

Interpretation of “spin doctoring”

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Abstract

The concept of “spin doctoring” has become significant in recent years for some interlocking reasons, including the rising role of production and allocation of symbolic resources in sustaining the established social structure, the media’s heightened political role. In the spin doctor age, the interrelationship between politicians, the media and the public, which is dialectical, has become more sophisticated. By and large, these three players in the political process are interdependent on each other at the one hand, but conflict with each other on the other hand. Despite the criticism of spin doctoring, it seems that in the foreseeable future, spin doctors will remain well alive or even flourish.

Key Words: spin doctor; media; symbolic governance; ruling elites

1 Media’s Heightened Political Role

1.1 Hegemonic Role

It is now consensus that legitimacy of liberal democratic government is founded on the consent of the governed. And consent, as Walter Lippman (1922) observed, can be manufactured when politicians employ the techniques of social psychology and “press agents” (quoted in McNair, 1999:26). Then how can the ruling elites mobilise consent successfully? Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci referred to their *hegemonic* position, by which he meant there was no need to protect the social structure by coercion and force of the army, but that citizens contented to the system, and their place within it (quoted in McNair, 1999:62). According to him, the maintenance of the hegemony was a *cultural* process, in which media plays a great role by “reinforcing and reproducing a generalised popular consensus about the inherent viability of the system as a whole” (Daniel Hallin, quoted in McNair, 1999:62). That is, the media’s major political role is to construct and maintain the dominant ideology. In this spirit, to reduce the cost of governance, it is vitally necessary for the ruling elites to foster or even force a cooperative relationship with media.

Meanwhile, in our information age, to understand the sea change in the global village is of unprecedented significance to strengthening our sense of safety and security, and thus the capacity to interpret the up-to-minute change over the globe is a prime index of the efficiency and qualification of an individual or institution. In this situation, the role of media and spin doctors became more prominent.

1.2 Electioneering Demand

The media’s political role is highlighted by electioneering campaigns. Media not only transmits but also transforms the political message in various ways. Media is a vital political actor in its own right, boasting its unparalleled capacity to assemble and disseminate information so effectively. Therefore, “It is impossible for any party to win a British general election without a majority of the press (as measured in share of circulation) behind it” (Martin Linton, quoted in McNair, 1999:60). In reality, no party would run the risk of cutting itself from the main means of communication available for fear that their opponents monopolise the campaign.

1.2.1 TV: Campaigns Carrier

The birth of television has dramatically changed the mediascape and therefore the electioneering campaign. John F. Kennedy (1960) recognised that “It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide” (quoted in Watts, 1997:124).

The medium is the message. Television “has changed what is said, as well as how it is said” (Watts, 1997:139). Watts (1997:140) believes that “In an age of television, viewers make their assessment based on the visual image than the spoken words, and propaganda works more effectively if it engages the emotions rather than the intellect, if it emphasises themes rather than policies”. Realising that they have neither the time, expertise or inclination to build a fruitful relationship with media, the political elites saw the urgent need to introduce professional operations into political campaigns. In this light, Watts (1997:139) concluded that “The medium of television has allowed the political consultants to flourish”.

2 Criticism of Spin Doctoring

2.1 The Matthew Effect in Politics

“In America today, without good professional help, if you are running against a person who has professional help, you have virtually no chance of being elected”, commented Raymond Strother, the consultant to the Democratic Party (quoted in Watts, 1997:139). Understandably, the number of political consultants in USA has increased to 10,000, compared to only 100 two decades ago (ibid). Also, the cost of campaigns has risen sharply. “In America, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on elections for everything from presidents to local dog-catchers”(McNair, 1999:40).

In the UK, the number of spin doctors in Whitehall has risen from 38 to 81 since the Labour came to power in 1997 [2]. Accordingly, the annual bill from the Central Office of Information has risen from £111 million in 1997 to £273 million in 2002, which was criticised by the Conservatives [3].

This trend not only adds to the financial burdens of citizens, parties and governments, but worse, it discriminates against those without access to financial resources. The PR-rich actors are more likely to obtain more power and in turn enlist more financial support while the PR-poor are less likely to be elected and thus feel harder to attract more financial support. This forms a vicious circle, which I would like to term as “the Matthew effect in politics”. This trend, I am afraid, will keep the marginalized political actors away from the mainstream of the political process and eventually damage the democratic base.

2.2 Spingate Affair

Ms Jo Moore, a special adviser to the transport secretary of Blair administration, emailed colleagues within minutes of September 11 attacks suggesting it was “a very good day to get out anything we want to bury”. She also suggests “council expense” as one possible candidate for a story needing “burying”, which means that the local authorities set their own expense and allowance levels. This memo incited harsh criticism of not only Ms Moore but also of all the spin doctors, because it was argued that the memo revealed the spin doctors’ “black arts” and “heartless cynicism”[4].

The spingate affair brought about heated debate over spin doctor use. Some call for an end to spin doctoring, and others advocate regulation of spin doctors. Admittedly, in the UK it is the spingate affair that spotlighted spin doctoring.

3 Interrelationship Between Politicians, the Media and the Public

The interrelationship between the aforementioned three political factors is dialectical, involving act and react. They depend on each other but also conflict with each other. From the standpoint of the political elites, the role of the spin doctors is to “upgrade” the interrelationship between the three factors.

3.1 Media and Politicians

Obviously, the politicians desperately need media (and spin doctors), which was illustrated by journalist Martin Woolcott: “If you are visible on television and in the papers, you are attended to. If you are invisible you are dead, sometimes literally so”(quoted in McNair, 1999:53). Firstly, politicians have realised that they can be packaged and sold to the public via media with the professional help of their spin doctors. To succeed in politics, the politicians must clearly preach their message which the voters favour. Secondly, politicians need media’s help to set agenda favourable to politicians. Media can achieve this target by highlighting some issues and neglecting others. Thirdly, “The media could be seen to legitimate government action, and then to provide the channels through which policy was implemented.

The net effect of press and TV attention was to establish a climate of opinion which requires governmental action, or gestures of action” (Greenway et al, 1992, quoted in McNair, 1999:53). Sharing mutual interests with their masters, the spin doctors seem very proud to stand between politicians and media.

In the meantime, the media needs to cultivate a pleasant relationship with politicians and spin doctors. Above all, the sharp competition between media compels them to fight for more sellable information to fill the expanding space and airtime while political issues account for the majority of media coverage. Worse, to meet the deadlines, newswriters have to save time. To comprehend the quick changing political climate, they have to approach politicians and more often, their special advisers, to take the political temperature, to confirm their information and judgement, etc. Finally, some politicians have the right to regulate media.

But also clearly, the relationship between the politicians (and their advisers) and the media are naturally tense. First of all, they have different agenda and priorities. Media, particularly those in the developed countries, “wishes to expose wrongdoings and spotlight the failure of government policy” while government “wishes to highlight its achievements rather than dwell upon the things left undone or done badly” (Watts, 1997:8). Even when reporting problematic events, the politicians insist on a favourable angle to minimise the negative effects. Moreover, politicians and their advisers attempt to control the information flow into the public sphere, but media wouldn’t like to accept “managed” information. Media have to counterspin or de-spin (as I term it) the “managed” information, which adds difficulty to their routine work. Furthermore, as spin doctors struggle to dominate the interpretation and dissemination of political message, the media practitioners’ traditionally defined social status is challenged to a great extent. Honestly, as far as I can see, the relationship between the media and spin doctors and between spin doctors and the public, will become tenser in the future.

3.2 The Public and Spin Doctors

Some sociologists argue that the growing role of mass communication in politics represents the extension of capitalist social relations—in particular, the relations of consumption—to the political sphere (quoted in McNair, 1999: 42). In the process, politics has become artificial and degenerate. Jurgen Habermas (ibid) has argued “late capitalism brings with it the manipulation of public opinion through the mass media, the forced articulation of social needs through large organisations, and in short, the management of politics by the ‘system’”.

As Kaid et al (1991, quoted in McNaire, 1999:12) suggest, the political “reality” comprises three categories:

- *objective* reality, comprising the political events as they actually occur,
- *subjective* reality, as perceived by actors and citizens,
- *constructed* reality, as reported by media.

Spin doctors disseminate and interpret political message in order to construct a political “reality” to favour themselves. In this case, “There is a danger that the public can be manipulated, that their doubts and anxieties can be unfairly used by those in power” (Watts, 1997: 141). In fact, what the citizen receives as political information in the public sphere is always incomplete and partial picture of reality (McNaire, 1999:26); it “is the product of several mediating process which are more or less invisible to him or her” (ibid: 25). So to speak, spin doctoring contributes to the damage of the integrity of politics because to rob the citizen of their right to know will obstruct them from informed judgement, which will, to some extent, harm the democratic process.

Luckily, the politicians and their assistants have realised that it is difficult to sell an unwanted message (ibid: 141) because “Sincerity and candour cannot be entirely simulated in a society which still respects these qualities (ibid: 142).

4 The Future of Spin Doctoring

Although “spinning” has become a problem for the government, the media and the public, although some have apologised for spinning, and many have realised the need to regulated spin doctoring, there is little evidence that a “new settlement” will be actually created in the not too distant future. On the contrary, as the political environment sophisticates, it seems to me that spin doctoring will continue to flourish.

At the international level, “spin culture” develops unequally. As the manipulating art perfects in the industrial countries, it is still in its infancy in the developing countries. This implies that “the Matthew effect in politics”, as I expounded previously in this essay, applies to the international politics.

But as the symbolic fight dominates the international relations, the disadvantageous countries will see the urgency to introduce the “black art”. In this case, I predict that the spinning art will be exported in the future as a commodity, which will in turn boost the global political PR market.

As “the regime of consumption” becomes more flexible, continuous change in the mode of regulation is unavoidable. In fact, the input of spin doctoring into the political process reflects the rising significance of symbolic production in sustaining the established social structure in the information age. Possibly, as the world is tiptoeing into the post-information age, and the importance of technological and organisational innovation in the regulatory system becomes more conspicuous, I believe the spinning industry will further prosper in the future even if some tentative regulations are brought into effect in some developed countries.

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Notes

[1] This is an assignment submitted to Mr. Pete Wilby at Coventry University, England on 28 April, 2003.

[2] “Speaker attacks spin doctor use”. 2 January, 2003.

<http://www.epolitix.com/bos/epxnews/0000004CD4F4.htm>

[3] “Cost of spin revealed”. 26 July, 2002. <http://www.epolitix.com/bos/epxnews/000000007221.htm>

[4] “Top spin doctor apologises over war memo”. 9 October, 2001.

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/marketingandpr/story/0,7494,566291,00.html>

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