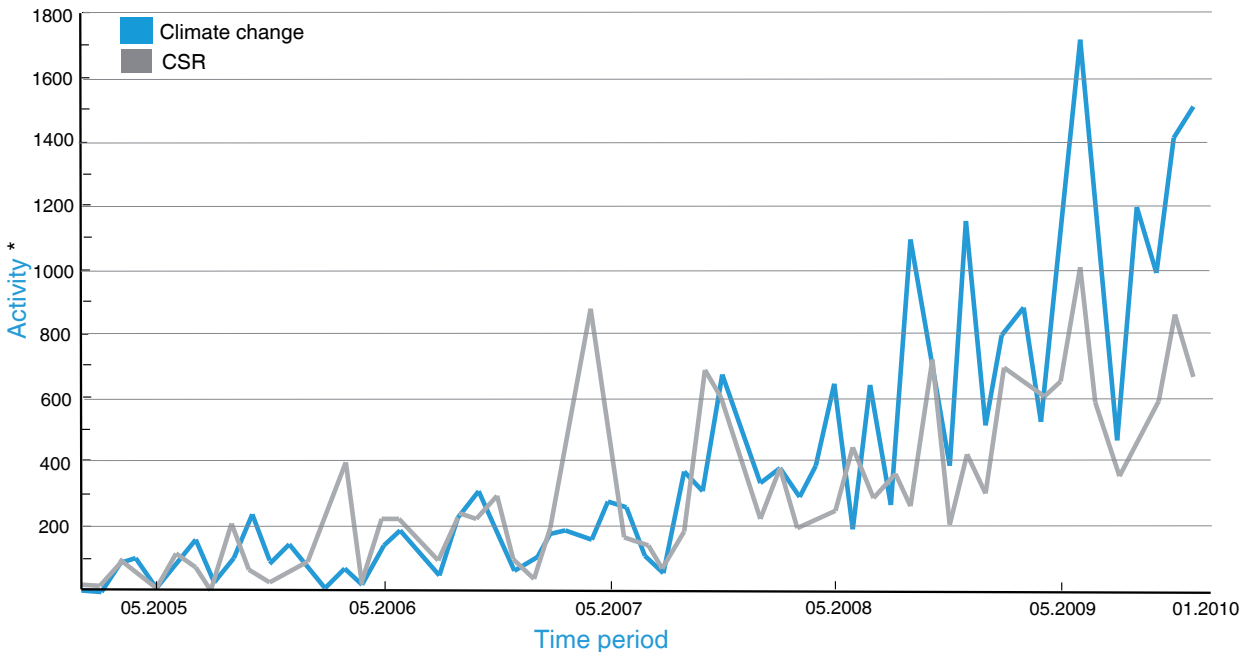
of climate change in the activity of special interest groups has been accompanied by their belief that businesses have a particular responsibility to society.

Media coverage of the summit followed demonstrations and publicity stunts outside the conference centre as closely as it followed meetings inside. Rallies and demonstrations across the Danish capital coincided with efforts by NGOs to influence diplomats at the negotiation table. The prominence of non-governmental and transnational actors was palpable, affecting both the dissemination of information and the framing of policy. This reflects two themes that have emerged since the seminal UN 'Earth Summit' in 1992: that non-governmental voices are increasingly media savvy and that they have moved from the periphery to the centre.

Non-governmental voices are increasingly media-savvy

Over 5,000 journalists from 180 countries attended COP15; mainstream media sources formed a considerable minority. Access was granted to individuals representing the publications of charities, pressure groups, financiers

Issue Tracker: NGO campaigning levels around climate change and CSR



* Activity level calculated by SIGWatch algorithms (based on the number of NGOs involved and how each NGO is connected to regional or global networks)



and even carbon traders, all with different agendas and different ways of reporting events. Add to this the countless bloggers, Twitterers and Facebook users updating a global audience via wireless hook-ups and mobile phones. This seemingly-anarchic dissemination of information, unprecedented at an international political meeting, undoubtedly disrupted attempts to produce a consolidated narrative.

Non-governmental voices have moved from the periphery to the centre

NGOs and activists have always sought to 'high-jack' issues for their own causes, but never before has their action been so accepted. The critique of multinational corporate excess found in texts like Naomi Klein's *No Logo* has transformed from extremism to orthodoxy.

Mick Hume of UK national newspaper, *The Times*, suggests that non-governmental voices have in many ways become the 'conscience of the elite'. This has been facilitated by the appeal of environmentalism as a unifying issue; it is now easier for groups like WWF and Greenpeace to catch the mainstream's ear. Yet at COP15, special interest

groups were able to transfer attention away from the global struggle to combat climate change to issues of aid and dependency, highlighting the division between rich and poor states. This reorientation exacerbated tensions, arguably preventing the production of a robust policy.

Campaign groups are gaining access to more communication platforms than ever before, and are increasingly influential among key decision-makers. What does this mean for business? Changing expectations and changing levels of trust can lead to changes in the business-operating environment. An issue like climate change is particularly disruptive because it encompasses a myriad of 'sub issues', from emissions control to geoengineering, from sustainable production to agriculture and biofuels. Businesses need to pick their 'winners', acknowledging areas where they simply cannot affect policy. An authoritative narrative needs to be created around the issue of climate change, with businesses designating priorities within it. Amidst the succession of voices proclaiming their interests on the global stage, there is a distinct need to promote clarity.

I wish I hadn't done that

... No doubt British interviewer Jeremy Paxman features regularly in the nightmares of many an interviewee. The renowned presenter of BBC *Newsnight*, which airs mainly in the UK, pulls no punches with high-profile figures and the latest to run the Paxman gauntlet was celebrity eco-campaigner Sting. Indeed, he was only Sting by name as Paxman's strategic and ferocious questioning turned the interview away from the good cause Sting was trying to promote. Instead, the music star found himself having to justify his presence on the show ending up looking chippy, churlish, battered and bruised. Read more on our blog, **Reputation Spotlight** and see the interview [here](#).

... Have we all lost our sense of humour? Terence Kealey, vice-chancellor of the University of Buckingham in the UK certainly thinks so. Dr Kealey contributed a commentary on the 'the seven deadly sins of academia' to a UK flagship education publication. Described by the editor as a 'lighthearted' and 'wry' satirical look at last, Dr Kealey went on to describe curvy students as a 'perk of the job', elaborating 'as in London strip club Stringfellows, you should look but not touch'. No doubt Dr Kealey was aware the piece was quite a risk for a few laughs, but you wonder if a certain Gerald Ratner crossed his mind? Read the article [here](#).

... Investment bank Goldman Sachs is wildly successful, yet almost universally deplored. Much of this antipathy is born out of perceived secrecy due to lack of communication to the greater public. And so when the UK's **Sunday Times** gained exclusive access to Lloyd Blankfein, Goldman chairman and CEO, he seized the opportunity to set the record straight, pointing out that things too often get overlooked: "We help companies to grow by helping them to raise capital. Companies that grow create wealth. This, in turn, allows people to have jobs that create more growth and more wealth. It's a virtuous cycle." (so far, so good). Then there was talk of Goldman's "social purpose" (on thin ice) before finally saying that as a banker, he is "doing God's work" (fallen through the ice).

... In a previous edition of **Issues Watch** we reported how a captain of a UK Flybe Jet announced to passengers that he was not qualified to land their plane in the fog over Paris. Well, it gets more unbelievable than this. Pilots and cabin crew of an Air India flight reportedly brawled at 30,000ft after a co-pilot allegedly sexually harassed a stewardess. The plane was apparently left unmanned during the fight, as astonished passengers looked on from their ringside seats, no doubt reaching for the oxygen masks.

