COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE IN FRANCE: CHALLENGES FOR NGOS.

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In France, there is a new phenomenon in the “Competitive Intelligence” (CI) academic literature, which is a specific field in business literature. There are more and more articles dealing with NGOs. A few scholars present NGOs as organizations with a high nuisance potential, which could be manipulated to destabilize companies (François, 2004; Harbulot 2007). Some CI specialists, even if they are a minority, encourage companies to see nonprofits as potential enemies. At the same time, there are more and more cases of corporate spying on NGOs in the press. Swiss giant Nestlé has been charged on suspicion of spying on ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens) (Hamel, 2008). French state-owned EDF (Electricité De France) is suspected of spying Greenpeace (Mandraud, 2009). It seems that the recent development of Competitive Intelligence in French companies and as a French public policy is a real challenge, not to say a threat, for NGOs.

These observations lead to have a closer look at the link between CI and NGOs. Previous examples show that private firms have put NGOs under a kind of surveillance that exceeds CI and invite to investigate counter-intelligence among NGOs. But more important, the issue of nonprofits practices of CI must be put on the agenda. CI has been studied among various types of organizations, but as far as known, formal research about CI as a whole has not been conducted inside NGOs. Thus, this contribution attempts to establish a new research agenda, related to CI and NGOs.

In order to better understand the proposed agenda, the concepts related to intelligence in the business sector are presented in a first section. The acceptation of CI is somewhat specific in Europe, compared to North America (West, 1999). French authors and authorities usually talk about “Economic Intelligence” (EI) instead of CI. The concept of EI is broader than CI. While the scope of CI is limited to the detection of threats and opportunities, EI also includes an “information risk management” function and an influence function (Larivet, 2006).

The second section offers an overview of existing bridges between NGOs and CI. NGOs are under surveillance. From a company’s point of view, it is legitimate to watch (legally) any actor in its environment who can have an impact on its activities. It is particularly true of NGOs competing with the company, which would be watched as any competitor. But the main reason why CI specialists could recommend watching NGOs is that they can damage a firm’s reputation (Baron & Diermeier, 2007). The contribution also shows that some French authors claim that NGOs are being manipulated by states or private firms (Francois, 2005; Harbulot, 2007). True or not, these statements exist and might undermine NGOs’ efforts to improve their legitimacy. Fortunately, some other researchers have developed a different approach, far from seeing NGOs as businesses’ enemies. NGOs and private firms have cooperation strategies, and CI can be part of a partnership (Mabille, 2008 ; Yaziji, 2002).

The last part of the contribution describes pieces of evidence of intelligence, as a process, in NGOs. Lobbying and influence campaigns (one of the three EI functions in the French acceptation) are broadly used by NGOs. They also practice environmental scanning: they use benchmarking techniques (Hudson, 2005; O'Regan & Oster, 2000; Paton, Mordaunt & Cornforth, 2007), marketing research (Hanson, 2001; Thyne, 2001), they watch new regulations (Paton, 2007) and more discreet information-collection practices (Fox and Brown, 1998). But evidence of counter-intelligence techniques in NGOs have not been found in the
literature. The end of this third and last part outlines a research agenda, based on the previous literature review.

References:


