

## Abstract

The intense battery of activities around what can loosely be called spin control is historically unique, and a major facet of contemporary democratic politics. The bulk of public commentary on spin doctors portrays them as a sinister force, but in doing so nearly always also emphasizes their efficacy. Partly as an antidote, this article concentrates on when the efforts of spin doctors do their cause more harm than good. After elaborating the major activities associated with the contemporary spin enterprise, the paper explores some of the constraints on spin doctors' power & the difficulty of translating PR precepts into effective action, the variations in individual skill, and the countering of one side's spin by their opponents. Moreover in rapidly evolving political situations it is frequently impossible to know what strategy will work best. The paper then takes this a step further, by outlining how the attributes that make spin doctors successful at some times make them likely to engage in counter-productive actions at others. These include the inherently precarious nature of the spin enterprise, that spin tends to be a self-diminishing resource, the tendency for tactics to triumph over strategy, and the combative approach that can escalate minor irritants into major embarrassments.

## Introduction

Spin doctors get a bad press. Their activities are increasingly the subject of public commentary, but it is almost universally adverse. Indeed the spin doctor has become one of the bogeymen of contemporary politics. David Cornwell, the novelist John Le Carre, bemoaned their power thus:

We are dealing with an octopus. We have become the creatures of these people. Advertising as news. It's very skilfully done. The methods of seducing the media are far more sophisticated and the money that's going into it, and the ingenuity of the spin, has reached the point where we, as a general public, have never been lied to by such sophisticated means as now. It's instant brainwashing (Sheehan 2003 p.205).

Former British Prime Minister John Major was scathing about the state of spin in Britain under his successor:

Spin is the pornography of politics. It perverts. It is deceit licensed by the Government. The daily line from No 10 was ruthlessly disseminated. It was formidable propaganda. The press became the receptacle of Orwellian attempts to manage the news (Major 2003 p.12-13).

Journalists echo these sentiments. The twin themes in their commentary, as in most public commentary, are the power of spin doctors and their evil impact. Robert Bolton, introducing ABC radio's *Media Report*, said:

which typified late -90s politics, it's that mysterious, the Spin Doctor; the political oracle who shapes and the of political parties and politicians (Bolton 2003).

Investigative reporter Ross Coulthart thought:

We're in crisis. I've never seen (the situation for getting public information) as bad as it is at the moment - it's an attitudinal problem inside government, inside bureaucracies and until that changes, until we get rid of the spin doctors, the spinmeisters inside government, nothing's going to change (O'Regan 2002).

Yet submerged within this chorus of criticism is a paean of praise. All the denunciations of spin's pernicious influence, of how it is harmful to democracy, the public's right to know and the quality of journalism, are also testimonies to its effectiveness. So overwhelmingly the popular image of spin is of a negative, evil force but also of a powerful, effective force. This paper addresses only the latter of these - the claims about spin's efficacy. Partly as an antidote to the constant emphasis on spin's power, the paper focuses on when and why it fails and sometimes is actually counter-productive.

The word iatrogenic comes from two Greek words - genesis meaning beginning and iatros meaning doctor. So iatrogenic sicknesses or iatrogenic medical problems are those that come as a result of medical treatment, such as the side effects of drugs, or post-operative complications. The idea was probably first popularised by Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War, when she said that the first duty of a hospital is not to make it more likely that a patient would die. In other words, British military hospitals at the time were so unhygienic and so prone to infectious diseases that a soldier could go in with a minor wound, become infected and die as a result of being in hospital. In the contemporary era there has been much more attention to how treatments can set up their own future problems, advanced most radically by the social analyst, Ivan Illich in his book *Medical Nemesis* (1975).

So this article's title -iatrogenic spin doctoring- is designed to capture when spin doctors' efforts go wrong, and produce more damage for their cause than good. The dominant tone of public commentary on spin is misleading in that it fails to consider the limits on its effectiveness - the fact that one side's spin is countered by its opponents, that there are often great variations in individual competence among spin doctors, and that sometimes they are acting in situations of such uncertainty and haste that sound decision-making is all but impossible. After considering these in the middle part of the paper, the final substantive section explores how elements intrinsic to the spin doctoring enterprise are likely to cause them to sometimes do damage to the image of those they are trying to promote, of how the qualities that generally make them very effective operators are prone sometimes to produce the opposite. First, however, we need to consider the nature of the contemporary spin enterprise.

### **The Scale and Meaning of Spin**

The huge increase in the size of the public relations industry has been frequently asserted. Davis (2002, p.28-30) has charted it most systematically. It has prompted discussion of a public relations state (Deacon and Golding 1994, Ward 2004), and that we have entered a third age of political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999) and of election

characteristic of which is a thoroughgoing  
cacy (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, p.207).

Claims about the influence of spin on news content are very widespread, often overly so. While the central concern here is with political spin, it needs to be remembered that public relations is much broader, aimed not just at the main news media, but at a range of soft news outlets, such as magazines and talk shows, and covering not just politics but corporate activities and a whole range of promotional areas. Magazine content, for example, is very much intertwined with the celebrity industry (Turner et al 2000), and its influence has become so pronounced that the editor of Conde Nast's *GQ* magazine said that more than half its articles were now PR generated, although he did not see a problem with this (Cozens 2005).

The recognition that media can make or break careers and campaigns has led to an increasingly calculating approach, not only in political campaigns but by all major institutions especially when saturation coverage is expected. Even the Vatican, faced with the huge influx of reporters when the death of Pope John Paul II was imminent, used PR expertise to deal with the unprecedented situation:

A former bullfighter who became the Vatican's spokesman is today being credited with the slick media operation surrounding the Pope's death, which has included the use of text messages, photographs and emails. Joaquin Navarro-Valls, a man journalists call the Alastair Campbell of the Vatican, made it clear that this was a death that would be handled with aplomb (Day and Deans 2005).

As a result of their growing importance, increasing attention has been paid to spin doctors. It once was the rule that they had to remain publicly invisible. Harold Wilson's press secretary Joe Haines had a rule that any of the staff whose photo appeared in the paper had to forfeit a bottle of wine (Seymour-Ure 2003 p.123). In contrast a generation later, there is often media coverage of how leaders' offices are working. The two most famous spin doctors in western democracies – Alastair Campbell and Karl Rove – have had whole books devoted to them (Moore and Slater 2003, Dubose et al 2003, Osborne and Walters (2004).

Rove has become a *bona fide* celebrity within the Republican Party and one of the most sought-after speakers by GOP audiences. A White House official said Rove now can attract about as much money for a candidate or the party as Vice President Cheney, behind only the President (Balz 2005).

Spin doctor is one of those labels like politically correct or thought police with which people describe others, but almost no-one identifies oneself as one. Britain's most famous spin doctor, Tony Blair's closest adviser, Alastair Campbell (2002) wrote an article 'It's time to bury spin'. His most famous predecessor, Sir Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary, deplored what he called 'the wages of spin' in the Labour era (2003), while professing that criticism of his own performance had simply been a case of killing the messenger (1991). So it is important to explore more precisely what spin means.

The term spin doctor made its public debut in the *New York Times* on October 21, 1984 (p.22), under the headline 'The debate and the spin doctors'

ds after the Reagan-Mondale debate ends, a bazaar  
the press room of the Kansas City Municipal

Auditorium. A dozen men in good suits and women in silk dresses will circulate smoothly among the reporters, spouting confident opinions. They won't be just press agents trying to impart a favourable spin to a routine press release. They'll be the Spin Doctors.

Since then, terms such as spin, spin doctor and spin control have become so ubiquitous it is hard to remember they are of such recent vintage. It is dangerous for social science analysis to take up terms from journalistic and political jargon, where formal definition and disciplined usage are always lagging behind. But equally it is dangerous not to take account of how practitioners are talking about their enterprise. For Howard Kurtz (1998, p.xxi), spin has come to occupy a grey zone between candour and outright falsehood. According to *Wikipedia*, in public relations, spin is usually a pejorative term signifying a heavily biased portrayal. This may go back to what some consider the sporting origins (eg tennis, cricket etc) of the term (ie spin is not straight). However language does not develop systematically. Despite for example the heroic attempt of Sumpter and Tankard (1994) it is not possible to systematically contrast spin and PR, or to neatly fence off one area as spin. So perhaps the best way to give more precision to this widely used and evocative but elusive term is to examine the activities associated with it.

The contemporary spin enterprise is composed of the combination of four central activities. Each of the following can be made to sound anodyne, simply a neutral, beneficial, common sense pursuit. Spin doctors picture themselves as simply increasing the professionalism and efficiency with which messages are communicated to the public (eg McNair 2004, p.327). What could be more harmless than a government arranging its diary so that major announcements do not interfere with each other? Surely it is good to be responsive to public opinion. But each also has the potential for manipulation.

#### 1. Background briefings to shape the interpretation of public events

The original use of the term, when it made its first public appearance in the *New York Times*, was to give anonymous guidance about the 'real meaning' of public events, shaping the interpretation of success and failure. Post-debate their task is to give the flow of ambiguous moments the desired shape and political definition in subsequent news reports. Before the event it can be to shape expectations about what a good performance would be or the opponents' weaknesses and traps. Such briefings succeed most fully when they are inserted into journalists' reports without any attribution that the interpretation has been shaped by political interests at all.

Sometimes the reporting of the 'real meaning' or significance of leaders public statements are shaped by background briefings (eg Seymour-Ure 2003, p.150). A case of spinners urging upon reporters a political meaning that may not have been apparent from the public words alone came after a 2005 presidential speech on the Iraq war:

Although the speech Bush gave was largely an amalgam of previous addresses, White House reporters were urged to note the extraordinary significance of the president 'for the first time anyone can remember' actually acknowledging the number of soldiers who have died in Iraq. 'Indeed, after the speech, White

gely significant evidence that ó in spite of his refusal  
r Cindy Sheehan ó the president is sensitive to the  
licies (Froomkin 2005).

2. Catering to media demands, and in particular the orchestration of photo ops and sound bites

Perhaps, more basic than anything else is that spin doctors know how the news media work and how they can enhance or reduce news coverage. Spin is not just a matter of shaping the content, but the prominence and intensity of reporting, to enhance and maximize the good news and to contain and minimize the impact of bad news. Many media advisers are former journalists. They know news cycles and routines, they understand media demands and news values, and so have a strong sense of what will become a headline, and what will be the key phrase used in a sound bite. Some spin doctors are very good at orchestrating photogenic occasions which will show their candidate in a good light, and just as importantly save him or her from embarrassments.

3. Use of public opinion polling as a tool to shape the presentation and even substance of policy

All political parties use private polling to assess their prospects and guide their strategies. The use of this polling data is not just to let them know the shape of public opinion, but the degree to which different themes resonate, which face of an issue to highlight, and to know which parts of public opinion are hard and immovable and which are soft and ambivalent. As with most aspects of spin it is most intense in America. The famous Clinton war room in his successful 1992 presidential campaign was getting new public opinion data every day, and using it to fine tune their phrasings and emphases. Tracking voter sentiment and targeting potential swing voters are central parts of all contemporary campaign planning.

Before Clinton, earlier administrations had increasingly institutionalised the use of opinion polls into the office of the presidency (Heith 1998), and since him it has continued to grow. In 2005, the Bush administration, the very same White House that outwardly exudes contempt for polls, hired a prominent academic pollster onto the National Security Council staff, and informed the way the President made his speeches on Iraq. They had concluded that the key to public support for the war is not the number of casualties in Iraq, nor whether the war was right or wrong ó but whether people feel like we're going to win (Froomkin 2005a; Baker and Balz 2005).

4. Media monitoring and rapid rebuttal

The term rapid rebuttal was first used by Tony Blair's New Labour in Britain during their rise to power. Their aim was to contest damaging charges as soon as possible, not to let accusations run uncontested. The practice keeps evolving so that the other side's criticisms are anticipated and attempts can be made to circumvent them even before they are made ó rebuttal.

However media monitoring is not just to inform defensive spin operations, but also to provide the ammunition for offensive actions. One of the main tactics in contemporary elections is the relentless zeroing in on any weakness they see in the other side. This is an



er advantaged incumbents over oppositions, and where  
y in the resources available. Parties in government  
ocracies to search for statements to target opposition

figures.

McNair (2000, p.123) has correctly observed that most of the individual elements of spin doctoring predate World War II by a considerable amount. Public opinion polling began in the United States before World War II, and the parties gradually started to do their own. Politicians have always kept files on their opponents' statements, and sought ammunition to attack them. The evolution of the position of press secretary has been going on for a long period. All these individual activities substantially pre-date the coining of the phrase spin doctor.

News management practices also have a history that is almost as old as democratic politics. Brian Dale, press secretary to New South Wales Premier Neville Wran in the 1970s, claimed that they had discovered Sunday (1985), traditionally a slow news day, but with large media audiences for the Sunday night TV shows. In fact, not only could other contemporary politicians claim to have been practicing the same tactic, but variants of it go back at least to the early twentieth century. President Theodore Roosevelt claimed that he had 'discovered Mondays'. He knew all the reporters needed something for their papers, but there was not much news happening on the Sabbath, so he could get prominent coverage of any announcement he gave them (Sigal 1973, p.101).

Nevertheless to emphasise the antiquity of the individual antecedents of spin is fundamentally misleading. In the contemporary spin doctoring industry, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. What is new is the intensity of the enterprise, the huge amount of resources devoted to the effort; the integrated and professional approach to it; and the capacity for speedy action and response. What used to be done casually and sporadically and slowly is now done professionally and systematically and immediately. There has never in history been anything to parallel this effort.

Public relations is often said to have begun in America in the period following World War I (Tumber 2001), with one of its earliest practitioners and prophets Edward Bernays proclaiming its possibilities, while social analyst Walter Lippmann observed that a new age of opinion management had arrived. Davis (2002) and others have charted its rising scale in recent decades, while according to the *Economist* (January 21, 2006) even between 1999 and 2005, spending on public relations in America grew from \$2.3 billion to \$3.7 billion. It is equally important to understand its changing scope. Harold Burson summarized the history of public relations as at first clients 'told us 'where' the message, go deliver it'; then it became 'what should our message be?'; now it's 'what should we do?' (Palluszek 2002). In politics a similar process has been at work. As one new Labour spin doctor confided shortly after Blair's historic 1997 election victory, 'what they don't seem to grasp is that communications is not an after thought to our policy. It's central to the whole mission of new Labour' (Franklin 1999 p.19-20).

Political public relations follows its own evolutionary trajectory guided principally by what succeeds. According to Kurtz, Bill Clinton's presidential spokesman, Mike McCurry, 'developed a series of rules and rationalizations to persuade himself that while he sometimes tiptoed up to the line separating flackery from falsehood, he never crossed it (1998 p.15). But if the only inhibition on crossing that line is individual conscience, and if

shment for doing so, the line will be crossed. In its  
tic but politically effective practices (Alterman 2005)  
McCurry's line. An apparently independent  
conservative commentator, Armstrong Williams, was paid \$240,000 to regularly  
comment on how good its education policies were (Faler 2005, Rich 2005). It put out  
television news reports which ran on many local stations, stories which looked like  
independent but were in fact produced by the Government (Economist 2005, Lee 2005).  
An official who wrote several White House documents about global warming came  
straight from the energy industry, and when his role was exposed, returned there (Revkin  
2005). Most bizarrely, it allowed White House access to the correspondent for a far right  
website, *Talon*, Jeff Gannon, aka James Guckert. Bush's spokesman often relied upon  
him in press conferences to ask soft or loaded questions, such as when he asked how  
Bush could work with Congressional Democrats, such as Hillary Clinton, who seem to  
have divorced themselves from reality? (Rich 2005b) After Gannon's problematic past  
was exposed, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, who had initially been rejected  
for a White House press pass at the start of the Bush administration, wondered how  
someone with an alias, a tax evasion problem, and who featured in nude internet pictures  
had been so easily credentialed (Dowd 2005).

Although each of these was exposed, at least in some elite media, they did the  
Administration little political damage. As Kurtz notes (2005b), each administration  
builds on the news manipulation techniques of its predecessors and Mike McCurry now  
struggles to explain what incentive there would be for future White Houses to be more  
open with the media (Robertson 2005, p.31). So spin is constantly evolving, and the key  
question is whether the political environment rewards or punishes pro or anti-democratic  
practices.

### **The Limits of Spin**

The intensity of the enterprise should not be confused with it automatically succeeding. In  
practice it is often impossible to disentangle the role of spin tactics in affecting a political  
outcome. Commentators almost automatically proclaim the superiority of the winning  
side's spin. Conversely, it is always easiest for a losing party or a government in trouble  
to blame inferior public relations, although this can be wishful thinking, or a deliberate  
masking of deeper problems.

A multitude of factors mitigate against the success of political PR strategies (Tiffen 1989,  
p.85f). The precepts of image enhancement are more easily stated than achieved. The  
attempt to look like a strong leader often leads to hollow and unconvincing posturing.  
Very often attacks on opponents appear only as empty smears and scare tactics. Moreover,  
the media focus tends to be on the most successful spin doctors, picturing them as  
superstar Svengalis. But far more common, of course, are pedestrian time servers, and as  
one would expect in an activity that is far more art than science and for which there is no  
recognised professional training, there are huge variations in competence.

Most basically however politics always interferes with the practice of spin. In party  
politics, one side is always seeking to puncture the claims of the other, and although  
incumbency gives great advantages, there is always an oppositional spin to counter the  
government spin.

unity and coherence needed for successful spin is good. The contemporary spin enterprise is inextricably control within parties and governments (Kuhn 2002).

This inevitably creates its own frictions, especially as the principal spin doctors tend to identify the government's interest with the leader's. This became an important sub-theme during the British Government's crisis over the Westland affair of 1986. The charge was that Prime Minister Thatcher's press secretary, Bernard Ingham, was leaking against her rival in cabinet, Michael Heseltine (Seymour-Ure 2003). Then as New Labour radically centralized government information services, and further politicized bureaucratic information processes, criticisms, such as the following, have become common:

Whitehall's standards watchdog today warned that the government's continued failure to rein in its spin doctors would result in the "further erosion of trust in public officeholders" (Happold 2004).

Downing Street's cavalier attitude to policy making and presentation has driven public trust in the government to record lows, according to the leaked minutes of a meeting of Whitehall communications chiefs. "The speed of the leak" suggests that someone high in this branch of the civil service was determined to damage ministers (Wintour 2004)

The interaction of spin processes and decision processes can also impact on the quality of policy. Robert Reich (2005) asserts that "no White House in modern history has been as adept at politics and as ham-fisted at governing" and likens the current Bush administration to the ineptitude of Warren Harding. But he sees a link in the orchestration of all levels of government to stay on message. He argues that the "same discipline and organisation that's made the White House into a hugely effective political machine has hobbled its capacity to govern." "The squelching of troublesome information" is effective in the short-term in keeping the media and opposition parties at bay, but prevents top policy makers getting the data and perspectives they need to make effective policy.

The spin doctors' quest for control is frequently frustrated by the speed and uncertainty of political developments, especially during developing crises and scandals. Political figures caught up in a scandal must make decisions under duress, uncertain what is the best strategy to contain the episode, but often engaging in responses which fuel it further. Indeed a common development in scandals is that secondary themes develop, based not just on the original allegation but on political figures' responses to it (Tiffen 1999), leading to the common claim that the cover up caused more damage than the original offence.

In February 2006, Vice President Cheney accidentally shot his hunting companion Harry Whittington. The strategy of releasing information to favoured outlets instead of in a more routine way from the White House may or may not have reduced the total political embarrassment flowing from the incident. The first account was given by Cheney's friend and the hostess for the hunting party, Katharine Armstrong, to the small local paper, the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, from where it was picked up by the national media. Four days later, amid a gathering clamour at the lack of information and the lack of access to the central figure, the Vice President granted an exclusive interview to Fox News, again forcing the rest of the media to follow up his preferred outlet. It is not at all clear that



media coverage, and indeed Cheney's post-shooting (Blumenthal 2006).

In a 2003 case involving the British royal family some observers blamed Prince Charles's minders for the way the crisis escalated. In November, while the Prince was on a tour of India, his most senior aide, Sir Michael Peat, took what many newspapers described as the extraordinary step of issuing a public denial of as-yet unpublished rumours involving the Prince's household. The statement was made soon after a court victory by the *Guardian* granting the newspaper the right to name Michael Fawcett as the former royal servant who had obtained an injunction last weekend banning a Sunday paper (*Mail on Sunday*) from printing material about him.

The following days produced a media frenzy, especially among the tabloid press. Except for their unresolved and sordid nature the details are not important here. But immediately afterwards, analysts were asking -how did a single, unprinted tabloid story blow up into an international scandal that even the normally supportive *Daily Mail* says could destroy the monarchy? Some charged that -by acknowledging his role in the alleged incident, Charles had fanned the flames of the scandal. It gave a licence to publish a story which the press would have otherwise been reluctant to publish.

But others thought the opposite. -We could not let the rumours and innuendo continue. In this job you're damned if you speak out and damned if you don't (Harris 2003). -Generally our strategy has worked. The story was a pre-emptive strike and we got there just in time, said another aide (Davies 2003). Whatever the truth in this particular case, the general dilemma for spin doctors is that it is often impossible to calculate whether their responses will stop negative charges or feed further attention to them.

### **Counter-productive spin doctoring**

The thesis of this article is not only that spin is more limited in its efficacy than is sometimes pictured, but that its practice has inherent vulnerabilities. In particular, the activities that make for effective spin doctoring can easily create their own pathologies.

#### **1. Spin is precarious because it is by nature a self-denying activity.**

Presidents -must try to master the art of manipulating the media not only to win in politics but í at the same time they must avoid at all costs the charge of trying to manipulate the media. (Nixon, 1978 p.354)

Because they must give the appearance of not manipulating the media, and yet because the manipulative activities are so ubiquitous, there is often the potential for unflattering news attention. Most of the time journalists and minders work with a tacit compact that the backstage activities will not be revealed, but every so often the facades are torn down, and when the spin doctors' invisibility is blown, the coverage is nearly always damaging and looks unpalatable. And over-reaching is a constant temptation for strong spin doctors. When the backstage efforts of Alastair Campbell and Downing Street to have a higher profile for Blair at the Queen Mother's funeral were revealed, they created far more negative publicity (Preston 2002) than the positive image that would have been gained had he succeeded.

of spin being exposed came in October 2005, when conversations with troops in Iraq were exposed as being. As a result, television journalists for once had a field day exposing the sleight of hand to which they are more often accessories. The video of a senior Pentagon official coaching the troops on how to answer the president before the event made for much better television than the event itself, and earned the White House universally critical coverage (Fromkin 2005b).

The cynicism with which spin doctors treat their tasks can seem shocking when transposed against tragic events. The most infamous example was Jo Moore, a minder for the British Transport Minister (Franklin 2003), sending an email to other staff on September 11 after the news of the attacks on the World Trade Centre, saying that today is a very good day to get out anything we want to bury. For at least one recipient, this was a cynicism too far and the email was leaked.

Almost as high on the incongruity scale was the leaking of emails regarding Michael Brown, head of the federal agency in charge of the relief effort after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. While the Government's response was being criticized, Brown and his assistant Sharon Worthy swapped notes about his clothing and TV appearance. Worthy emailed: Please roll up the sleeves of your shirt, all shirts. Even the President rolled his sleeves up just below the elbow. In this crisis and on TV you just need to look more hard-working (Kurtz 2005a).

Frank Rich (2005b) observed that once Toto parts the curtain, the Wizard of Oz can never be the wizard again. He is forever Professor Marvel, blowhard and snake-oil salesman. One would like to believe this is true and on some occasions for some groups it is but equally the media often seem to come back for more in the next news cycle. Nevertheless media exposure of backstage machinations can sometimes severely embarrass the spin doctors and their cause.

## 2. Spin tends to be a self-diminishing resource

Not only is spin subject to exposure, but its use sometimes tends to build up resistance and resentment on those upon whom it succeeds, and induces opponents to take counter-action. The effectiveness of spin relies on using the media effectively, and so despite the general protestations to the contrary, there is often tacit co-operation between them. While their interests may sometimes overlap, their orientations are different, and their purposes conflict. This means that the interactions between them are often marked by irritants, which can grow into issues of credibility. The partisan purpose of politicians can cut across journalists' sense of professionalism.

Sky TV reporter Adam Boulton reflected on the experience of reporting on new Labour: on a good day, you can see an intelligent, honest administration at work. On a bad day I feel soiled, when we end up seeing the press conniving in our own manipulation (Franklin 2003, p.46). When the *Independent* carried a critical story the editor, even though generally politically sympathetic, fell foul of the Labour team. Alastair Campbell told him, you are either with us or against us (Franklin 2003, p.46). Such an attitude is fundamentally demeaning to journalists' professionalism. The carrot and stick approach of politicians, rewarding journalists for favourable stories and punishing them for unfavourable ones, is at cross-purposes with the orientation of journalists to follow a story

Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, popular with many reasons, was also infamous for this attitude. Keating's tactics: promises and threats. Buy it and you would be on the drip; reject it and no drip, and probably a lot of abuse (Grattan 1998, p.42). At the best this can produce a brittle relationship; the trading mentality might sometimes produce short-term results, but is also felt to be bullying, and stimulating resentment.

Part of the response to the exercise of spin is increasing attention by both journalists and political opponents to the tactics used. Esser et al (2001) say that in election campaigns there is increasing emphasis on behind the scenes reporting, including a focus on media manipulation and the activities of spin doctors. Several analysts have written about the increasing journalistic emphasis on political process, analysing the meaning of political events from the viewpoint of spin and presentation rather than policy substance (McNair 2004, p.332). The practice of spin itself becomes a source of attack, and indeed this has become one of the Conservatives' most common critical themes against New Labour, and spin (had) come to be the shorthand which sums up Labour's reputation for over-promising and under-achieving (Gewirtz et al 2004, p.324). Even during Labour's march to triumphal re-election in 2001, Gallup polls reported that three-fourths of the public wanted the government to place greater emphasis on practical achievement and less on presentation (Norris 2001).

### **3. Spin tends to represent the triumph of tactics over strategy.**

### **4. Overkill – minor battles escalate into major embarrassments**

What sorts of people become successful spin doctors? One characteristic is an unquestioning allegiance to their own side - The notion that Clinton might deserve whatever criticism the paper was dishing out seemed not to have crossed McCurry's mind (Kurtz 1998 p.46) - and believing the end justifies the means. They then apply themselves to those means with a determination and skill and flair. They know news formats and news cycles intimately and have a great feel for exploiting them - Alastair Campbell is a tabloid journalist to his fingertips. Their focus is very much on the immediate, on how to achieve a two day bounce for good news, for example (Kurtz 1998). This combination of tactical sense and combativeness, of a complete absorption in the immediate with a huge will to win, is what makes them so successful. But strengths can also become weaknesses, and these normally effective traits instead become counter-productive. Their concentration on tactics can set up longer term strategic problems, and their combativeness can unnecessarily escalate minor problems into more major conflicts.

Despite their ability to influence short-term appearances, the tactical successes can set up longer-term targets. They set up a record of claims and promises against which later developments will be measured. As the apocryphal journalist asked at a military briefing in Vietnam, 'Yes General, but aren't your victories getting closer to Saigon?'

The most spectacular recent example of leaders still being hostages to history was George Bush in May 2003 declaring on the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, in front of cheering troops and under a large banner proclaiming 'Mission Accomplished' that in Iraq the United States and its allies had prevailed. It was wonderful television, and looked as if it could become the basis for an advertisement in the 2004 election, before subsequent developments in Iraq destroyed that possibility.

Following the failure of the Anglo-American allies to act in Iraq, both the American and British governments faced criticism that they had misrepresented the evidence in the build-up to the pre-emptive war. In both countries, strangely parallel cases of iatrogenic spin doctoring resulted. In both following a critical news story, the government responded by seeking to discredit their critic, but instead of minimizing the story's impact, their response generated prolonged crises.

The American case known as "Plamegate" had its origins when retired ambassador Joseph Wilson was sent to Niger by the CIA in early 2002 to investigate claims that Saddam was trying to import uranium as part of a nuclear weapons program. Wilson established that there was no truth to the claim, and exposed that there had been crude forgery involved in the so-called evidence presented.

Despite Wilson's authoritative refutation, the claim re-surfaced nearly a year later in President Bush's state of the union address. After the war, in July 2003, Wilson wrote that the White House knew the claim was false when Bush used it. Eight days after this article, presumably in an attempt to discredit Wilson, it was leaked that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, was a serving undercover CIA agent, and it was only her influence that led to Wilson being given the mission. This story was floated with several journalists, but the only one initially to publish the story was conservative commentator Robert Novak on July 12.

Instead of discrediting Wilson and disposing of his claims, the leak began a new political drama. Revealing the identity of an undercover CIA agent is a crime. The story caused great anger inside the CIA, and finally in late September an official inquiry into the leak was instigated. Eventually at New Year, an independent prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald was appointed. The story again disappeared for a period, but reappeared dramatically when two journalists who had not written stories were faced with jail for refusing to divulge their sources. Eventually Judith Miller of the *New York Times* went to jail for some months before revealing that Vice President Cheney's chief of staff Lewis Libby was her source. Libby was eventually indicted on a charge of perjury and the indictment coming more than two years after the original leak - and the court case is scheduled for 2007.

The affair has become enormously protracted, partly because some of the accused seem determined to delay it reaching a climax. It has taken on many permutations which could not have been imagined at the outset, and at times has achieved great intensity in the media, especially when there has been speculation that it could bring the ruin of Karl Rove.

The parallel case in Britain began with a report on BBC breakfast radio by investigative reporter Andrew Gilligan. In a series of telephoned exchanges with the program's presenter, Gilligan said that intelligence sources had said the government "sexed up" the evidence in the dossier it had issued in its September 2002 dossier on Iraq's WMD. This brought a huge reaction from Alastair Campbell and those around Blair. The Ministry of Defence allowed the fact that the defence scientist David Kelly was the source for Gilligan's story to dribble into the public domain. Amid enormous pressure, Dr Kelly committed suicide, and this tragedy set a whole different chain of events into action. The inquiry under Lord Hutton had weeks of public hearings. While eventually Hutton's Report exonerated all senior members of the government, its weeks of public hearings had brought many embarrassing revelations that greatly damaged the Government's credibility.

in this sordid and terrible affair (Doig 2004, Phythian  
verkill escalated the crisis to a new dimension, raising  
the stakes greatly for everyone concerned. His determination to win this battle was the  
sort of error of judgement, the loss of a larger perspective, that such a combative tactician  
would make. There was also an element of hubris and perhaps exhaustion in his  
behaviour. The crisis gave journalists a licence to write about Campbell, and many had  
long stored resentments about their treatment by him. He had been the private bad cop  
that had allowed Tony Blair to be the public good cop. By the time of the Hutton Report,  
a poll showed a huge loss of trust in Blair, with fully 51 per cent saying he should resign,  
and 54 per cent that he had lied to the nation (Waugh 2004). Campbell himself had  
departed, and there was an inquiry into the government's communication practices.

## Conclusion

The rise of spin is perverse testimony to the strength of the political demands of the media  
and of democracy. It is evidence that more coercive means of political control will not  
suffice. The gradual professionalisation of the activities to which (the term spin) refers  
was organically entwined with the evolution of liberal democracy (McNair 2000, p.123).

While critics deplore the rise of spin, sometimes in a misleadingly one-sided way (McNair  
2004; Atkinson 2005), the more important point is to recognize how the incentives of the  
political environment in which the battle for media coverage and public opinion are so  
central have made the growth of spin irreversible. To return to some of the quotes in the  
introduction, Coulthart said 'until we get rid of the spin doctors nothing is going to  
change'. If what Coulthart says is true, then nothing is going to change. Similarly John  
Major was scathing about the amount of resources New Labour devotes to spin and the  
relentlessness of its efforts. In other words, we did it a bit, but they do it more. It is not a  
realistic solution for professionals to become amateur again, or to become more  
gentlemanly, or to pretend that they will devote fewer resources to their efforts.

Spin does not transcend and trump all other political resources. No Orwellian dystopia of  
all powerful spin doctors is imminent. Like most black magic its power is much reduced  
when it is subjected to close and constant scrutiny. The relationship between politicians  
and the media should be seen as three interacting sets of games: politicians versus  
politicians; journalists competing with each other; and politicians and journalists relating  
to each for their own advantage. The dangers of spin are most pronounced when these  
relationships become unbalanced. If resources are unequally distributed, for example  
government in relation to opposition or media, then the risks to democracy are greater.  
Much of the time one side's spin is neutralised by their opponents. Similarly the power of  
spin is increased when in the name of productivity, journalistic resources are cut and the  
weakened media industry remains an easy prey for an increasingly powerful and predatory  
PR sector (Davis 2002 p.40). If so, the democratic problem is not so much spin doctor  
activity as news media passivity. In the future, the scale and professionalism of the spin  
enterprise are likely to keep on increasing, but its pursuit will continue to be as fallible, as  
subject to hubris and miscalculation, as confounded by opponents and observers, as other  
parts of democratic politics.



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