Editorial

Reflections on 20 years of the Journal of Public Affairs: Public Affairs in a Rapidly Changing and Globalising World

Phil Harris and Danny Moss
University of Chester

Introduction

As we commence the twentieth year of publication of the Journal of Public Affairs [JPA], we reflect on having published 20 volumes of the journal, comprising 80 issues with over 1000 academic articles and close to 10 million words of text and illustrations. This endeavour has been superbly supported by a network of 1500 authors and 2000 reviewers contributing from across the world. This remarkable body of work has been generated by an international collection of academics, aficionados, businesses, experts, governments, interest groups, practitioners associated with the vast industry of public affairs. The editorial team would like to acknowledge and thank all our contributors and reviewers for their support over the past two decades.

The breadth of work that has been published in JPA over these two decades spans such diverse topics as international accountability, communication and public affairs strategy, corporate governance, industry regulation and management. We plan to mark the achievement with the publication of this special issue of the Journal of Public Affairs containing papers written by some of the leading contributors to JPA over the past two decades, along with the publication of a number of specially commissioned commemorative papers that will be published throughout the year.

Since the publication of the first issue back in 2001, JPA has continued to provide an important platform for scholars and practitioners to share their thoughts, research and critical observations on a broad range of themes that arguably can be seen to fall within the domain of public affairs, which itself embraces a quite rich and complex array of subject matter ranging amongst others from government relations and lobbying, to issue management,
community relations, corporate and social responsibility, political strategy and political marketing to stakeholder Management. Indeed the breadth and scope of the subject matter that public affairs scholars and practitioners have treated as falling within their sphere of interest has continued to shift and adjust contextually over time, geography and circumstances. Indeed more recently we have witnessed a growth of interest in exploring public sector government and financial control and its management from a public affairs perspective in what is a rapidly internationalising world. Here one broadly common thread that can be detected running through much of the work of public affairs scholars and practitioners arguably remains that of a focus on issues that to a greater or lesser degree connect citizens, government or public sector institutions/organisations and business. Indeed, when Morkunas et al (2018) completed a comprehensive bibliometric review of JPA covering the first sixteen years of its publication, they identified the most prominent themes found amongst articles published over this period to have included papers exploring social advocacy organisations, and issues relating to general and other government support.

However, notwithstanding this strong emphasis on understanding and influencing relationships with and on behalf of government and government bodies of all complexions; what is treated as falling within the public affairs domains has shown a degree of “definitional elasticity”, particularly when examined from outside the traditional western London-Washington-Brussels perspective.

Of course, as a discipline concerned with the world of politics, business and society, it is only to be expected that the way public affairs has evolved and the type of issues it is concerned with have reflected some of profound changes and trends that have permeated societies around the world over the past two decades. For example, soft power backed by trade seems to be very much the dominant form of “modus vivendi” in our ever changing times. One notable feature of the past decade has been the growth of activism and political interest groups concerned with political freedoms, human rights and environmental issues. Amongst the most high profile issues attracting widespread political and regulatory attention has been the growing concern about the security of personal data, particularly in relation to power of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. More recently, and still controversially, we have witnessed mounting concern over climate change and the sustainability of the planet’s ecosystems. Here, activist groups such as “Extinction Rebellion“
and the “FridaysForFuture” school strikes movement led by the young Swedish climate campaigner Greta Thunberg, have forced the climate change issue to the fore on the public affairs agenda of governments, NGOs and businesses around the world. These are issues that have already begun to attract the attention of public affairs scholars and are likely to continue exercising the attention of contributors to JPA and other publications going forward.

As mentioned earlier, as part of our plans to mark this anniversary year for the Journal of Public Affairs (JPA), we have commissioned a number of articles from leading scholars and professionals that will appear throughout the year. One is a bibliometric analysis of political marketing research and another notable work planned is a systematic review of trends and themes published in the JPA over the past two decades which will build on our previous published bibliographies in the journal (2001 & 2012) and the bibliometric analysis of Journal of Public Affairs conducted in 2018 referred to earlier. We expect to publish this systematic review in the final issue of the year.

Phil Harris and Denny Moss