



Moments of lobbying

An ethnographic study of meetings
between lobbyists and politicians

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Abstract

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The aim of this study is to define and further the understanding of the practice of lobbying as it manifests in the participants' interactions with each other and to identify its specific conditions (rules, standards, traits).

A research overview shows that lobbying as a political phenomenon is well researched, but that the action per se tends to be taken for granted as 'talking'. Communication between lobbyists and politicians has predominantly been reconstructed as transmission, information-exchange. The study addresses this deficiency by applying an ethnographic method, shadowing, and by focussing on the micro-level of lobbying as a socio-political phenomenon. Lobbying is researched in moments of interaction between interest representatives and representatives of the political system, i.e. MEPs and their assistants.

Seven lobbyists and politicians in Brussels have been shadowed for one week each; a further 34 interviews were conducted. The analytical strategy was to infer from the actors' impression management (Goffman). The study is informed by a neo-institutional perspective. It assumes that cognitive, normative, and regulative structures provide meaning to social behavior, and that these resources are identifiable.

Goffman's concept of team and the distinction between frontstage and backstage emerged as central categories. My results suggest that the small world of the EU's capital results in a sense of 'us in Brussels' shared by lobbyists, politicians and assistants alike. Lobbying-interaction in frontstage-mode is governed by strict conventions; ignorance or transgression are sanctioned as unprofessional. The key result, however, is that lobbyists actively work towards engagement on other terms. Lobbyists employ various strategies and build relations with politicians in order to create moments of backstage-interaction. In backstage-mode, lobbyists not only gain access to soft information, but can negotiate ways of working together with politicians in pursuit of different, but partly overlapping agendas.

Keywords: lobbying, Brussels, communication, interaction, shadowing, ethnography, strategies, organizing principles, impression management, relations.

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