Essay:

Spinning the fabric of reality

Author:

Stephen Stockwell

Pity the poor spin doctors. Few occupations are more despised than theirs but then few occupations offer such power with so little responsibility. We all know who the spin doctors are. They are the nasty, nefarious types, stashed in politicians' back offices, twisting words to mean whatever they want them to mean. They are commonly held to be responsible for the media's mendacity and democracy's decline. They convinced us to go to war in Iraq over weapons of mass destruction that were not there. They declared "mission accomplished" when it had barely begun. They threw the children overboard. Every day they are busy spinning yesterday's denial into tomorrow's full and frank admission. They will say anything as long as it advances the cause of whoever is paying their fees.

But now spin doctors have gone on the counter-attack about their own image. ABC metropolitan morning radio in most states has recently added weekly sessions with spin doctors from government and business who explain how the news of the week has been managed. Of course, these sessions are never very critical of public relations practice and they never tell about the dirty deeds that go on behind the scenes but they do draw our attention to the ubiquity of spin. Perhaps this is the right time to consider the spin doctor's place in the world, particularly as public relations practises now determine how governments do their work and, in particular, wage war.

The Simpsons, that indispensable guide to modern mores, has summarised the spin-doctor situation for all. When a three-eyed fish is found near Mr Burns's nuclear power plant, he becomes desperate to roll back health and safety regulation and decides to run for governor. His campaign team boasts not only a spin doctor, a joke writer and a make-up man but also a muck-raker, a character assassin, a mud-slinger and a garbologist. It is the politics of the bottom-feeders.

In the end, despite the spin doctor naming the fish Blinky and coming up with a sterling defence of the creature as an evolutionary necessity, Marge Simpson out-spins them all by serving up the three-eyed fish for Mr Burns's televised dinner the night before

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the election. It is a spin doctor's nightmare when Mr Burns spits out the fish and destroys his credibility on live television.

The West Wing's communications director Toby Ziegler (played by Richard Schiff) provides an alternative to *The Simpsons* stereotype. Toby is confused, moody, soul-searching and often transfixed in the headlights of another onrushing dilemma, desperately clinging to certainties that turn to dust in his hands, finally saving the day with nothing more than an obscure code of personal honour and recourse to networks and techniques honed through years of failure. Toby, like many spin doctors, is still an idealist. That is why he is working in politics and not making 10 times the salary as a corporate media consultant. But he is an idealist who has come to an accommodation with the pragmatism that successful politics requires in order to achieve what he can.

While spin doctors tend to be more *West Wing* than *Simpsons,* they all want to be *Wag the Dog*'s Conrad Brean (played by Robert De Niro). Created by David Mamet and Hilary Henken, this character has such a command of the possibilities of the mediasphere that he can create the appearance of a small war with Albania to get a United States president re-elected despite the president's indiscretions with an under-age girl. Conrad Brean is a master at messing with the fabric of reality.

This is the attraction of the position. Sure, the job is despised, the pay is comparatively lousy and the spin doctor will be blamed for any problems, yet be strangely absent when the kudos are distributed. But, in the meantime, the spin doctor has the opportunity to sculpt the terrain on which public debate occurs and to play the puppet-master, crafting the words and images that create the future. And it *is* a craft because spin doctors are doing more than just spinning a web to catch our minds. The application of spin is subtle work, just ask the spin bowler in cricket or the pitcher in baseball. Ideas of dip, drift, turn and bounce are central to the craft whether you are working with a ball or words.

The origins of spin lie deep in human history, in the unifying legends and murderous quips of the tribal bard and the rhetorical science of ancient Greek democracy catalogued so methodically by Aristotle. Politics has always been a contest between narratives, and Machiavelli advised his prince of the wisdom in opposing the fortune one is handed in favour of the story, and persona, most likely to achieve success: "Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are."

The "father of public relations", Edward L. Bernays, began to appreciate the potential of public relations techniques while working as a propagandist at the US Committee on Public Information during the First World War. Bernays understood that public relations and spin were essential parts of modern politics because they were the only tools available to convince people of a proposition in a media-saturated mass society. As

societies become larger and more complex, as traditional communications networks found at church, in the trade unions and through the community start to break down in the face of national and global institutions, then the techniques of public relations are more important not only in marshalling the vote to win elections but also in managing all communications between government, corporations, interest groups and the public.

During the 1920s, Bernays tutored politicians on the use of the media and the "engineering of consent". His skill became evident when he was retained to humanise the austere and dour president, Calvin Coolidge. He took a group of celebrities for breakfast at the White House only to find the president in a very bad mood. The spin he put on the event nevertheless won the humanising headline: "President nearly laughs".

While political persuasion has always facilitated fabulism, Bernays unintentionally revealed the particular dangers in the commercial application of public relations techniques in a 1928 stunt. He was employed by a tobacco company to promote smoking among women and, leveraging the work of the suffragette movement, Bernays organised a group of women to flout the prohibition on women smoking in public by lighting up their "torches of freedom" on Fifth Avenue in New York. Cigarette sales went up but at a great cost to women's health.

Since Bernays's time as a World War I propagandist, there has been a complex cross-development of political and commercial persuasion techniques to produce a massive marketing enterprise both in the US and around the world. While the imperatives of consumer marketing fuelled the economic growth of the past century, political marketing has replaced old-fashioned electioneering and created the political campaign industry. This marketing enterprise uses quantitative and qualitative research, message and image development, news management, advertising and direct contact, strategic game playing and the early adoption of new technologies to compete for customers, clients and political support.

It is not surprising, given the origins of marketing practises in military propaganda, that the military is now making use of these techniques in the pursuit of its broader objectives. The philosophy of marketing has returned to become a key plank in the so-called Revolution of Military Affairs that has developed, particularly in the US, since the first Gulf war. This revolution places information at the core of the military enterprise so that information warfare has evolved beyond traditional intelligence gathering, psychological operations (PSYOPS, as propaganda is now called) and signals intelligence (SIGINT or analysis of the flow of communications that has been a military staple since World War II). Information has become the pre-eminent means by which war is conducted.

Now, the US and other Western military forces seek to use all the techniques of marketing to manage not only opinion on the home front but also the expectations of the enemy. The war in Iraq has extended the information-war concept into new territory: at the outset, this war was waged as entertainment. It is not that the sight of a pathetically armed and disorganised rabble being blasted to oblivion by a massively armed military machine is in itself entertaining, though the ratings were not bad. Rather the US war machine has learnt much from the entertainment industry and is now pursuing battle plans that treat the "enemy" as the audience. This is what shock and awe is all about - give them a big production number and their hearts and minds will follow.

The entertainment paradigm was at the forefront of US conceptions of the Iraqi war. The words of one senior White House official sum up the approach: "Boom, boom, we're going in hard and fast," the official said. "By this time next week, sit by your TV and get ready to watch the fireworks." War as entertainment even played a role in focusing the efforts of US troops. As US Navy Vice-Admiral Timothy Keating told a massed meeting of US personnel just before the war: "Make no mistake, when the President says 'go', look out, it's hammer time." This a direct reference to the stylings of rap musician, MC Hammer.

The problem in Iraq is that the enemy leadership, that loose non-coalition of al-Qaeda, Shiite militants and Baathist remnants, understand the precepts of information warfare and have their own phalanx of spin doctors tending the information flow. They certainly have no compunction about the use of new technologies to subvert and divert US efforts. As an enemy, they revel in not playing by the US rules and the US has forgotten the power of the active audience. As US Army Lieutenant General William S. Wallace was heard to complain: "The enemy we're fighting is a bit different to the one we war-gamed against …"

Complicating the situation for the US is the enemy within, not the fifth columnists and ideological traitors of previous wars, but their own most enthusiastic supporters who now have access to new technologies (digital cameras, internet, 3G mobile phones and DVD authoring) that allow them to circulate their proudest moments to a world that interprets those acts as war crimes.

Australia, lacking both the protections of the US First Amendment and the bustling, brawling press of Fleet Street, has developed a whole-of-government approach to media management that is fundamentally changing the nexus between politics and the media. Over the past 20 years, governments from both sides of politics have been party to decreasing transparency and increasing involvement in the management of public expectations. The Hawke and Keating governments created the National Media Liaison

Service (nicknamed the aNiMaLS) to monitor and interact with the media. Members of parliament had access to sophisticated computer databases to track each constituent. Whole electorates were phone-polled to ascertain voters' individual intentions. More recently, the Howard Government has systematised its relations with the public to circumvent the media where it can and to control the media otherwise.

John Howard likes to portray himself as a politician with an innate feel for the Australian people so that when he speaks his mind he is speaking for all Australians. This is true only because Howard has developed a comprehensive polling capability and immaculate media skills that allow him to play back what people are thinking with his own spin as they are thinking it. Thus he has been successful in "fusing his ideology onto the national psyche", as Bill Hayden puts it.

Howard honed his information-management skills through long years of trial and error. From his failure to grab the economic agenda as Malcolm Fraser's treasurer in the '70s, through the hokey "incentivation" and "white picket fence" campaigns that doomed his 1987 bid to be prime minister and the loss of agenda control that prompted the Peacock coup that retook the Liberal leadership, to his long period in the wilderness in the early '90s, Howard learnt a lot about how the media works and how public opinion is formed.

He re-emerged in 1995 with the skilful non-campaign that neutered the Canberra press gallery and toppled Paul Keating.

Liberal Party pollster Mark Textor ably assisted Howard by developing soft rhetoric on ideological objectives in industrial relations and the environment, skilfully playing the race card in a circumspect fashion and totally avoiding the tax issue by issuing the blanket "never, ever" formula on the goods and service tax. Howard's successful 1996 election strategy was to give broad and bland headland speeches then avoid controversy and only release his policies in the last weeks of the campaign.

In government, Howard has built a ruthlessly efficient information-management machine. The University of Queensland's Ian Ward has asked: "Is Australia a PR state?" The answer is that it has become much more than that. From the gun-control campaign he ran after the Port Arthur massacre, Howard has closely managed the information flow to avoid difficult areas of the media and gone directly to the public, either through tame talkback hosts or via advertising and direct mail. This process has not been cheap. MPs' budgets for printing and mailouts have been increased. There's an army of ministerial advisers working behind the scenes to spike stories before they are written so as to sool tame columnists, such as Miranda Devine, onto critics of the Government, such as Anne Summers. Through the Government Communications Unit there is careful co-ordination of the whole Government's advertising budget that reached $100 million in the lead-up to the 2001 election, while funds are cut to NGOs that do not toe the Government line.

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Howard's successes include convincing many Australian republicans to vote against the republic in the 1999 referendum and managing the introduction of the GST in 2000 by making debate irrelevant with a massive advertising spend to the strains of Joe Cocker's *Unchain My Heart*. The failure of image management during the waterfront dispute, allowing news photographers to get pictures of guards in balaclavas with dogs, convinced Howard that he should be even stricter in excluding the media from hot spots.

The 2001 federal election saw Howard at the peak of his information-management powers. The year had not started well: his party was behind in all opinion polls and Labor's Kim Beazley was beginning to outrank him as preferred prime minister. Then the Liberals lost the Western Australia state election and the conservatives were whitewashed in Queensland. Then, in the Ryan by-election, the Liberals lost a heartland seat. But Howard's middle name is Winston and he provided a Churchillian fight-back. His first step was to look at the research, which revealed that education, health, unemployment, environment and family issues were the most important concerns of voters and Labor was seen to be the best party to handle each of these issues.

The only issues on which the Government maintained a lead were tax, economics, defence and immigration. Howard sought ways to use his lead on these issues to win back small-business and blue-collar voters. He commissioned a report from the Federal Liberal Party president, Shane Stone, which said that Howard was seen by the voters as "mean and tricky, out of touch and not listening". The report was leaked so that the Prime Minister could respond that he was addressing these issues and would mend his ways. Appealing directly to the male, working-class "battlers", the Prime Minister ordered cuts to taxes on beer and petrol. To lure back small business, he made the GST collection process simpler and less time-consuming.

But most significant were his moves on immigration and defence. In late August, the Government began taking a hard line against refugees, informing the Norwegian ship Tampa of refugees in distress and so obliging it to take them on board and then refusing the Tampa permission to land them on Australian territory. The Government immediately implemented a strict media-management regime as Howard directed relevant departments to refer all press inquiries direct to ministers' offices. These restrictions ensured the flow of information was limited to a handful of press advisers and only the bare details of the operation were made public.

The Government created an exclusion zone around the Tampa, enforced by the military, which prevented journalists talking to the refugees or photographers getting shots that may have humanised the refugees. And while the Tampa stand-off continued, the events of September 11 occurred and Australian troops were committed to the US "War against Terror" in Afghanistan. The "Pacific Solution" to the Tampa problem and the

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Children Overboard furphy all kept immigration on the front page and made the Labor Party irrelevant to the election.

Most disconcerting in Howard's command-and-control approach to information management is how national security and the military's chain of command are used as excuses to deny transparency. Since the Tampa was declared off limits, Australian journalists have covered US military activity in Iraq while being denied similar access to Australian combatants; Australian journalists were refused access to Howard's barbecue with George Bush for security reasons while US journalists were ushered right in. And draconian laws have been introduced that limit reporting about ASIO.

But over-manipulation of reality does come with costs: Howard's claims that we would "never ever" have a GST, that the children were thrown overboard and that we went to war over weapons of mass destruction are coming back to haunt him. When you promote your pronouncements as "barbecue stoppers" then they need to be so good that people are so busy discussing them that their steaks go cold. It would seem that Howard is now so concerned about his communications with the punters that even when he goes on talkback radio with its friendly hosts, with the options of a screening process for callers and a seven-second delay button, he does not actually take calls from the public but just sits there chatting with Alan Jones or whomever. What we see here is a government that is no longer comfortable talking to its constituents who are all spun out.

This is the danger of too much spin, as Tony Blair and George Bush are finding. There comes a time when it is too easy for your opponents to put out the spin that all your pronouncements are spin. There will never be a return to a time without spin because politics is always about spin, but as the public become more media-savvy, the observation of spin and criticism, not only of its techniques but also its contents, will become a media staple as journalists and citizens learn to create democracy from within the information flow. ■

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