

# Social issue qua wicked problems

## The role of strategic communication in social issues management

Social issue  
qua wicked  
problems

W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay

*Department of Communication, Texas A&M University, College Station,  
Texas, USA*

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Received 30 November 2016  
Revised 19 March 2017  
Accepted 26 July 2017

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to describe the need to theorize firms' involvement in social issues and propose the social issues management model as a framework for analyzing the communication processes underlying social issues management. An application of the new approach is illustrated through a brief case analysis.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is conceptual and emphasizes theory building for firm's involvement in social issues management.

**Findings** – The paper describes modifications to the general issues management model that can be adopted to reflect the social issues management process and contemporary digital media environments.

**Practical implications** – The paper can benefit theory and practice of social issues management by describing how specific communication strategies and digital media use may affect social issues management.

**Social implications** – Because firms increasingly are motivated or urged by stakeholders to take stands on social issues, understanding how they can perform the role of social issue manager can enhance their potential for contributing to positive social change.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides a much needed update to the models of issues management used in strategic communication. The new model accounts for the increasing pressure on firms to address social issues and the role of digital communication channels in that process.

**Keywords** Activism, Strategic communication, Communication strategy, Issues management

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The term wicked problems can be traced back to Churchman (1967) and has been popularized by Rittel and Webber (1973). Used across a number of disciplines, a wicked problem is one that is ambiguous, contentious, has no definitive resolution, and is resistant to solutions (Termeer *et al.*, 2013). As Camillus (2008) noted, “[...] the greater the disagreement among stakeholders, the more wicked the problem. In fact, it's the social complexity of wicked problems as much as their technical difficulties that make them tough to manage” (para 19). Social issues are problems that affect a segment of society. People are divided over social issues in terms of which issues should be addressed and how they should be addressed. Social issues can vary in their degree of polarization – how divided people are on the issue – and often are tied to political ideologies. For example, in the USA, domestic violence is low in polarization while same sex marriage is a highly polarizing social issue (Global Strategy Group, 2016). Highly polarizing social issues are a form of wicked problem because various stakeholders will disagree over the issue's resolution. This means the role(s) of firms in helping to address social issues is likely to be contentious. Nevertheless, a recent study found that 88 percent of Americans believe firms have the power to effect social change and 78 percent of Americans agreed firms should take action on important issues facing society (Global Strategy Group, 2016, p. 2).

### Literature review: intellectual context for social issues management

Social issues management emerged as a result of changes in the sociopolitical environment – the space where social and political concerns intersect – and can be located within the larger



Journal of Communication  
Management  
Vol. 22 No. 1, 2018  
pp. 79-95  
© Emerald Publishing Limited  
1363-254X  
DOI 10.1108/JCOM-11-2016-0093

tradition of corporate advocacy and related advocacy concepts. It refers to a firm's involvement in promoting specific orientations toward social issues. To qualify as social issues management a firm must speak publicly about its stance toward the social issue and attempt to shape how stakeholders view that stance. Corporate advocacy, also called issue advocacy, is defined as "the management of issues on behalf of corporate, educational, special-interest, governmental, and nonprofit institutions" (Heath, 1980, p. 370). Essentially, corporate advocacy is a means for firms to influence public opinion in order to create favorable operating environments (Waltzer, 1988). A collection of related concepts that influences social issues management also qualify as corporate advocacy. This literature review divides these related ideas into strategic concepts and process models.

### *The strategic concepts*

The strategic concepts focus on how specific firm discourses are used in attempts to influence the sociopolitical environment. The strategic concepts include epideictic advocacy; values advocacy; organizational epideictic; and corporate social advocacy (CSA).

Crable and Vibbert (1983) argued that organizations use discourse for epideictic purposes – the praise or blame of widely accepted values. By praising values, epideictic discourse increases adherence to those accepted values (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Epideictic advocacy creates value premises (the praised values) that organizations then can use to support their policy and action preferences (Crable and Vibbert, 1983). Connecting to values implicated in wider belief systems creates a context for acceptance of the organization's agency in pursuing its goals. Crable and Vibbert (1983) explored how Mobil Oil used issue advertising efforts to praise values the firm later used to justify de-regulation of the petroleum industry.

Values advocacy extends epideictic advocacy by identifying two additional functions for the discourse: to enhance reputations and to deflect criticism from organizational products, policies, or services (Bostdorff and Vibbert, 1994). Because it involves praising accepted values, values advocacy often is viewed as innocuous by audiences who fail to appreciate its persuasive power (Bostdorff and Vibbert, 1994, p. 152). Values advocacy associates an organization with the values being praised. In turn, those values can enhance the organization's reputation by connecting the organization with something positive. Values advocacy can protect an organization from criticism because people should not be critical of the values embodied by the organization.

Organizational epideictic is an extension of values advocacy. Bigam Stahley and Boyd (2006) argue that values are rarely completely uncontroversial. Organizational epideictic extends values advocacy to include stands on controversial issues and the actions organizations take in addition to their words (Bigam Stahley and Boyd, 2006).

As Chatterji and Toffel (2015, 2016) observe, firms and their CEOs speaking out on social issues that are not integral to their central operations is not a new phenomenon. Such activism has always existed. However, turbulent sociopolitical environments may contribute to increased scrutiny and polarized views of these activities (Chatterji and Toffel, 2015, 2016; Global Strategy Group, 2016). The term CSA was coined by Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015) to describe such advocacy as a public relations function in which the firm and/or its CEO intentionally or even unintentionally "align themselves with a controversial social-political issue outside their normal sphere of CSR interest" (Dodd and Supa, 2015, p. 288) where the public stand on the controversial issue is not directly relevant to its business or operating environment. Their concept of CSA also includes how firms may contribute financially to advocacy groups that support the firm's values and position on a controversial social issue such as marriage equality, health care reform, or emergency contraception (Dodd and Supa, 2014). CSA may be perceived by stakeholders as affecting its social responsibility and stakeholder willingness to support the firm. Dodd and Supa's (2014, 2015) concern with CSA rests with its potential to affect the

bottom line. They found participant purchase intention was greater for firms whose stances on issues were similar to their own (see also Chatterji and Toffel, 2016).

In summary, these four strategic concepts provide foundational building blocks for understanding the process-oriented models of issues management, issue catalyst, and the proposed social issues management. Rather than merely noting issues advocacy is a form of organizational rhetoric, the process models focus on how communication is used strategically to promote an issue.

#### *Issues management: a process model*

Issues management was proposed as a distinct process whereby an organization or other actor seeks to shape public policy decisions. Issues management is a focused form of corporate advocacy that articulates the influence process. One of the early process models of issues management was articulated by Howard Chase. Chase sought to recognize and explain how organizations can engage in systematic efforts to influence public policy decisions. His issues management model reflects a strong systems orientation and emphasizes the role of environmental scanning in locating issues of importance to an organization. He also described different strategies managers might use to address those issues (Jones and Chase, 1979). Later, Crable and Vibbert (1985) proposed the catalytic model which emphasized the role of communication in helping to create and to resolve policy issues in ways that benefit the organization. We shall elaborate on the catalytic model in the next section.

Robert Heath, the foremost expert in issues management, identified the public policy-organization connection in his early writings: “companies need principles and strategies to survive in a dynamic and increasingly demanding policy environment” (Heath, 1988, p. 2) and “Thus, the defining characteristics of this research domain encompasses all efforts corporations must make to create harmony with their public policy arena – both by influencing public policy and accommodating to it” (Heath and Cousino, 1990, p. 10).

Over time, issues management expanded beyond its early public policy focus to include social issues. In 2005, Heath defined issues management as “a management philosophy and multidisciplinary set of strategic functions used to reduce friction and increase harmony between organizations and their stakeholders” (p. 495). Issues management has become a more broadly focused proactive strategic communication function that helps management achieve larger organizational goals. Political scientists documented how activists have adapted issues management to their purposes as well. The concept of private politics attempts to capture how activists now target organizations directly to request changes rather than to influence organizational behavior through public policy processes (Baron, 2001). Unfortunately, the phrase “private politics” can be confusing because the communication action occurs in public, but is located within the private sphere rather than the public policy sphere. For example, an activist group may petition an organization directly in the private sphere to request it to change some practice that harms the environment rather than seeking reform of the industry’s environmental policies within the public policy-making sphere.

While issues management has expanded into social issues, models of issues management have not been adjusted to reflect this new role. Management of social issues moves the locus of decision making to organizations, not the government. Shifting the locus of decision making has implications for how issues management occurs. Moreover, social issues have risen as a concern for firms in large part due to digital media. Digital media allow for social issues to more easily appear as a concern for both stakeholders and firms (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). We propose the social issues management model as an updated version of the catalytic model that is designed specifically for the worlds of social issues and digital media. The next section details the catalytic model and how it can be adapted for application to social issues management.

*The catalytic model (issue catalyst model)*

As noted earlier, the catalytic model or issue catalyst model, as co-creator Steve Vibbert now prefers to call it (Vibbert, 2015, personal correspondence May 28), was developed for the public policy arena. It was premised on the idea that for an organization to pursue its goals, an organization must create opportunities by influencing the environment in which it operates. It focused on how various communicative strategies could be enacted in attempts to influence public policy decisions, with politicians being the final decision-making entity in policy formation. According to Crable and Vibbert (1985), the use of the term catalyst depicts how the organization or stakeholders, after engaging in situational/environmental and organizational assessments, can decide to act as a catalyst for change and become involved in the creation of the potential issue and seek to move that issue through to resolution. The intent is to pressure a government entity to make a decision relative to the issue. However, issues are not managed in isolation. The controversial nature of social issues insures contestation throughout the social issues management process.

The catalytic model differed from earlier models with its emphasis on creating an issue. However, the issue catalyst model requires adaptation to be applicable to social issues management. The important difference is that social issues management occupies the private politics space where the firm managers, rather than politicians, make the final decision on whether or not the organization should publicly take a stand on the issue as well as determine the nature of that stand. Thus, the removal of the public policy-making process from the issue catalyst model is a significant alteration of the original model.

Firms and activist stakeholders are the primary social issue managers. We use the phrase activist stakeholder to refer to stakeholders committed to changing a firm's behavior. Activist stakeholder contestations are frequently lead by NGOs such as Oxfam or Greenpeace. The social issues management process will be initiated by either firms or activist stakeholders, both of which are key players in any social issues management effort. Because firms are the locus of decision making, firms become entangled regardless of who initiates the social issues management process. The social issue will polarize the organization's stakeholders, prompting activist stakeholders to either support or oppose the social issue. As with issues management, social issues management is a process marked by contestation. For social issues management, that contestation typically is between the firms (as the decision maker) and activist stakeholders. While the overall social issue management process is similar for both firms and activist stakeholders, differences arise from the firm's role as decision maker. The differences between the two are most pronounced in what we term the awareness stage. By reviewing the stages and central communicative interventions of the issue catalyst model, we can see where the modifications are required for its application to social issues management as well as some of the differences between firms and activist stakeholders as social issue managers.

The issue catalyst model consists of five stages or status levels that must be managed by the organization: potential, an issue is identified; imminent, an argument is built for the importance of the issue; current, a larger audience is made aware of the issue; critical, pressure for a decision builds; and dormant, a decision on whether or not to take action on the issue is made (Crable and Vibbert, 1985). This policy-based model relies heavily upon greater public recognition and support for an issue that then serves to pressure policy makers into making a decision. Although the five stages are presented here in a linear fashion, the stages actually are rather fluid and need not be addressed in a specific order. For example, an issue might suddenly rise to the current status due to news coverage or an issue can go dormant at any stage in the model if issue managers fail in their communicative efforts to move an issue to the next stage. Unfortunately, simplified versions of the issue catalyst model have contributed to an overly linear view of the issue catalyst model (Meng, 1992). An issue begins with a small audience seeking to define it (potential) and to

build legitimacy for the issue and themselves (imminent). The potential and imminent stages focus on strategy. The definition and legitimacy provide the foundation for later efforts to create pressure to take action on the issue. During these initial stages, others may seek to contest the definitional and legitimacy efforts as these ideas begin to enter public discussion.

The potential stage occurs when actors recognizes a situation as a problem, thereby creating an issue – a point of contention or question to be resolved. The actor could be an organization, a stakeholder, or even a government official. The central communicative intervention in the potential stage is the definition of the issue. Issues managers hope to define an issue in a way that favors their preferred method of resolving the issue. Moreover, the definition also should be abstract enough to attract a wide base of supporters. There is power in definitions and by controlling the definition of the issue, issues managers gain an advantage in the process. As with all the other stages of the issues management process, definitions are contested because of their centrality to the issues management process. Various actors might advance different and conflicting definitions of an issue.

The imminent status is reached when actors successfully expand the number of actors involved with the issue. The central communication intervention is legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to the acceptance of the issue as worthy concern – people feel an issue warrants public attention. Issue managers implement various strategies to bolster the legitimacy of their issues thereby giving others a reason to be interested in the issue. However, legitimacy is another factor that may be contested in the issues management process. Other actors might question the legitimacy of the issue and/or the issue managers themselves (Coombs, 1992). The issue manager must be accepted as a legitimate voice for the issue. People can be drawn to an issue but may reject the issue manager. An issue management effort will stall and move toward dormancy if efforts to create legitimacy for the issue and/or the issue manager fail or the issue is too narrow to attract a wider audience.

The potential and imminent stages will be similar for social issues management because it focuses on defining the issue (potential) and seeking to establish the legitimacy of the issue and the issue manager (imminent). Social issues managers still need to craft a definition that will attract supports, build legitimacy for the issue, and establish their legitimacy to manage the issue. Firms and activist stakeholders differ in terms of legitimacy. Firms can face intense scrutiny for supporting a social issue that is unrelated to their core business and will need to find reasons to legitimize their involvement with the social issue. For example, an issue may be supported by a firm because it feels it affects its employees and/or it is a significant social issue that warrants attention. If there is a strong disconnect between the firm and the social issue, people are likely to ignore the issue because they would consider the firm as having no right to speak on that issue. A firm's support of a social issue will be scrutinized by stakeholders and not all stakeholders will be satisfied given the divisive, polarizing nature of social issues (Global Strategy Group, 2016). As Bigam Stahley and Boyd (2006) observed, even accepted values frequently have multiple sides and are not embraced by all stakeholders. Social issues by definition reflect multiple perspectives and vary in their degree of divisiveness (Global Strategy Group, 2016).

Activist stakeholders, including NGOs, tend to have manifest connections to the social issues they choose to manage – their connections to the issue are overt. For example, in 2006, Oxfam raised concerns over Starbucks exploiting Ethiopia coffee growers by not supporting efforts to trademark three varieties of Ethiopian coffee beans that would increase the profits of the coffee growers (Oxfam, 2006). Because Oxfam's mission is to end poverty, it had a natural connection the coffee grower exploitation issue. There is less of a need for activist stakeholders to build issue manager legitimacy in comparison to firms.

Moving from imminent to current status requires the use of publicity efforts to attract traditional media coverage of the issue and is directed toward significantly expanding the

number of actors involved with the issue. Policy issues typically emerge slowly but can burst into the public discussion through immediate traditional media interest in the issue – an issue suddenly might move to the current status. Historically, the current status required attracting the attention of the news media. There are two central communication interventions for the current stage: attract media attention and polarization. Attracting media attention is media advocacy and relies heavily upon publicity tactics to generate media coverage of the issue. In today's digital world, online channels can be used as well as traditional media to spread awareness of the issue. Polarization attempts to force actors to pick a side – to support a particular resolution of the issue. During polarization, issue managers will need to support the legitimacy of their preferred course of action (policy). If the definition was accepted, it should be easier to win support for the preferred course of action. However, issue resolutions can be contested. An issue will go dormant if issue managers cannot create awareness of an issue with a broader audience.

The critical stage continues the public examination of the issue and creates a pressure to act. The policy makers must decide if they will take action on an issue and how they will resolve the issue if they do decide to take action. Identification is the central communication intervention for polarization. The issue manager attempts to persuade others to see themselves in their preferred course of action. This is a form of agenda building and agenda setting. An increasing number of people support a particular issue resolution that pressures policy makers to take action. Building support for the various issue resolution options is contested, however. Different actors will advocate for different means of resolving the issue while other actors will argue no action should be taken on the issue. An issue will become dormant if issue managers cannot generate sufficient pressure for action.

The current and critical stages require significant adaptation. Traditional issues management and social issues management demonstrate very different loci for decision making. Because social issues management is decided by firm managers, agenda building and agenda setting are less applicable. In social issues management, we believe you can collapse the current and critical stages into one stage that we label awareness. The central communicative intervention is creating awareness of the issue and includes the definition of the issue and rationales for the legitimacy of both the issue and the issue managers (either the firm or activist stakeholders). Polarization occurs naturally with social issues because social issues are divisive in nature. Stakeholder awareness of a social issue and its connection to a firm creates the benefits a firm might derive from addressing the social issue (e.g. benefits may accrue through reputation enhancement and positive media attention).

Mobilizing information is an integral aspect of the awareness stage when action is required for an issue. Lemert *et al.* (1977) defined mobilizing information as “information which allows people to act on those attitudes which they might already have” (p. 721). Mobilizing information facilitates collective action by providing the information people need to coordinate their actions (Chan, 2016). There are three forms of mobilizing information: locational provides a time and place for an action, identificational provides the information necessary to contact a person or organization, and tactical offers behavior models that guide how people take action (Lemert and Ashman, 1983). It has been problematic to rely upon the traditional media to supply the mobilizing information necessary to facilitate collective action (Lemert and Ashman, 1983). In contrast, today's digital environment provides an easy means of creating, distributing, and accessing mobilizing information (Chan, 2016). Social issues managers integrate websites with various social media channels to provide locational and identificational information. The various digital channels, including e-mail, are used as tactics to pressure organizations along with traditional in-person protests (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). Mobilizing information helps to build pressure on firms to change by providing a means of facilitating collective action by stakeholders. However, mobilizing information is relevant to social issues management only when a specific action

is requested such as sending an e-mail, posting to a Facebook page, sending a Tweet, joining a boycott, or attending a rally.

For firms, the awareness stage is about announcing and justifying their decisions. When a firm chooses to engage publicly with a social issue, the decision is made – an issue has reached awareness. There is rarely a need for firms to employ mobilizing information. However, because the social issue is polarizing, firms must justify issue definition, issue legitimacy, and issue manager legitimacy to those who would contest these points. Activist stakeholders, in contrast, experience a different dynamic at the awareness stage than do firms. The firms are making the decisions while activist stakeholders are trying to influence the decisions. Activist stakeholders use mobilizing information along with traditional media and social media to build pressure for change (the critical stage of the catalytic model).

Activist stakeholders use a firm's connection to a social issue to generate negative publicity and negative word-of-mouth, both of which can damage the firm's reputation and bottom line. The activist stakeholders tie the social issue to the firms in a negative fashion to create the need for the firm to change (King and Soule, 2007; McDonnell and King, 2013). The general message by the activist stakeholders is that the firm is irresponsible because of how it relates to the social issue. The firm may be deemed irresponsible because it either supports or fails to support the social issue. In either case the firm's stance toward the social issue generates negative stories and comments in social media and traditional media by creating the perception that the firm is irresponsible because it is on the "wrong side" of the issue. Managers must then decide if they will respond and how they will respond to the challenge posed by stakeholders (Coombs and Holladay, 2015). It is important to bear in mind that the firm's response is likely to please some stakeholders while angering others. After the managers decide to take action or to take no action, the social issue may become dormant if stakeholders are satisfied with the action. However, if stakeholders disagree with the firm's decision, its implementation, or the decision to not act, on the issue stakeholders may attempt to reinvigorate the social issues management process by returning to the process of generating awareness.

The efforts by activist stakeholders to reinvigorate a social issue demonstrate the intersection of firm and activist stakeholder issue managers and the contestation that establishes social issues management as a process. What appears as a firm simply stating its position on a social issue is really a complex and dynamic process. The firm must define the social issue in a positive manner and legitimate its involvement with the issue because of the anticipated contestation of the social issue. It is very likely that the contestation will be countered by activist stakeholders who seek to manage the social issue toward a different outcome – a reversal of the firm's position on the social issue.

The social issues management model describes the process whereby firms decide to take a stance on a social issue, explains how activist stakeholders are involved in the process, and details the dynamics and communicative tasks involved in that process. Both issues managers and those analyzing the issues management effort should focus on the communicative tasks of definition, legitimation, and awareness rather than specific stages in the issues management process. Social issues management is extremely fluid and emphasizing the communicative tasks seems the best way to capture that fluidity. Social issues management is one mechanism among many that can be used to explicate the processes that contribute to CSA. A recent case study will illustrate how the social issues management process can be used to analyze the communicative challenges firms may confront when they decide to take a stand on social issues.

Once a decision is made by the firm, an issue goes dormant. The issue is resolved for a time but can always reemerge. If a particular actor in the issue management process disagrees with the issue resolution, attempts can be made immediately to restart the

issues management process. Such a restart forces the “winning” side to defend the initial outcome. Table I provides a comparison of the social issue management model to the original catalytic model to highlight the modifications required for managing social issues in a digital age.

**Case study: Target’s response to House Bill 2 (HB2)**

On March 23, 2016, North Carolina passed HB2, which often is referred to as the “bathroom bill” though its primary focus is on the relationship between state and local governments. It was shorthand as the “bathroom bill” because one of its provisions requires individuals to use bathrooms and changing facilities in public buildings that correspond to their biological sex (sex as reported on birth certificates) rather than their gender identity. Bills with language similar to HB2’s have generated national debate on discrimination. Some journalists have noted the legislation seems to be in response to US Supreme Court’s ruling on marriage equality (Couric, 2016).

Interestingly, the implications of HB2 are far greater than bathroom use because it limits the ability of local municipalities to pass ordinances that expand protections beyond those provided by the state of North Carolina. HB2 was proposed in response to non-discrimination legislation in Charlotte, NC, that was to go into effect April 1, 2016 that protected the rights of transgender and gay people, and in doing so, exceeded the protections guaranteed by NC state law. HB2 removed the ability of municipalities like Charlotte to pass local ordinances that expanded protection from discrimination and also removed the right of unprotected employees to sue in state court for wrongful termination and discrimination.

|                                 | Catalytic model/issue<br>Catalyst model  | Social issues management<br>model  | Comparison   |
|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Locus of decision<br>Approaches | Government actors<br>Status levels   | Firms<br>Communicative tasks   | Different<br>Different: shift in focus<br>from status levels<br>(stages) to<br>communicative tasks                         |
| Key tasks                       | Potential: define an issue and<br>recognize as important<br>Imminent: build legitimacy of<br>the issue and issue manager<br>while expanding the number of<br>people involved with the issue<br>Current: create widespread<br>awareness of the issue through<br>agenda setting and building<br>Issue managers also seek to<br>polarize the issue and mobilize<br>supporters<br>Critical: pressure for a decision<br>to be made and seek to win<br>identification with a particular<br>side of the issue<br>Dormant: an issue is resolved or<br>interest wanes<br>Some decision is made<br>including a decision not to take<br>action on the issue | Definition: define the issue<br><br>Legitimacy: build legitimacy of<br>the issue and the issue manager<br><br>Awareness: firms will announce<br>and justify their decisions while<br>activist stakeholders use<br>mobilizing information to place<br>pressure on a firm to act<br>polarization occurs naturally<br>with social issues<br><br>Dormant: issue is resolved or<br>interest wanes<br>Some decision is made<br>including a decision not to take<br>action on the issue | Similar<br><br>Similar<br><br>Different: combine<br>current and critical;<br>de-emphasize agenda<br>setting<br><br>Similar |

**Table I.**  
Comparison of  
catalytic and social  
issues management  
models



Though protecting some classes from discrimination based on race, religion, color, national origin, disability, and biological sex, HB2 failed to provide such protections to transgender individuals. North Carolina's HB2 is being contested by the US Justice Department as a discriminatory and unenforceable law that violates the US Constitution.

It is perhaps surprising that the portion of the bill prescribing bathroom and locker room use garnered considerably greater media attention than the increased power of the state and municipalities' concomitant reduction in decision-making power. Discussions surrounding HB2 and other similar bills being considered in other states generated heated national debate on discrimination and "traditional American values." Proponents of HB2 portrayed the "bathroom use" portion of the bill as protecting children and adults from sexual assault and voyeurism that might be perpetrated by the trans community or people posing as the opposite sex. The bill's passage prompted over 90 US business leaders to sign a letter to the state's governor that condemned the law as discriminatory (Kamp and McWhirter, 2016). Labeling the bill as anti-transgender (restricting gender expression and gender identity), advocates of the LGBT rights movement, indicted discussions of bathroom attacks as fear-mongering.

It was against this backdrop that Target, the second largest discount retail chain store in the USA, decided to speak to the issue of inclusivity as well as the "bathroom issue" that had garnered so much media attention. On April 19, 2016, Target's CEO and Chairman, Brian Cornell, spoke to the issue of protection from discrimination after HB2 passed in North Carolina and posted a statement to Target's corporate website reaffirming Target's commitment to inclusivity (Target, 2016a). His post to Target's website on April 19 would not be surprising to those familiar with Target's existing policies because it reiterated its commitment to inclusivity:

Recent debate around proposed laws in several states has reignited a national conversation about inclusivity. So earlier this week, we reiterated with our team members where Target stands and how our beliefs are brought to life in how we serve our guests.

Inclusivity is a core belief at Target. It is something we celebrate. We stand for equality and equity, and strive to make our guests and team members feel accepted, respected, and welcomed in our stores and workplaces every day.

We believe that everyone – every team member, every guest, and every community – deserves to be protected from discrimination, and treated equally. Consistent with this belief, Target supports the federal Equality Act, which provides protections to LGBT individuals, and opposes action that enables discrimination.

In our stores, we demonstrate our commitment to an inclusive experience in many ways. Most relevant for the conversation currently underway, we welcome transgender team members and guests to use the restroom or fitting room facility that corresponds to their gender identity.

We regularly assess issues and consider many factors such as impact to our business, guests, and team members. Given the specific question these legislative proposals raised about how we manage our fitting rooms and restrooms, we felt it was important to state our position.

"Everyone deserves to feel like they belong. And you'll always feel accepted, respected, and welcomed at Target" (Target, 2016a).

Cornell's post on April 19 echoed information provided at Target's "diversity & inclusion" portion of its website:

As champions of diversity and inclusivity, we're making our business stronger, building our talented team, and working toward a more equal society (Target, 2016b).

The text at the site includes this statement on "what we stand for":

We believe diversity and inclusivity make teams and Target better. And we'll live that belief as champions of a more inclusive society by creating a diverse and inclusive work environment, cultivating an inclusive guest experience, and fostering equality in society (Target, 2016b).

Following Target's CEO's post at the website, The American Family Association (AFA), a conservative Christian group, accused Target of "social engineering" by supporting the LGBT agenda. The AFA has a history of asking its members to boycott selected retailers and service providers whose practices and products are deemed to counter to traditional Christian moral values. On the day following Target's post, April 20, the AFA posted at its website a petition asking members to boycott the retailer (Wildmon, 2016). Text at the AFA boycott site argues: "Target's dangerous new policy poses a danger to wives and daughters" who may become victims of sexual predators (Wildmon, 2016). "Target's policy is exactly how sexual predators get access to their victims. And with Target publicly boasting that men can enter women's bathrooms, where do you think predators are going to go?" In addition to providing the boycott petition to sign, the text proposed a solution: "One solution is a common-sense approach and a reasonable solution to the issue of transgendered customers: a unisex bathroom. Target should keep separate facilities for men and women, but for the trans community and for those who simply like using the bathroom alone, a single occupancy unisex option should be provided" (Wildmon, 2016).

In its call to action, AFA urged "all others who think exposing others to danger is a bad idea to take action" and sign the petition to boycott target (Wildmon, 2016). As of June 15, AFA had secured 1,361,607 signatures on its Boycott Target petition but had not convinced Target to alter its policies. Because the AFA wanted Target to take a specific action, mobilizing information was employed in its response. Tactical and identificational mobilizing information were emphasized in the social issues management effort. Tactical mobilizing information included supplying links and web addresses to post comments to Target's Facebook, a link to sign a boycott petition, and messages to encourage people to post to social media using the #BoycottTarget. The identificational mobilizing information included links to pages on the AFA website to learn more about the boycott and the AFA efforts to pressure Target into changing its position.

## Analysis

### *Target's social issues management*

This case analysis examines the communicative tasks facing firms like Target that decide to voice a stance on social issues and engage in social issues management. Specifically, this analysis focuses on how communication is directed toward the key communication tasks of definition, legitimacy, and awareness (including mobilizing information). It is important to note that the environment surrounding this case reflects the power of digital communication in connecting with stakeholders. This digital environment as well as the separation from the policy-making process helps to illustrate how social issues management processes differ from original the catalytic model. Moreover, by including the contestation/social issue management efforts of the AFA, the analysis illustrates how opposing social issue managers can intersect and compete with one another, thereby providing a richer understanding of the social issue management effort.

### *Definition*

In Target's case, the CEO's website post entitled "Continuing to stand for inclusivity," defines the social issue as inclusivity. Cornell goes on to connect inclusivity to the federal Equality Act. His definition of the issue holds strategic value because it is likely to attract more positive attention and support from others rather than simply referring to the issue as a debate over appropriate bathroom use. The value of inclusivity is hard to contest, especially because inclusivity is a broadly defined concept that clearly expands the social issue beyond the parameters of bathroom use and LGBT concerns.

The AFA contested the inclusivity definition by offering the counter-definition of safety for the bathroom issue. Target's bathroom and changing room policy, which the AFA claimed was "new," would endanger women and children by making them vulnerable to sexual predators (Starnes, 2016). The AFA's definition undermined Target's inclusivity-based stance and questioned its commitment to guest safety because their policies would place "women and children" at risk. Target's claim that "everyone deserves to feel like they belong" was reframed as a welcome invitation to sexual predators rather than as a promise of equality. Overall, the AFA attempted to delegitimize Target's values and associated policies by focusing only on its bathroom and changing room policies and deeming those irresponsible and dangerous. Target maintained its position that the social issue was inclusivity, not safety.

### *Legitimacy*

Questions of legitimacy are important to firms' actions in the policy-making realm (Boyd, 2000; Coombs, 1992), but also are relevant to the social issues realm. Any time an issue is being managed, legitimacy is a central concern. For policy-making contexts, Coombs (1992) demonstrated that legitimacy is a concern for the issue itself, the issue manager, and the advocated policy. In the general social issues environment, the firm faces the challenge of justifying its involvement on an issue that some could see as irrelevant to their central operations. If a social issue already is being widely debated, the legitimacy of the social issue as a concern itself has been established. People already have considered the issue worthy of their attention, regardless of their personal stances. By tying the social issue to inclusivity, an accepted value, Target enhances the legitimacy of the issue itself. The legitimacy of a hotly debated social issue also may seem self-evident. Thus, the issue can serve as its own source of legitimacy. The AFA never contested the legitimacy of the bathroom issue, the organization believed the issue to be very important.

Target's CEO, Brian Cornell, is the Issue Manager. The interests of the firm, including how those interests affect policies, employees, and customers, certainly are relevant to his position and experience as CEO. Cornell explains the exigence prompting his website post, and hence the firm's involvement in the social issue, is the national debate that may generate concern among Target employees and guests who question how this controversy pertains to their own lives. Target's CEO establishes the legitimacy of his status as issue manager by connecting the social issue to existing policies concerning employees and customers. Though Target's values including inclusivity, equality, and equity are stated and part of existing policy at Target, the currency of the debate makes the timing seem right for Cornell to emerge as a social issue manager and to address the issue to reinforce Target's stance.

The AFA used a financial basis for its contestation of Target's legitimacy as social issue manager. The AFA argued that firms such as Target should not be involved with LGBT issues such as transgender bathroom use because it hurts shareholders. In the year following Target's entry into the bathroom issue, revenues and stock prices fell. The AFA claimed the financial decline was a result of the boycott in response to Target's position on the bathroom issue (Starnes, 2016). Because Target's role as social issue manager had a direct, negative effect on its shareholders, Target should not be involved with the issue, the AFA claimed that Target repeatedly denied the financial decline was a result of the boycott. Target spokeswoman Erika Winkels stated, "We have made it clear over time that we've seen no material impact to the business based on the bathroom policy" (Did, 2017, para 16). Target disagreed with the assessment that managing the bathroom issue was harmful to its shareholders.

The final legitimacy challenge relates to Target's policies and actions. In the social issues arena, the firm makes the decisions. The relevance of firm policies and actions to legitimacy

may be best understood through the lens of actional legitimacy (Brummer, 1991; Boyd, 2000; Epstein, 1972; Hearit, 1995). A firm must be able to justify that its actions conform to social norms. Summarizing this work, Boyd (2000) argues that actional legitimacy requires firms to demonstrate the usefulness and responsibility of their actions to the public (see also Epstein, 1972). Firms communicate with stakeholders to establish that their actions are useful and responsible to society. In Target's case, Target must establish the actional legitimacy of its existing policies for customers and employees as well as its decision to speak out on the social issue at this point in time. Had Target elected to say nothing, it would not have attracted attention to its current policies that some stakeholders perceive to be controversial. In fact, other firms did have policies similar to Target's but elected not to publicize them. Target was tasked with creating actional legitimacy by demonstrating its decisions are both responsible and useful to society. The AFA's challenge to Target was designed to undermine the actional legitimacy of its bathroom and changing room policies. The AFA's legitimacy critique focused on responsibility: it was irresponsible to allow people to use whichever bathroom they chose because it would place women and children at risk and precipitated financial losses.

In August of 2016, Target did respond to concerns over policy legitimacy. Target announced it would add single-toilet unisex bathrooms to its stores. Target recognized not all customers were happy with its bathroom policies. People who were uncomfortable could have complete privacy by using the lockable, single-toilet bathrooms. Having a unisex/family bathroom available to all was posted as a legitimate solution to the bathroom policy. However, the AFA maintained the boycott because Target was not changing its policy about transgender use of bathrooms (Isidore, 2016). Target maintained its position that the policies were morally correct on the grounds of being inclusive. Inclusion was a point of actional legitimacy for Target because inclusion benefits society and is a responsible course of action.

#### *Awareness of the firm's actions*

In general, public awareness of firms' stances on issues is relatively low, with a 2016 survey reporting only 29 percent of its participants were aware of a range of firm stances. Awareness of stances in the USA had doubled from the previous year, presumably due to high profile cases such as CVS banning the sale of tobacco products and the NFL supporting domestic violence prevention, both of which were accompanied by paid advertising campaigns (Global Strategy Group, 2016, p. 6). In our case study, legislation like HB2 had created an environment where firm stances, as reflected in the letter to North Carolina's governor, were garnering considerable media attention. The media environment was primed to cover the social issue as well as contests between firms and their detractors. The AFA petition to boycott Target also would contribute to awareness of the issue of bathroom and changing room use.

Target's website provides the opportunity to create awareness of its existing policies and its longstanding support of inclusivity and equality. Information about Target's values and policies is available at the "diversity & inclusion" portion of its website and elaborated in the "What we stand for" section of that page (Target, 2016b). The CEO's website post, "Continuing to stand for inclusivity," serves to remind readers that Target's commitment is unwavering (Target, 2016a). The post alluding to HB2 garnered attention from the traditional media and online media thereby increasing awareness of Target's (pre-existing) values and policy stance. Given that most stakeholders would become aware of Target's stance only after media publicity, stakeholders would view the message content as a form of policy decision by Target. In summary, the CEO's post created awareness of what Target had done in the past and currently is doing to ensure inclusivity as they address the contested social issue. The traditional media and social media were drawn to Target's

position, thus increasing the awareness of its bathroom policy (Kumar, 2016). Target had no need for mobilizing information because it was simply stating and defending its position rather than trying to create pressure for change. Target's use of digital channels and traditional media reflects the way social issues reach awareness and the need to move beyond the limited array of channels available when the catalytic model originally was created in 1985.

For Target, the decision relative to this social issue was made a long time ago and had been integrated into its culture. The firm has established policies in place for bathroom and changing room use as well as overall treatment of employees and customers. However, the recent national controversy prompted Target's CEO to make another decision – to restate Target's policies at its website. His reiteration of existing values and policies represents the more recent decision made by Target. For Target, the social issue should now slide toward dormancy, but not for the AFA.

The AFA actions demonstrate the various communication tools that can be applied to social issues management. Unlike Target, the AFA was trying to create pressure for change and thus mobilizing information was important to its efforts. The AFA wanted people to sign its online petition, known as the Boycott Target Pledge. Eventually 1.4 million people signed the online petition (Starnes, 2016). AFA used a variety of communication channels to provide mobilizing information to tell people about the petition and how to sign it. The AFA hosted the online petition at its website and used both its Facebook and Twitter accounts to promote the petition with #BoycottTarget. The AFA also sought traditional and online news media stories about the petition and how to sign it. Fox news, a conservative news media source, wrote a number of positive stories about the petition and the AFA boycott (e.g. Starnes, 2016). The online, conservative news outlet Breitbart was a strong advocate of the boycott effort. Ed Vitagliano, Executive Vice President of the AFA, said, "Breitbart has been instrumental in helping the American Family Association get the word out about our immensely successful boycott of Target" (Munro, 2016, para. 7). The AFA even had renewed awareness pushes for the boycott and for Target to change the policies in August and November of 2016. The AFA was very successful in creating awareness of its opposition to Target's bathroom policy and mobilizing people to sign the boycott petition. However, as of March 2017, Target has not felt enough pressure from the AFA efforts to change its policies about transgender bathroom usage.

## Conclusion

The issues faced by firms and stakeholders have evolved rapidly due to the increased use of digital communication channels. It has become easier for stakeholders to raise issues and create exigencies for firms to make choices about those issues (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998). The nature of the issues is shifting to become more social and values-based. Firms are increasingly called upon to make choices involving social issues/wicked problems (Coombs and Holladay, 2015). Moreover, the locus of decisions is shifting from policy decisions to decisions made by firms (Baron, 2001). Unfortunately, models of issues management had not kept pace with this changing issue environment. This paper articulates a revised model of issues management we choose to term social issues management.

Involvement in social issues is not limited to those firms considered to be social entrepreneurs or values-based firms. Nor are social issues considered relevant only to corporate social responsibility programs. Social issues are implicated in virtually all firm operations, ranging from treatment of employees to access and use of resources to allocation of profits. Increasingly stakeholders want to hold firms accountable for their actions and lack of actions on a variety of issues. This means the time is ripe for more systematic examination of social issues management. This paper has contributed to that goal.

Social issues management fits under the larger umbrella of corporate advocacy and CSA. Though inspired by the catalytic model of issues management the social issues management model moves away from the idea of stages in issues management to focus on the communicative tasks facing firms. The social issues management model seeks to explain how various communicative tasks are used in attempts to influence the debate and possible resolution of social issues. Resolution does not mean solution. Social issues have no solution or permanent outcome. Instead, social issues are resolved – settled for a short time. The issue catalyst model also preferred the term resolution to denote that an issue is never permanently solved (Cralle and Vibbert, 1985). In our contemporary media environment, managing social issues is a very fluid process. Not only do digital channels make it easier to create awareness of an issue, they also empower stakeholders to join the issues management process at the time of their choosing. Because the catalytic model reflected the media environment in the 1980s, it assumed a large segment of the target stakeholders for the issue would be at the same stage at the same time. Traditional news media coverage of an issue provided an anchor for establishing when an issue has moved to the current stage.

In social issues management, stakeholders can be drawn to an issue at any point during its discussion. This means that issue managers regularly must be prepared to provide definitions and build legitimacy (for issues, issues managers, and decisions) for those stakeholders who enter the debate at various points in time. Hence, the definition and legitimacy communication tasks remain constant throughout the entire issues management effort. Even when dealing with policy issues, not all stakeholders will be at the same stage simultaneously. However, the catalytic model suggested a progression paralleling the policy-making process (Cralle and Vibbert, 1985) that does not reflect the dynamics of managing contemporary social issues. Therefore, the social issues management model concentrates on the communicative tasks necessary for influencing issues rather than the stages of the issues management process.

As demonstrated in the application of social issues management to the Target case, social issues often have been debated and policies developed within the firm prior to any public awareness of the issue. For a specific firm, its internal relationship to the social issue may not constitute a wicked problem. It simply develops policies deemed “workable” in light of its goals, values, resources, and constraints. However, when attention to a social issue is generated through digital and traditional media, stakeholders may join the conversation and interrogate firms about their stance and/or firms may elect to speak about the issue. Entering the larger public sphere requires firms to anticipate the communicative challenges in order to engage effectively with additional social issues managers that may emerge to contest the firm’s position on the social issue. The Target vs AFA case illustrates the specific communicative tasks confronting firms who elect to engage in social issues management. The analysis reflects the idea that firms may voluntarily and/or involuntarily engage with stakeholders over social issues at any point and should be prepared to confront questions related to their legitimacy as spokespersons (issue managers) as well as the legitimacy of their actions.

The AFA boycott illustrates how issues are resolved and not solved. For Target, the social issue was resolved with the firm’s re-statement of its policies. The AFA chose to revive the social issue through its attacks on Target. For the AFA, the social issue was no longer resolved. Because of their contested nature, social issues are never solved but temporarily resolved for certain actors in issue arenas (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). The social issues management model, with its focus on communicative tasks, provides a useful tool to analyze and to guide social issues management efforts. Managers and researchers can focus on how definition, legitimacy, and awareness were used as well as the effectiveness of communication task implementation in attempts to resolve social issues. Analyses of these communicative tasks can provide insights into how and why certain social issues management efforts

were effective or ineffective. The social issues management model is an initial step toward revising our theorizing about issues management. Additional theorizing, along with more empirical research, is needed to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of contemporary issues management.

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### Corresponding author

W. Timothy Coombs can be contacted at: [wcoombs@hotmail.com](mailto:wcoombs@hotmail.com)

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