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The Spin Doctor: An Alternative Model of Public Relations

ABSTRACT: The past 10 or so years have seen the emergence of a new phenomenon in communication—the so-called spin doctor. What is a spin doctor? What does a spin doctor do?

This article suggests that the spin doctor is a new communication role, and raises questions about its relationship to the traditional public relations model. It also discusses the implications of this new role for mass communication theory and for the practice of journalism.

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What is a spin doctor? What does a spin doctor do? Is the term just a catch phrase used by the mass media, along with similar phrases such as “sound bite” and “photo op”? The phrase appeared on the 1989 list of overused words and phrases issued annually by Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan,¹ and Matt Groening included it in a list of forbidden words for 1993 in his “Life in Hell” cartoon.² Or does it refer to a genuinely new communication role with unusual potential for manipulating the media, and, in turn, the public?

This article looks at the “spin doctor” phenomenon and attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is a spin doctor?
2. What does a spin doctor do?

3. Who are the spin doctors?
4. What are the effects of spin doctoring?
5. What is the relationship between spin doctoring and traditional public relations?
6. What are the implications of the spin doctor phenomenon for some areas of communication theory?

ORIGIN OF THE TERM

Safire suggests the term “spin doctor” is based on the slang meaning of the verb “to spin.”³ He believes the term originated in the 1950s when “spin” sometimes meant to deceive as in “to spin a yarn.” Safire and others draw the obvious connection with sports terminology: putting spin on a billiard ball, tennis ball, or baseball to make it go in a certain direction. Image-makers and advertisers have long known how to put a favorable spin or angle on a story, he concludes. Specter agrees with the sports analogy and calls spin in the political arena “the blatant art of bending the truth.”⁴

The etymology of the term implies that, while the term isn’t new, reporting about it is.⁵

According to Metter, the concepts of spin and spin doctors fit an advertising or public relations model and are an important component of image making. Publicists use several devices to blur the distinction between editorial content and advertisements to give ads a “journalistic spin.”⁶ These devices include advertorials, long-copy advertisements that mimic news articles; legitimate news stories that “puff” a product, company, or service; “blurb abuse,” the practice of using a favorable quote from a film or book critic in a promotion; and long broadcast commercials like FNN’s six-part series on financial planning. Metter speculates that the media’s recent preoccupation with reporting the activities of spin doctors follows a shift from the premium formerly placed on information in the news to entertainment.

Maltese traces the genesis of “spin control” to the White House Office of Communications during the Nixon presidency.⁷ Presidents Ford and Carter also used the office’s “spin” abilities in an attempt to manage their image problems. Reagan’s spin doctors paid more attention to broadcast media. They wove appealing sound bites into his televised addresses in an effort to manage what appeared on the nightly network news broadcasts.

One source noted before a Bush-Gorbachev summit in 1990 that to White House spin doctors “manipulating expectations is as automatic as breathing.”⁸

Spin doctors also operate in the entertainment field, where movie publicists “operate in the slick new tradition of political handlers, whose job is to reduce a campaign to photo ops and sound bites, keep their candidates away from rancorous reporters and try, ever so discretely, to manage the news.”⁹

Spin doctoring also occurs in the travel promotion field. The American Travel Marketing Executives held a workshop in 1990 on how to market tourism after a

hurricane, earthquake, or oil spill. One tourism booster was quoted as saying, "A hurricane is just a thunderstorm on steroids."¹⁰

WHO ARE THE SPIN DOCTORS?

Who the spin doctors are isn't a secret. Before the 1992 presidential debates, *U.S. News & World Report* offered its readers a line-up of each candidate's spin doctors: The Republicans would use Budget Director Richard Darman, party pollster Robert Teeter, and campaign director James Baker; the Democrats would use Clinton strategist James Carville, consultant Robert Squier, and media adviser Frank Greer; Perot would be his own spin doctor. The magazine also offered examples of the spin doctors' past successes, including Baker's pronouncement after the 1984 Mondale-Reagan debate that "Even if we did as poorly as a draw, we won."¹¹

Master "spin doctors," such as New York City publicist John Scanlon, who has counted the politically and commercially powerful among his friends for years, may use unconventional methods.¹² Scanlon worked in the Eugene McCarthy campaign; Mayor John Lindsay appointed him a deputy commissioner to New York City's Economic Development Administration; and he worked as a public relations representative for investment banker Felix Rohatyn. Scanlon also cultivates powerful media contacts through a variety of methods, including a weekly Long Island softball game with Morton Zuckerman, publisher of *The Atlantic* and *U.S. News & World Report*; John Leo, a *U.S. News* columnist; Walter Issacson, a *Time* writer; magazine designer Walter Bernard; and journalists Carl Bernstein, Richard Reeves, and Ken Auletta. Scanlon undermines an unfavorable story by underscoring excerpts that he considers unbalanced and sending it to the reporter, by calling on his powerful friends in the media, and by mailing lengthy "press releases" to a list of what Scanlon calls opinion-forming elites. This list includes magazine and newspaper editors, quotable academics, journalists, politicians, and business people. Scanlon's aim is to persuade the "people who control not only what gets printed or talked about over the air, but what gets whispered as well. 'I'm a firm believer in the power of gossip,' Scanlon says."¹³

While they may come from the political left or right, master spin doctors share the same assets. They are personally acquainted with media superstars, can hone their message to a single, quotable slogan, and know how to repeatedly flood media channels with that message. These skills and connections give the best spin doctors a sort of "institutional power" that remains even after a political administration changes.¹⁴ Cooper quotes Eric Alterman as identifying New York City attorney Leonard Garment as one of the master spin doctors.¹⁵ Garment was a colleague of Richard Nixon's at the Mudge Rose law firm and worked in the Nixon White House. Different administrations have retained him to insure Senate confirmations or to rehabilitate the images of political appointees accused of wrongdoing. Garment's friends include media superstars Safire, McGrory, Pincus, and Sawyer. He know how to set up an interview with Barbara Walters and has Ben Bradlee's personal phone number.¹⁶

WHAT DO SPIN DOCTORS DO?

Spin doctors, whether in advertising or press relations, use some of the same approaches to image-building tasks. Walcott likened the favorable selling of then President Bush's 1992 State of the Union Address to the techniques PepsiCo Inc. used to sell its new advertising slogan, "Gotta have it!"

The White House orchestrated "structured leaks" of some good news in advance of Bush's speech; Pepsi started running a teaser commercial on January 12. The lobbyists had lined up congressional leaders to comment favorably after the speech; Pepsi bought endorsements from celebrities and hired "Entertainment Tonight" anchors John Tesh and Leeza Gibbons to "report" that the slogan "Gotta Have It" is sweeping the land.¹⁷

Walsh reports that press advisors in the 1984 campaign ritualized the "spin patrol."¹⁸ Partisans would patrol their media contacts immediately after a debate and sell a "favorable spin" for their candidate's performance. After one of the Bush-Clinton debates, Walsh criticized candidates' spin patrols for rigging the free marketplace of ideas. He noted that the spin patrols were armed with "attack lines," which he described as "memorable and entertaining if not entirely true" and "perfect for the nightly news."¹⁹ Writing on the same activity, Specter criticized spin doctors for pursuing reporters into the press room after a 1992 debate.²⁰ He called them "political henchmen, the minders and puppeteers who make their living by calling the Titanic the Love Boat. . . ." ²¹

Media commentators often portray spin doctors as toiling to reverse poor marks in public opinion polls following a government scandal. During the Iran-Contra scandal, for example, then-White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan:

appeared on Good Morning America at 7 a.m., met with three dozen reporters over breakfast at 7:30 a.m., briefed a group of columnists and TV commentators at 10 a.m., talked to network reporters at 1 p.m., took questions from radio reporters at 4:30, and was interviewed by NBC's Tom Brokaw at 5:30. He closed the day with an interview with the New York Times....²²

THE SPIN DOCTOR CONCEPTION OF TRUTH

One way that spin doctors approach the concept of truth is to maintain that every issue has two sides. This position is often taken by spin doctors for unpopular clients. For instance, Brennan Dawson, a spokeswoman for The Tobacco Institute in Washington, has said that people will ask her how she can do what she does, and her answer is that "there are always two points of view."²³

Another view of the truth taken by spin doctors is that truth is relative. This

position is presented by Scanlon in the following exchange with Adam Smith on the television show "Adam Smith's Money World":

SMITH: You've been described as a spin doctor. What is a spin doctor?

SCANLON: I think that what you do when you try to spin a reporter's consciousness or their attention, is to get them to look away from what they're focused on to what you think in fact is more important.

SMITH: Well, given a choice, do you serve your client or the truth?

SCANLON: You always try—you always serve the truth. But again—the truth is often, you know, is often not necessarily a solid. It can be a liquid. I mean, what's—

SMITH: What does that mean?

SCANLON: What seems to be true is not necessarily the case when we look at it and we dissect it and we take it apart, and we turn it around and we look at it from a different perspective.²⁴

SPIN DOCTORS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Most public relations professionals would probably like to distance what they do from the activities of spin doctors. Edward L. Bernays, one of the "fathers" of public relations, has criticized political "operatives" and "lobbyists" and argues that they are not really practicing public relations.²⁵ Much of the activity he criticized seems to be what spin doctors do.

On the other hand, however, another public relations journal ran a piece on John Scanlon in which they referred to him as "the public relations man to have at the trial."²⁶

The spin doctor or spin control model and the traditional public relations model differ on a number of dimensions, including goals, media used, typical clients, common tools, communication techniques, orientations to the public, breadth of appeal, approaches to ethics, and concern with self-image. Some comparisons between the spin doctor approach and the traditional public relations approach are provided in Table 1.

EFFECTS OF SPIN DOCTORS

Some political analysts have expressed doubt about the effect of spin doctors. Before the vice presidential debate in 1988, Adam Clymer, political editor at the *New York Times*, said, "I'm not sure the public pays quite as much attention to all these efforts that campaigns make to set expectations."²⁷ Whether

TABLE 1

Comparison of Two Models of Public Relations		
	<i>The Traditional Public Relations Model</i>	<i>The "Spin Control" or "Spin Doctor" Model</i>
Goals	Active—presenting the “corporate story” in the best possible light, attempting to head off prospective difficulties.	Reactive—attempting to deal with negative turns of events; “brush-fire control”; sometimes pre-emptive, attempting to move before the opposition.
Media	Uses traditional media—speeches, print, television, photographs.	Uses new technology—facsimile transmission, cellular telephones.
Clients	Typically corporations, can be politicians or government.	Typically politicians, government officials, parties involved in court cases, sometimes entertainers or sports teams.
Tools	Stresses direct PR tools—news releases, press conferences, speeches, corporate advertising.	Stresses indirect PR tools—contacts with editors and publishers, the “weekly softball game,” visiting reporters in the press room.
Communication Techniques	Tend to be general—writing, speaking, counseling others in their communication.	Tend to be specific—the 30-second sound bite; talking points (points to get into the news today); “Good news, then bad news” delivery.
Orientation to Public	Stresses “mutual interests” of corporation or government and public.	Stresses getting the client’s interpretation of events into the media.
Breadth of Appeal	Targeting specific “publics.”	Flooding media channels with the client’s message (often in the form of a particular frame or spin).
Approach to Ethics	Stress on being ethical and “truthful.”	Stress on unorthodox methods that get the job done; concept of truth as “liquid.”
Concern with self-image	Preoccupied with becoming a “respected profession,” concerned about being seen as ethical.	Attempt to achieve low visibility, denial of being “spin doctors.”

spin doctors have effects and what kinds of effects they have may not be so simple questions, however.

The spin doctor phenomenon may have some implications for several areas of communication theory, including agenda-setting and the powerful effects model.

An important question still unanswered with regard to agenda-setting is who or what sets the agenda for the press.²⁸ Spin doctors certainly try to influence the press's agenda. They also try to be the first to frame an issue or an event.²⁹ McCombs notes that agenda-setting takes place not only with regard to selection of topics for the news agenda, but also with regard to frames for stories about those topics.³⁰ The spin doctor may play a key role in determining those frames.

The trend in mass communication theory seems to be somewhat away from powerful effects models.³¹ But the spin doctors could be operating at a crucial leverage point that yields some strong effects on mass communication, with that point being the instant at which news is defined and framed.

The functioning of spin doctors also has some implications for discussions of journalistic objectivity. The largest threat to the objectivity of journalism may come not from the subjectivity of the individual journalist, which has often been the focus of concern, but from professional spin doctors attempting to influence the newsmaking process at its very core.

THE PRESS AND SPIN DOCTORS

Many members of the press may need to consider whether they operate too much as adjuncts for spin doctors. Miller has attributed Ronald Reagan's success as a popular and strong-appearing president to "Reagan's team of White House spin doctors, a naive public and an unprobing and too-cozy press."³²

In other cases, the press may find itself dependent on powerful spin doctors who also control access to stories. McDaniel and Fineman report that Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf used 23 minutes worth of video from successful airstrikes and other upbeat comments during a Desert Storm press conference to cushion a later announcement that 12 Marines had been killed.³³ The result was equal billing for the "good" and "bad" stories during evening news broadcasts. McDaniel and Fineman said the press conference tactic was planned by White House, Pentagon, State Department, and CIA officials, who gathered daily during the war to plot a positive administration spin for the coming news cycle.

The most effective spin doctors are those who serve as a nexus for government, business, and the media.³⁴ They are able to move ideas and messages from a variety of sources across media frontiers, a process that Turow calls linking pin activities.³⁵ Turow said the prevalence of these "transmedia impulses" illustrates the need to study how political, economic, cultural, organizational, and industrial cross-currents can simultaneously push certain subjects through the newswork process of several types of media outlets.

CONCLUSIONS

The term "spin doctor" does appear to be more than a catch phrase—there is evidence it refers to a genuinely new communication role. The role differs

from that of the traditional public relations practitioner by putting greater stress on personal contacts with the media, by attempting to intervene earlier in the newsmaking process, by using new technology to greater advantage, and in other ways.

The spin doctors seem to have found ways of circumnavigating the reporter's traditional wariness of the source who is an advocate, and they seem to be more skilled at this than the traditional public relations practitioner. One of the major implications of spin doctoring for journalists is that reporters should attempt to find means of newsgathering that are less dependent on the spin doctors. For instance, journalists should be able to analyze and report on presidential election debates without having to depend on representatives of the candidates to tell them what happened and who did what.

The field of public relations also needs to come to terms with the spin doctor phenomenon. A cursory review of some public relations textbooks suggests little discussion of the role, and, indeed, some rather drastic differences between spin doctoring and standard public relations activities. Do public relations practitioners want to distance themselves from the spin doctor phenomenon, as Bernays appears to be recommending? Do they want to claim the spin doctors as part of their fold? Or do they want to select what is effective from the spin doctor repertoire and incorporate it into the traditional public relations model, while ignoring the rest?

The spin doctor conception of truth, and the ethics of spin doctors, would also seem to be topics worthy of further discussion.

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