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THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES OF ISSUE MANAGEMENT IN A POSTMODERN WORLD: A CASE STUDY OF THE SOUTH DURBAN INDUSTRIAL BASIN

ABSTRACT

This article describes the failure of issue management communication in resolving an enduring pollution crisis stretching over two decades in South Africa's South Durban Industrial Basin (SDIB). A crisis of responsibility has arisen from a postmodern, neoliberal order. Concerns of residents are overridden in favour of nationally significant economic growth objectives. As a result "local" issues are communicated by global coalitions seeking environmental justice through modernist notions of "science" communicated in a postmodern, global context. The lack of public confidence, trust and the unmet expectations of participation in the environmental decision-making of government agencies and corporations is revealed. Local mobilisations look to broader spaces of engagement, including international activist organisations and international media as the unresolved crisis is deepened by state coercion and industry intransigence.

Keywords: South Durban Industrial Basin; environment; crisis communication; neoliberalism; modernism; science

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to find a scholarly account of any conflict in Africa, Asia or Latin America which is not imputed in some way to economic globalisation and the "new neoliberal order" (Van de Walle 1998). However, the majority of scholarly work on issue management communication seldom interrogates in any detail how neoliberalism, defined as a partnership between big business and government, impacts on the free flow of information and prevents meaningful resolution from taking place. Little attention is paid to the individual accounts and experiences of those who have endured a crisis. Competing perceptions of reality between authorities and affected residents and commercial agents of causation characterise such crises. These remain enduring and perplexing questions in issue and crisis management communication (Jacques 2014; Simons 2016).

The end of apartheid and institutionalisation of a broadly liberal regime of democratic citizenship rights and its consequent expectations in South Africa has coincided with the reinsertion of the South African economy into global circuits of production, investment and consumption. One of the results has been that the South African state in concert with large corporates in the pursuit of growth has failed to meet sustainable environmental standards by allowing life threatening industrial pollution (Cox 2003: 329).

THE SOUTH DURBAN INDUSTRIAL BASIN (SDIB) AND ENVIRONS

The SDIB economic development hub is situated near Durban in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. The SDIB is known as South Africa's "environmental and disaster management hotspot". For decades, local communities have experienced very high levels of air, ground and water pollution, poor health conditions and constant exposure to high risks during ongoing industrial accidents (Jaggernath 2010; Barnett & Scott 2007; Sparks 2006; SDCEA 2008/2009; Skinner 1997; Skinner & Mersham 2002; Skinner & Rampersad 2014).

It has two major petrochemical refineries, the largest in South Africa, hazardous waste dumps, a paper mill, hazardous chemical storage facilities, a major airport and more than 150 crude oil dependent industries. It is the country's second largest concentration of industrial activity, with more than 300 industrial-scale facilities situated in and amongst highly populated residential areas (Peek 2002). Nearby are two major shopping mall complexes attracting thousands of people from other parts of the province. Pollution in this area is reported as one of the highest in the world (Jaggernath 2010). The basin's label of "cancer valley" refers to the area's high rates of cancer and prevalent cases of asthma and bronchitis (Jaggernath 2010; D'Sa 2014). Serious problems include explosions, heavy transport using residential roads, noise pollution, illegal dumping of hazardous waste and major leaks from the ageing pipelines which are directly beneath residential streets to the Engen and SAPREF refineries (Wiley *et al*. 2002). The SDIB has a residential population approaching 500 000, comprising low to middle-income black communities who were forcibly relocated there during the apartheid regime, creating a cheap labour pool for local industry (Barnett & Scott 2007).

Health and environment concerns among communities and the continuing expansion of industry have resulted in an enduring crisis running over decades (Van der Merwe 2004). Feeding this conflict is the lack of progress towards a resolution by which the many industries involved agree to jointly develop a crisis management plan with input from the affected communities, and the disregard of the legal rights of individuals and groups enshrined in national legislation. (Ozawa 1996). Crisis communication and contingency planning for ongoing disaster situations remains inadequate, with the strategies adopted by the major stakeholders insufficiently integrated to ensure effectiveness (Skinner & Rampersad 2014).

The SAPREF refinery is jointly owned by two multi-national oil companies, Shell and BP, while the Engen refinery is owned by Petronas, Malaysia's state-owned petroleum company. Residents living close to polluting industries are forced to engage with local

representatives of corporations whose head offices are distant and disconnected from local concerns. As this article will show, local representatives have an unenviable record of poor communication and failure to improve the situation, with the apparent blessing of national and local government.

Industrial accidents are legion. In the period 1998 to 2008 the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) recorded 120 accidents and pollution incidents, ranging from large oil spills and work-related employee deaths to fires and explosions in the refineries' compounds. In 2001 a petrol pipeline leak resulted in the release of more than 1 million litres of petrol into the soil under residents' houses. The result is a "perpetual crisis" with ongoing tension between residents, big business and environmentalists. Unsurprisingly crisis management messages from industry about their actions to mitigate these crises are treated with incredulity and disdain.

In this multi-layered context of the inherited geography of apartheid urbanisation, a tradition of protest, a governmental focus on industrial investment and lack of consultation have fed into a variety of sometimes contentious forms of popular mobilisation. While residential proximity has created a shared experience of living in a polluted environment, cross-community mobilisation has negotiated histories of racial and class division and inherited traditions of activism and community mobilisation (Sparks 2006). A host of organised demonstrations, protests and public meetings have occurred over 20 years. A crucial projection of community solidarity into the public realm came in 1996, with the formation of the SDCEA umbrella organisation to focus on environmental concerns. SDCEA's political roots lie in a network of community-based organisations whose origins include earlier mobilisations against apartheid. Today it includes conservation organisations and ratepayers associations from formerly white areas, church and women's groups and has links with NGOs such as the Environmental Justice Networking Forum (EJNF), Earthlife Africa and groundWork (Peek 2002; Reid & D'Sa 2005).

The crisis of responsibility

The crisis of enforcing the obligations of environmental citizenship rights has focused on state actors at the local, provincial and national scale, and non-state actors, primarily multinational corporations, based in other national territories (Skinner & Mersham 2008; Barnett & Scott 2007).

Section 24 of the South African Bill of Rights states, "Everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing". However, "in the face of powerful domestic imperatives and global forces that encourage further development of dirty industries, the South African state is severely constrained in its capacity to give substance to this clause" (Barnett & Scott 2007: 14). Despite a well-documented, extensive list of pollution incidents, transnational corporations manage to bypass governmental policies on environmental justice. The constitutional clause is the foundation of a broader system of environmental governance established in South Africa during the 1990s, culminating in the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) in 1998. NEMA included commitments to sustainable development

principles, the entrenchment of environmental rights and social justice, and procedural mechanisms for stakeholder engagement (Scott *et al*. 2001). This system follows the Western model of ecological modernisation, importing principles and mechanisms from the North, assuming conditions such as steady economic growth, advanced technologies, a pluralist polity and an enabling state (Scott & Oelofse 2005).

In South Africa the lack of harmonisation between economic growth and ecological modernisation imperatives are highly visible. Development policy focuses on further growing those sectors of the economy that operate internationally, including dirty industries such as petrochemicals, and paper and pulp processing. Close proximity to heavily polluting industries, and current policy which identifies the SDIB as strategic point for further industrial growth, means that environmental risks from continued development fall disproportionately on black communities (Scott 2003).

The SDIB becomes the site of the collision of national and international circuits of accumulation where the concerns of residents are overridden in the name of nationally significant economic growth objectives in a neoliberal paradigm (Barnett & Scott 2007). Uneven development is deepened by state coercion and industry intransigence (Bond, Desai & Ngwane 2012). In turn, highly localised mobilisations look to broader spaces of engagement, including international activist organisations and international media (Skinner & Mersham 2002; 2008; Cox 1998; Staeheli 1999), and the politicisation of industrial pollution and public health issues evolves to encompass both national and transnational advocacy.

Focusing on this intersection of discourses of responsibility and practices opens up a less common view of the implications of crisis and issue management in a globalised world. Neoliberal globalisation has compromised states' ability to manage national economies in the best environmental interests of its citizens. In this view, the emergence of internationalised and flexible systems of production and capital investment lead to numerous problems of "territorial non-correspondence", so that "the events over which the state needs to exercise control in order to achieve its objectives fall increasingly outside of its control" (Cox 2003: 329). Ironically, newly enfranchised South African citizens with widened expectations of government – regulating economic growth, creating jobs, providing health care, housing, improving education or environmental quality – comes at a time when the South African state appears less able to intervene in the ways in which citizens might now expect (Mersham, Skinner & Rensburg 2011; Barnett & Scott 2007; Mersham *et al*. 1995).

CRISIS AS A MODERN NARRATIVE

Modernism can be characterised as a way of describing the world that is based on two assumptions: (1) that there exists a singular reality; and (2) that this reality can be discovered and described by the methods of science (Habermas 1990). These two modernist assumptions provide the grounds on which the SDIB crisis management can be located.

The modernist principle of a singular reality finds its most powerful expression in the institution of science (Lyotard 1989). Science, rather than residents' lived realities of

sickness and poor health, has been framed as the only answer to establishing causal responsibility for pollution and its imputed health impacts. Polluting organisations have often publicly rejected observed health impacts of pollution arguing that pollution levels do not exceed international standards.

A strategy used by activist networks to develop binding obligations on both the state and foreign corporations is the making of an alternative narrative to "official" positions of government and business by mobilising and maintaining media attention.

There is an increasing dissonance between the way in which public relations practitioners present their circumscribed, organisationally biased world, and the postmodern ways in which people express their lived realities (Radford 2011; Lyotard 1989). The SDCEA developed an alternative, non-business, non-state frame through which south Durban is problematised in policy and public debate through what Leonard (2014) describes as the oppositional politics of shame.

In 2000 a week-long series of stories in Durban's main daily newspaper, *The Mercury*, titled *Poison in our air* was published. The series started with a list of cancer cases in south Durban located by community organisations. The credibility of community narratives was established in these reports, in spite of protests by industry against sensationalism and subjective anecdotal accounts (Barnett & Scott 2007). The detailed case-by-case record, accompanied by a picture gallery of the victims, many of whom were children, elicited widespread response from other residents, linking their own experiences to the working hypothesis in the reports, that cancer was more prevalent in south Durban than elsewhere. Both provincial and national government's environmental departments quickly committed to further investigation of health impacts in the area. Reporting, at first limited to local newspapers, extended to national and international coverage. The campaign consolidated SDCEA's status as the legitimate voice of community concerns and succeeded in establishing a postmodernist interpretative frame of environmental activism as the dominant one in public discourse and publicly exposing the inadequate responses of state and capital (Leonard 2014). By giving space to an alternative construction of pollution in the area, the articulation of ordinary experience through journalistic reporting contextualised the discourse of science and expertise as just one perspective in a crisis of contested legitimacy. Experiential and anecdotal knowledge that is problematic in formal, science-led policy-making is given its proper exposure.

In response, the government introduced the Multi-Point Plan (MPP) for south Durban in 2001, which included pollution monitoring and research into health problems. The Air Quality Act followed in 2004, empowering local government as the authority for environmental regulation, shifting the institutional location of environmental conflict once again, and opening up new bureaucratised forms of activist engagement. Although its establishment appeared as a success for environmental activism, acknowledging an institutional response to community protests, it also presented new issues and crises, which followed incorporation into a technocratic forum. Activist organisations had to seek further resources, financial and scientific, to both engage in new participatory procedures and to maintain the public media profile necessary

to maintain community mobilisation (Leonard 2014). In 2003 the eThekwini (Durban) Municipality commissioned a system that could measure the compliance of companies to air quality measures, but the unit running this was dismantled in 2011 because authorities allowed the system to deteriorate to the point of collapse (Mngoma 2014).

The modernist assumptions of science provide the basis to articulate an understanding of the postmodern, where the assumptions of the modern are systematically challenged. Holtzhausen (2000) argues that contemporary practices of public relations are based on modernist principles, as indeed are the subset of issue management practices. Like positivist science, prediction and control are key elements to the crisis and issue management goal of making communication effective.

The centrality of scientific expertise to modernist positions is dictated by the system of environmental governance instituted in South Africa, which adopted the international framework of Local Agenda 21. This provided a politically neutral umbrella in the form of the discourse of sustainable development through which local state actors in South Africa were to voluntarily construct new systems of environmental management (Roberts & Diederichs 2002). More recently SDCEA's legitimacy as a representative of local communities has depended on its strategy to provide communication that links local anecdotal knowledge to formalised, science-led forms of policy participation. This has involved establishing communication relationships with local, national and international news media.

Another example of postmodern activist mobilisation networking is SDCEA's collaboration with the Danish environmental organisation Danmarks Naturfredningsforening (Society for the Protection of Nature in Denmark, or DN), which has been crucial in enabling SDCEA to generate data for further advocacy and mobilisation. The collaboration provided a comparative study of oil refineries in south Durban and Denmark, enabling South African activists to demonstrate how refineries in their country failed to live up to standards elsewhere in the world; the development of a GIS-based pollution map to be used by SDCEA with the comparative report in their advocacy and education work; and an Organisation Development Review of SDCEA (Leonard 2014).

Shared crisis communication in the international context

SDCEA and groundWork have established links with the Dutch environmental organisation Milieudefensie, the Dutch arm of Friends of the Earth. Milieudefensie has a long-standing involvement in the politics of industrial pollution in the Netherlands, particularly the national and international environmental impacts of Shell, a joint Anglo-Dutch owned company, and the owners of the SAPREF refinery. Milieudefensie's 2003 report for SDCEA on leaking pipelines, spills and explosions at the SAPREF refinery uses the discourse of responsibility to translate a local pollution problem into a transnational frame:

SAPREF has a history of corporate irresponsibility and SAPREF's behaviour in these cases would be unacceptable in the Netherlands […] What has been, and what continues to be, spilled and leaked into the environment on a daily basis? And what

kind of guarantee can SAPREF offer when it comes to the safety of the surrounding residential areas and the health of the local population? (Verweij 2003: 4).

Milieudefensie reframes emphasis on SAPREF's causal responsibility into a question of Shell's moral responsibility to take action:

> The Shell Group must take its responsibility, especially if it wants to live up to the reputation it is trying to portray as a responsible, open and concerned enterprise. Having advertised this promise, Shell cannot now renounce it (Verweij 2003: 4).

In community activist issue management it is a principle to name the owners of refineries, such as Shell, BP or Petronas, to emphasise the foreign-ownership and control of these plants. In this way, responsibility for enacting and enforcing environmental governance is in turn relocated to the international arena:

> The history of this refinery reveals the urgent need for international binding regulations for companies, including on environmental issues. South African legislation (and the understaffing of local authorities who must enforce the regulations), in combination with voluntary guidelines, do not appear to be enough to motivate SAPREF to become a more responsible enterprise (Verweij 2003: 5).

Production of scientific knowledge established SDCEA as a legitimate source to news organisations (Barnett & Scott 2014). The Bucket Brigade is a procedure allowing local residents to take their own air samples using a simple bucket device in their own homes and neighbourhoods. Developed by US-based environmental justice activists Global Community Monitoring (GCM) it has been widely used in the United States and internationally. In 2000, SDCEA, groundWork and GCM carried out a Bucket Brigade analysis in the SDIB to provide evidence of exact levels of pollution. The results enabled activists in South Africa to confront both government and businesses with facts about levels of toxins in the air. It revealed benzene levels around the Engen refinery of 4 to 15 times higher than World Health Organisation guidelines, and were used to generate media coverage that focused on the ability of community organisations to produce scientific evidence about pollution when the government had failed to do so, and connecting air pollution to widespread occurrences of cancer.

Corporations and government commonly regard the media and academics as an enemy to be constrained, limited and co-opted because of the centrality of corporations in delivering on the state's agenda of neoliberalism (Daniels 2012; Wasserman & De Beer 2005). A proposed but currently stalled Protection of State Information Bill has provoked intense debate between community organisations, journalists and media scholars on one side, and government officials and corporations on the other (Wasserman 2015). The bill would make it a criminal offence to publish information considered to affect the national interest, so that community organisations conducting independent monitoring of air pollution by Engen, Shell and ArcelorMittal, and who advise the public via media releases of such results, could face a R5 million fine and/or five years' imprisonment for a first conviction of this offence. They would also be held liable for calculated loss or damage as a result of the offence (Leonard 2014).

Corporate and government responses

One of the most serious explosions of a number experienced at the Engen refinery occurred in 2007 when 7.5 million litres of petrol ignited following a lightning strike. While causing massive damage to the refinery it also created panic in nearby communities. Earlier in the year an explosion at the nearby Island View petrochemical facility caused the meltdown of ten storage tanks, the death of an employee and the release of 64 times the emissions limit of the leukaemia and cancer-causing agent bromomethane (Skinner & Rampersad 2014).

Response communication from Engen and the city of Durban (eThekwini Municipality) was uncoordinated and badly handled. Residents seeking information from Engen's environment office were rebuffed and communities adjacent to the refinery were not evacuated. Engen disaster management crews drove through the residential areas warning people through loudspeakers to stay inside their homes and keep the windows closed. Due to a lack of information and the visible threat of fire and smoke, rather than heed Engen's warning to stay indoors, most residents fled their homes causing more uncertainty (Skinner & Rampersad 2014). The response to this and a subsequent chemical accident at the same refinery in 2008 generated massive public response criticising the lack of an emergency response plan for the area (SDCEA 2008).

Another explosion followed in 2011. Residents experienced breathing difficulties, skin and eye irritations and school children were admitted to hospital. Reports were received of foul smelling sludge running through drains and extensive oil sprays engulfing the neighbourhood (Naidoo 2011; Mottiar & Bond 2012). Residents marched to the gates of the Engen refinery to deliver a memorandum calling for a disaster management plan and an independent investigation into the explosion. While Engen would not meet the delegation, the memorandum was witnessed and signed by senior government officials. Subsequently a legal notice calling upon management to clean up operations or face prosecution described the refinery as "an immediate danger" to the environment and people of neighbouring residential areas in south Durban (Carnie 2011).

The response of the Malaysian-owned Engen Petroleum group was a threat to close the refinery. Engen CEO Ahmad Nazim Salleh was quoted from an internal memorandum as saying: "Do we continue with the refinery as our business? This is an option our majority shareholders (the Malaysian state-owned Petronas), have been debating for a while and is receiving careful consideration" (Carnie 2011). However, little changed and air pollution was set to increase with large corporates stonewalling attempts by the media to expose them or government to take any meaningful action.

In 2002, Mondi Paper proposed constructing an incinerator in south Durban to burn industrial waste. Waste such as de-inking sludge, materials containing heavy metals and chemicals such as arsenic, mercury, cyanide and lead were to be incinerated. Health effects of incineration include transferring toxic metals into the human bloodstream by inhalation, deposition and absorption and producing cancer-causing toxins (i.e. dioxins and furans) putting human health and the environment at risk (Leonard 2014). The community strongly opposed the incinerator due to health concerns. Despite a legal

success in challenging the provincial government and Mondi over the proposal, the campaign failed to halt the installation of the incinerator. The provincial government granted Mondi permission for construction after the company submitted a second application for the proposed installation.

Leonard (2014: 969) describes how the major polluter Mondi's intimidation of media exemplify the tensions that work against media reporting on environmental injustice, when some of the dominant print media players have links with multinational corporations with a history of corporate pollution. Leonard (2014: 974) refers to "the power of corporations to silence, intimidate or threaten local or regional journalists or outlets". He cites an interview with a leading Durban newspaper journalist:

> Say a company like Engen, [or] Mondi … if … [the article is] not perceived well … instead of coming to the journalists to register their protests, it's a kind of leap[ing] frog … protest to the editor to say, we [are] wounded, Carnie is biased and he's one-sided and he doesn't give us a chance to respond properly. When that doesn't work, the leap[ing] … goes further, to head office in Johannesburg …

Local community newspapers were also threatened with the loss of corporate advertising and funding if negative stories were printed. As the editor of local community newspaper said:

> An example of one that we had to leave out was a Mondi incident […] Mondi phoned our boss and said, 'if you run that story I am pulling out all the advertising' (Leonard 2014: 10).

At the time of writing, the South African government decided to exempt heavy industries from stricter air pollution laws for five years. Along with other petrol refineries in the area, the Engen refinery has been granted a special dispensation allowing it to pollute the air with dust and volatile organic chemicals in excess of new Air Quality Act minimum standards (Carnie 2015).

CONCLUSION

As a high-profile site of poor people's demands for greater responsiveness to their local conditions, the SDIB is characterised as an enduring international symbol of corporate and government failure to engage in authentic communication (Webber 2007; Bhangdia 2015).

The postmodern globalisation of issues has produced a growing threat to transnational companies. They are exposed to a broader range of stakeholders with increasing expectations of how the organisation should perform. Multinational organisations can no longer handle an issue in different ways in different parts of the world. Stakeholders expect and demand global consistency and transparency.

Issue management has shifted from its early participatory focus on public policy (Chase 1982; Regester & Larkin 2002) to a much narrower emphasis on practitioner-oriented, after-the-fact crisis management. This is occurring as activist organisations are moving their focus from engagement at a local or national level to targeting large organisations across a range of different issues and geographies (Jacques 2014).

This study shows that there is irreversible demand for organisations to re-engage with local communities in public policy formulation and the need to do so in collaboration with other industry players. Nowhere are the lack of public confidence and trust and the unmet expectations of participation more evident than in the environmental decision-making of government agencies and corporations (Jacques 2014). Whether it is copper mining in Chile (Meredith, Aravena & Deverell 2014; Ulmer 2014), oil production in the Niger Delta or petrochemical manufacturing in south Durban, these crises involving local communities appear perpetual and irresolvable (Skinner & Mersham 2002; Frynas 2001).

Technology has made connectivity possible on a truly global scale – "our lives are becoming increasingly intertwined with those of distant people and places around the world – economically, politically and culturally" (Legrain 2004: 4). The textbook call to achieve "mutual understanding" in communication management needs to be translated into achieving "mutually beneficial outcomes" through returning to active engagement with public policy as a key plank of organisational issue management in South Africa. Declining levels of trust in big business and government internationally and the failure of management techniques in controlling business environments heavily burdened with social problems are the biggest challenges to issue management in the present neoliberal, global environment.

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