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Spin doctors, citizens and democracy

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CHAPTER ?

THE SPIN DOCTORS:

GOVERNMENT MEDIA ADVISERS

STEPHEN STOCKWELL

There is a concern in Australia, as in other mature democracies around the world, that the channels of political communication have been so degraded by manipulation, massage and marketing that they have taken on an anti-democratic purpose: the manufacture of consent.¹ Many blame this alleged decline in political discourse on the spin doctors, those advisers who manage and mould the words and images of politicians for consumption by the media and thence by the audience of citizens.²

The argument goes that the application of spin to political communications is a negative force grinding down the substance of our language and our democracy.³ Critics argue that the corrosive influence of spin is evident in the rise of misleading political advertising,⁴ negative campaigning,⁵ and new forms of propaganda.⁶ Politicians, with the assistance of their media advisers, do seek to subtly orchestrate the symbolic spectacle of politics, set the terms of political debate and rapidly adjust their policies to any changes in public sentiment.⁷ But does the spin doctor deserve such opprobrium.

This chapter studies the historical precedents and actual work of spin doctors and media minders to acknowledge the contribution they make to the effective functioning of the form of representative government that actually exists in contemporary mass society. As most political communication occurs through the mass media, politicians need assistance and advice from people with operational experience and theoretical understandings of the media in order to communicate effectively.

However, when the spin doctor plays fast and loose with the truth and comes between the politician and the public, there is some validity in the view that they are a negative influence on the quality of democracy. Concerns are justified when political communication becomes nothing but spin, when spin is used systematically to bury the truth, when one side's spin so dominates the media that it effectively becomes propaganda, and when the spin-doctors political roles intersect with their commercial activities.

The techniques and technologies of spin do present significant problems for democracy. In the current situation where spin is a necessary part of politics in a mass media democracy, but where it is also abused, there clearly needs to be reform so that spin is subject to the sort of checks and balances which exist for other parts of the democratic system. This chapter suggests that citizens themselves, with an educated appreciation of the techniques of spin, are well placed to exercise most of those checks and balances, but that there may be need for greater regulation where the spin doctors' political and commercial interests collide.

WHAT IS A SPIN DOCTOR?

There is no doubt that politics has become increasingly stage-managed. Western democracies have been in a state of 'permanent campaign' for at least the last thirty years,⁸ and Australia in no exception. Modern governments employ techniques developed from commercial marketing and election campaigns to manage their interactions with the public via the mass media not only to ensure their re-election but also to encourage acceptance of the government's policy agenda between elections.⁹ Technically, 'spin' is the backgrounding and interpretation supplied by media advisers to the press to put politicians' pronouncements in a favourable context and to ensure that the message that they (the politicians) are trying to get across, actually appears in the media.

Bill Clinton is a master of spin and his skills were apparent when his wife, Hillary's campaign for New York senator was faltering in the aftermath of the Monica Lewinsky affair. Hillary's campaign people were in turmoil as women voters began to question Hillary's values. Bill dispassionately read the polling data and said to Hillary "Women want to know why you stayed with me." Hillary responded "Yes, I've been wondering that myself." Unembarrassed, Bill had the answer: "Because you're a sticker. That's what people need to know: you're a sticker. You stick at things you care about."¹⁰ The spin was applied, Hillary's campaign rhetoric shifted subtly, women voters were reassured that she would stick by them and she was elected to the US senate. The search for the persuasive path through any argument is often criticised as a modern malady but, as will be discussed below, rhetoric has been around as long as democracy, since the ancient Greeks at least when it was codified by Aristotle¹¹.

Governments use spin doctors in the prosecution of the permanent campaign. Spin doctors work with ministers to ensure that the government's key political messages reach the citizenry. They work on the news agenda and develop and place stories in the media for political advantage. Spin doctors monitor a fair proportion of the media themselves but they also rely on an apparatus to do their work: a media monitoring service that provides all relevant media output, an up-to-date contact list of all relevant journalists and media executives and a system that allows for the quick distribution of press releases. But the spin doctor's work extends well beyond the management of the minutiae of media contact. The spin doctor is involved in the construction of the meta-narrative that is the permanent campaign.

Developments in telecommunications and information technology allow pollsters to assess quickly the electorate's quantitative and qualitative response to ideas, issues, personalities and events. Using these insights, media advisers can position and re-position politicians quickly, and often effectively, by putting their side's 'spin' on developments and 'massaging' precisely those segments of the target audience which are needed on any particular issue at any particular time. The media and various forms of direct contact are used to deliver messages designed to elicit an appropriate intellectual and emotional response from those with the power in any particular situation—this can vary from the Cabinet or a company board to the whole electorate at polling time. The skills required by a spin doctor are essentially a deep understanding of media practices and personnel and the strategic capability to ensure that the right people know the right information at the right time. As Dennis Atkins remarked of his own move from journalist to media manager on the staff of Queensland Premier Wayne Goss: 'the transition from poacher to gamekeeper was simple: you use the same weapons, you just point them the other way.'¹² But the application of spin is also 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 of spin whether you are working with a ball or with words.

Spin doctors or 'minders' have a variety of formal names: media advisers, communication managers and press secretaries. In the most part, they are ministerial employees whose job is patently to look after their minister's political well-being in the media. Other ministerial employees may be drawn into the work of spin: speech-writers, policy advisers or even administrators may make a contribution to coming up with the right phrase at the right time. The minister employs these staffers and their terms of office expire with their minister's. They are paid by the tax-payers to do the political bidding of their minister but, at least, their terms of employment are transparent.

There is greater concern when other government employees are drawn into the work of spin. The work of the media adviser employed by a government minister can be distinguished from that of the publicity officers employed by government departments to assist in the dissemination of information on government policy and operations (see also chapters by Head and Turnbull, this volume). Publicity officers (sometimes called information officers or media liaison) are not ministerial appointments and while their work involves some day-to-day press liaison, the key part of their activities is more likely to involve public education campaigns. They seek to communicate directly with the public by commissioning advertising, coordinating community events, ensuring a web presence and designing and distributing brochures and other information materials. These campaigns have been particularly cost effective in promoting health and road safety¹³ and have also been used to confront sexism in the workplace, address bullying in schools, promote tourism and public transport and advocate compliance with plant and livestock quarantine. As other writers in this volume point out, particularly with regard to the Howard government's \$55 million promotion of its industrial relations legislation in 2005, governments who utilise these campaigns, funded by taxpayer money, to promote party political spin give themselves an unfair advantage over oppositions and lay themselves open to charges of abusing their power.¹⁴

Some spin also comes from party officials and this is barely remarkable given the transparent aims of political parties and that their salary comes from members and supporters. Of greater concern is the position of freelance consultants and contractors who may be engaged by the government for an ostensibly non-political purpose but who are in fact engaged in political work. The line between political and non-political work can be obscure and the situation is not helped as more and more ministerial and party officers privatise their activities to become free-lance consultants. Consultancies can also include former politicians and this further blurs the distinction between political and non-political work.

While the speech-writer practicing the worthy craft of a word-smith is often portrayed as a far more wholesome figure than the manipulative spin doctor, the reality is that they are both engaged in finding the right turn of phrase to create and hold majority support for their employer. From the 1961 election on, the Australian Labor Party was fortunate to have available the services of a very capable speech writer, Graham Freudenberg who was a master at finding the right phrase at the right time. Freudenberg worked for a number of federal and NSW Labor leaders including Calwell, Whitlam, Hawke, Wran and Carr. He was responsible for Arthur Calwell's historic denunciation of the Vietnam War and Gough Whitlam's celebrated 'It's Time' speech.¹⁵ Other Labor speech-writers have produced insightful memoirs including Bob Ellis¹⁶ and Don Watson¹⁷ (see also Glover, this volume).

Government spin has developed from election campaign practice and the two often overlap. They are enmeshed in a range of ways including the use of some consultants who work on both types of communication (election and government) as well as informal networks between politicians and their advisers which mean that, even once an election campaign is concluded, while some campaign staff will no longer officially be on the payroll, they may still be consulted informally all through the governing process.

Media advisers and spin doctors are rarely frank about their work, but on occasion there has been some honest reflection—at least in the American context—that reveals how spin works, day-to-day, in the hurly-burly of politics and, in particular, the spin doctor's craft in finding the right words and images to get across the message most advantageous to their client.¹⁸ Study of practitioners' ruminations on the craft of spin can be most illuminating. For a frank and encyclopaedic account of the role of spin in recent US politics, it is hard to beat Christopher Matthews' *Hardball*.¹⁹ Matthews discusses spin technique in detail as he explains his up-dated versions of Aristotle's advice with aphorisms such as 'Don't Get Mad, Don't Get Even, Get Ahead', 'Leave No Shot Unanswered', 'Hang a Lantern on Your Problem', 'Keep Your Enemies in Front of You', 'Always Dance Wit the One that Brung Ya' and 'Be Polite to the Guy with the Butter'.

Australian politicians have learnt a lot from the United States in the arts of spin and media manipulation. Politicians from both sides of Australian politics have employed increasing numbers of spin doctors, many of whom have benefited from study tours of the US. Nevertheless the Australian literature on how spin works remains sparse. Stephen Mills' *The New Machine Men* is an Australian publication that focuses on the rise of technocratic politics championed by the spin doctor.²⁰ Occasionally the modus operandi of the media adviser breaks through into the media itself and the full breadth

of their work comes in to focus. Before the 2004 election, veteran journalist Max Suich could report in *The Age* of Canberra press gallery complains: “that the senior reporters for *The Australian* are “on the drip.”- i.e. receiving favoured access on government stories in return for favourable emphasis for the government in the story. Suich goes on to claim that John Howard’s media adviser, Tony O’Leary “clearly prefers *The Australian* to any other paper- unsurprising given the vociferous support for the Government’s Iraq policies- and that would yield dividends in the hands of any able reporter.” *The Australian* is noted as denying that their staff are on the “drip” though admitting “sometimes superior access – ‘because we work harder at going after stories.’”²¹ Greg Turnbull, senior media adviser to Paul Keating and Kim Beazley in November 2000, when ABC radio current affairs reporter Mark Willacy conducted an interview with Treasurer Peter Costello. Turnbull was unhappy about the interview because he thought Willacy had been altogether too soft on Costello and so he phoned Willacy. Turnbull called Willacy a ‘sycophant’ and threatened: “Wait till we’re in government. We’ve got a long memory... It was the softest interview I’ve heard on ABC current affairs radio.” Turnbull appeared to have a point because when he took the issue up with the executive producer of the radio program, he was told: “We made a decision that the best approach with Costello is seduction.”²²

Bob Hawke’s cabinet increased the sophistication of the government spin apparatus in 1983 when it created the National Media Liaison Service (nicknamed the aNiMaLS) to monitor and interact with the media (see Ward, this volume). While there were precedents for government media management in Gough Whitlam’s Australian Government Liaison Service and Malcolm Fraser’s Government Information Unit, Hawke was chastened by the way the media turned against the Whitlam government in 1975 and gave aNiMaLS the resources to be proactive in exerting its influence deep into the regional and rural media that has become crucial to winning elections in Australia. Under Howard, the Government Members’ Secretariat operates discreetly from Parliament House in Canberra ‘providing fodder for newsletters and regional media (while) staff attached to ministers’ home-bases make sure of the monitoring, and feed it to other offices.’²³

The Liberal Party also has a long tradition of spin but, in the last decade, Prime Minister John Howard has gathered around him a formidable team of spin doctors who have systematised the federal government’s relations with the public to circumvent the media where they desire and to subtly control the language of debate when they do use the media. Judith Brett argues that, like his political hero Sir Robert Menzies, Howard has crafted a new language that skillfully adapts his party’s traditions to the political present.²⁴ 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 an immaculate media team 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.²⁵

Each member of Howard’s team brings well-tuned skills: Lynton Crosby on message management, Mark Textor on polling and concept development and Tony O’Leary on media management. However, they are still very much Howard’s team and benefit from Howard’s own excellent information-management skills honed through long

years of trial and error. Howard re-emerged in 1995 with the skilful 'non-campaign' that neutered the Canberra Press gallery by communicating directly to the electorate through talk-back radio. Howard held on to his policies until the last minute and avoided all controversies along the way, relying on research from Liberal Party pollster Mark Textor who showed him how to offer comforting words on the vote-switching issues such as industrial relations, environment and GST ('never ever') while sending coded messages on race.²⁶ Attacks on Aboriginal and multicultural 'industries' were effectively promises to dismantle the Hawke-Keating initiatives addressing the problems in these areas. This strange non-campaign attracted blue collar voters from Labor and toppled Paul Keating in early 1996.²⁷

Mark Textor has been the official pollster and key external campaign strategist for Howard in his four federal elections and thus, as is claimed on Mark's company website: 'the common thread in Australian Prime Minister John Howard's succession of election victories.'²⁸ Textor describes his method as 'values-based communication' which seeks to find the right combination of words to touch the audience's deepest held beliefs in order to produce behavioural change. Lynton Crosby has worked closely with Textor and is now his business partner. Crosby was Howard's deputy campaign director in 1996 and then fully responsible for Howard's 1998 and 2001 election campaigns. Crosby argues: 'The key to a winning election campaign is building a good team, giving attention to detail, having clear central lines of authority while implementing your campaign in as decentralised a way as possible, and having a leader who knows what he's on about... In a job like this you should never allow your personal agendas to drive the advice you give. You must be very controlled.'²⁹

The third member of Howard's spin team, Tony O'Leary, is the one who best fits the definition of government spin doctor outlined at the beginning of this chapter as he is employed by the taxpayer as a member of Howard's ministerial staff. O'Leary previously worked for Channel Ten and the Herald Sun. Working for Howard, he has become astute at managing the press gallery in Canberra while maximising Howard's direct contact to the voters through talk-back radio. There is more to press gallery journalism than just covering parliament and the door-stop media events that John Howard has in lieu of press conferences. O'Leary is adept in getting the government's spin to journalists and is not backwards in letting them know when he considers the Prime Minister has been treated unfairly.³⁰

From studying the work of the spin doctor it becomes evident that the spin of the media advisers is an element of the integrated practices of political marketing that grew in significance during the twentieth century as mass democracy with universal, adult franchise took shape. Utilising techniques that have crossed over from election campaigning, politicians and their media advisers employ an interrelated mix of qualitative and quantitative research, targeting and tracking the conditions and opinions of the citizenry, positioning and spinning messages and images using 'free' editorial space, paid advertising and direct contact.³¹ Many different roles in political work could be described as spin doctors including political consultants, campaign directors, media managers, opinion pollsters and advertising agents. Essentially, for many of these, their work is the electioneering of the past writ large, the craft of the press secretary and speech-writer adapted to the contemporary media environment, to benefit the politician and party they work for, both during elections and once in government.

IN DEFENCE OF SPIN

Perhaps it would be best for democracy if all citizens could engage in regular, detailed debate and discussion with their peers for the purpose of making political decisions as they did in ancient Greece. The problem with this ideal is that the size and complexity of our society and the constraints upon our available time make it impractical, if not impossible, for people to come together regularly to deliberate before they give their consent to particular laws. Instead, we have representative government where debate is formalised in Parliament, representatives connect with the citizenry predominantly through the mass media and citizens do not vote on every single bill but instead vote for their representatives every few years.

John Stuart Mill's 1861 foundational essay, *Representative Government* seeks the middle way between the ancient Athenian ideal of universal participation by citizens in the processes of government and 'empirical' accounts of representation, best represented by Joseph Schumpeter as elite 'individuals acquiring the power to make political decisions by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'.³²

By vesting sovereignty in the aggregate of the community, Mill³³ paved the way for universal suffrage and the inclusiveness of his position was a major step toward the appreciation of representative democracy as a system of government to which all adult citizens can and should contribute. Of course, by accepting that, in a mass society, sovereignty is predominantly exercised through elected representation, Mill effectively limited the extension of formal participation to the franchise, although he did express the hope that people would be 'at least occasionally, called on to take an actual part in the government, by the personal discharge of some public function, local or general.'³⁴ Mill understood that citizens' debate and deliberation about politics was a defining moment for democracy and that the work of government included the production of autonomous, rational 'self-protecting' and 'self-dependent'³⁵ individuals who can defend their own rights to liberty and equality and so promote their own welfare and thus the welfare of the whole community.

While the representative system allows democracy to extend beyond the single city that characterised Athenian democracy, Mill appreciated that to function effectively, representative democracy needs to be complemented by processes, similar to the Assembly of citizens, that allow the dissemination of a broad range of views and the opportunity for deliberation. While Mill argued that the press filled this role to some extent, he also had some unspecified dissatisfaction with the efficacy of the mass media. He referred to the newspaper press as 'the real equivalent, *though not in all respects an adequate one*, of the Pnyx or Forum'³⁶. While Mill did not expound on his reservations about the role of the press, he did problematise its role in the deliberative process and this duality of seeing the media as both a potential solution and a potential problem has remained at the heart of representative government ever since. There is an abiding disquiet that the channels of debate in mass democracies are predominantly partisan, commercial enterprises which could never be an 'adequate' forum for citizens' free and frank deliberation and could never be the site for citizens to rule and to consent to be ruled.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky give a contemporary summation of the problem of the mass media with a detailed analysis of how it empties the deliberative domain by the 'manufacture of consent'³⁷. They argue that while the media in a democratic society should be 'independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth', in fact the concentration of media ownership, the influence of corporate advertisers, the privileged position of experts and the homogenous world-view produced by the media, all act to limit the potential for new, different, dissenting or demotic voices to be heard. The problem of the mass media is that 'the powerful are able to fix the premises of the discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about and to 'manage' public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns'.³⁸

In Herman and Chomsky's account, spin doctors are clearly part of the problem but the issue that remains is that spin doctors are a consequence of the ubiquity of the mass media, not a significant cause (as Savage and Tiffen also discuss in this volume). If we extract spin doctors from the mass media, the media still remains as the tool of the powerful and opportunities for any alternative voices to find a gap in the media monolith are limited. The media is where debate occurs in mass society for better or worse and, as the media has become more complex, spin doctors help to get opposition and alternative messages through to the citizenry.

Brian McNair challenges the pessimistic view of spin and argues instead for an alternative, more optimistic evaluation of the political use of the public sphere, accepting the spin doctors' role in the process.³⁹ Spin doctors have contributed to the increasing quantity of political information in mass circulation and political journalism has become more adept in handling spin, subjecting it to more rigorous and effective criticism to produce better coverage of the political process. In particular, McNair explains the demonisation of spin in terms of the adversarial relationship that media advisers have with the journalists who depend on advisers for quick access to information and, at the same time, resent the advisers' control of politicians' pronouncements which limits journalists' ability to accentuate the angles they think are most newsworthy. This is a point echoed by Jay Blumer and Michael Gurevitch when they analyse the relationships between politicians and the press in terms of dependence and adaptation where roles are negotiated to manage institutional conflict and they find that 'media arrangements are often tended by full-time specialists with corresponding roles to match – press officers, publicity aides, campaign managers, speech writers and so on.'⁴⁰

Margaret Scammell points out that political marketing with the target of swaying public opinion to its cause is actually taking a more democratic approach than that proffered by those who restrict democracy to occasional elections to decide which elites should be in charge.⁴¹ She challenges the pessimistic view that marketing necessarily demeans and undermines democracy and points out that while there are dangers, there are also new potentials for a more genuine democracy. In this context, there is an opportunity to see the spin doctor not as part of the problem but as a necessary part of the solution. As the media is where debate and deliberation occur and, as the media has become more complex, representative democracy needs media advisers to get messages from politicians through to the citizenry, just as it needs pollsters (and, as discussed above, the line between these two callings is often very fine indeed) to read what the citizenry is thinking for politicians. Even George Orwell appreciated that polling can give the politician a clear view of the community's

concerns and desires and thus improves the quality of democracy.⁴² Spin doctors, like polling, have become necessary to form and maintain representative governments in mass societies and they are an inevitable part of government communications now.

While spin doctors are commonly held to be responsible for the media's mendacity and democracy's decline, these are common complaints about political communication and they have a long history. The origins of spin lie deep in human history, in the inter-relationship between language, power and consensus. The songs of the shaman have been unifying tribal communities around a common culture for as long as human culture has been extant.⁴³ Ancient bards preserved the genealogies and legends that bound together nascent nations and produced the timely verse and slogans that gave them the will to act, much as spin doctors do today.⁴⁴ Ancient Greek democracy saw the Sophists develop and teach the practices of rhetoric designed to convince assemblies to take a position.⁴⁵ These insights were catalogued methodically by Aristotle to produce the science of persuasion.⁴⁶ In Aristotle's view, the operation of rhetorical persuasion in open debate allows citizens to realise and then decide what is in their own best interests and thus ensures that the good prevails. While the techniques of rhetoric may be used for bad ends, as in the propaganda of totalitarianism, when competing arguments are allowed free play in the rhetorical field then the process of deliberation tends to produce a self-correcting mechanism. Where rhetoric is about persuasion (rather than say compulsion) it is 'a contest that brings forth the best among those who offer opposed positions on practical questions [so that] the audience is engaged in such a way that allows it to see more clearly and act more judiciously.'⁴⁷

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.'⁴⁸ 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. During the 1920s, Bernays tutored politicians on the use of the media and the 'engineering of consent'.⁴⁹ 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 (see also Turnbull, this volume).

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 there is a justified concern that social capital is under threat.⁵⁰ But the techniques of public relations are useful in marshalling the vote to win the permanent campaign, managing communications from governments and corporations to interest groups and the public, but also in sending messages back from the citizenry to governments and corporations. While spin is dominated by powerful interests, the techniques and technologies of spin also provide the opportunity for a strong active civil society to make democracy work.

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS WITH SPIN

The positive possibilities for spin do not abolish its negative uses. There is an abiding concern that spin plays fast and loose with the truth but politics is always a battle over definition of the truth. Outright lying is usually revealed and the debate over whether or not a lie was passed from spin doctor to journalist is, in many ways, a self-correcting mechanism. There is a greater reason for concern when political communication is nothing more than a wall of spin coming from government to citizen. Spin's anti-democratic uses are apparent when governments use spin systematically to muddy waters and obscure the truth. What occurs in this situation is that one side's spin so dominates the media that it effectively becomes propaganda. While the interplay of spin is part and parcel of doing democracy in contemporary, mediated society, it is only a positive force while it remains the vehicle for debate. Once the techniques of spin are used to start closing down debate and limiting opponents' ability to make their point with their spin then the situation shifts and the distribution of propaganda ushers in the possibility of authoritarian rule.

Bill Bonney and Helen Wilson, for example, argue that news is increasingly mediated by the political and commercial public relations industry. They cite the Wran Government management of the media during the 1982 NSW electricity 'crisis' and conclude that: 'those persons or organizations which need to be visible (notably politicians) can achieve visibility by pumping media releases into the system. Equally, those persons and organizations whose activities often benefit from being invisible... can often achieve invisibility simply by not putting out media releases... But the role of the media release and the publicity machine should not be underestimated.'⁵¹

As we saw above, in government, John Howard and his team have built a ruthlessly efficient information-management machine. They have 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. Howard and Crosby have refined the tactics of wedge or dog-whistle politics where they create various, subtle messages to 'round-up' different segments of the electorate and distance them from the opposition. They have been particularly successful on the issue of immigration.⁵²

Much of Howard's contact with journalists is done in private. To extend his reach beyond the press gallery, Howard visits editors and senior writers in Sydney and Melbourne, partaking in boardroom lunches with senior management and dinners with conservative commentators such as Piers Akerman, Miranda Devine, Michael Duffy and Christopher Pearson.⁵³ Howard and O'Leary's management of the conservative commentariat including those above plus Janet Albrechtsen and Andrew Bolt, has been a hallmark of their media approach, working behind the scenes to spike stories before they are written and soothing tame columnists, such as Miranda Devine, onto critics of the Government, such as Anne Summers.⁵⁴

There is a concern that intensive media management of this kind is dangerous to democracy and that all political parties will do it if they can. There is always the danger that too much spin undermines the spin-doctor's efforts to effectively participate in democratic debate. There comes a time when it is too easy for your opponents to put out the spin that all your pronouncements are all spin. An antidote to this situation is to reveal the operations of overweening media management, down to the minute details of its machinations. This requires a particular form of political

journalism that concentrates on the mechanics of political communication and so reveals the nature of politics to citizens. The ABC's *Media Watch* and Alan Ramsey in the *Sydney Morning Herald* both practice this kind of journalism from inside the mainstream but much more occurs in on-line blogging environments [[such as??]] where younger citizens are comfortable.

Another area of concern is where spin doctors privatize themselves and there is a potential, or certainty, that their commercial interests will conflict with their remaining political consultancies and that the juxtaposition of both interests will produce the appearance, if not the reality, that they are selling governmental access and inside knowledge. This is an area of murky ethical considerations and while many spin doctors are more than ready to shrug off the charge of 'conflict of interest', issues can arise unexpectedly and in different political circumstances that can damage reputations.

CONCLUSION: CITIZENS AND SPIN

There is no doubt that spin has become pervasive in our representative democracy and that raises a number of issues about the quality of democratic debate and the ethical issues raised when the political spin doctor throws the switch to commercial. But that very pervasiveness suggests that spin may actually have a function in improving our democracy, particularly when the methods of spin are more broadly understood and its practices are taken up by diverse interests in the community. There will never be a return to a time without spin because politics has always about spin. Certainly, since the ancient Greeks, humans have appreciated that there is an art to persuasion but while the character of the persuader and the emotions they stir can be an important part of their pitch, to be effective the persuader has to put forward rational arguments based in reality. As the public becomes 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 negotiate democracy from within the information flow.

Margaret Scammell points to the possibility that spin and the whole political marketing apparatus 'may possess intrinsic virtue precisely because, in principle, it makes politics more democratic.'⁵⁵ Already, media advisers are found not only in the employ of political parties and governments communicating messages from government to the public but they also work for NGOs, interest groups and community groups communicating messages from the public to the government. Spin doctors act as a conduit both ways.⁵⁶ Of course, spin can only be portrayed as a positive democratic force when it is available to everyone and this is one of the great challenges democracy today.

A broader appreciation of the techniques and technologies of the spin doctor among the citizenry not only allows them to read political debate more accurately but also opens up the possibilities for greater participation in democratic debate. While Dennis Johnson warns that political marketing and spin doctoring is 'no place for amateurs',⁵⁷ for democracy to be an effective mechanism to reconcile conflict in a way that retains the active consent of most citizens, those citizens must be able to be

authentically involved in the deliberative processes that precede decision making and, in contemporary mass media society, that requires an awareness of political marketing skills, and in particular, the ability to spin one's story when appropriate. Spin is becoming a required skill for all citizens keen to exercise their democratic rights.

Democracy can never be an end in itself. At its best it is the means to a better, fairer and more humane life for all the people in society. But society is not a constant and by the time discussion and debate has achieved even the smallest democratic reform, new problems have arisen and new challenges present themselves. To confront this task, which will never be completed, there is only the power of human reason communicated through language. To create greater deliberative participation in existing representative institutions and to recreate democracy itself by extending the possibilities for deliberative participation beyond representative institutions and into new areas of debate, citizens must retake political communication by using spin to turn the media to their own purposes. Much more work needs to be done on how citizens can gain media skills and how, given resourcing inequities, they could exercise those skills, but it is work that needs to be done.

¹ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, (New York: Pantheon, 1988) is a notable recent iteration of a constant criticism: see also Lippmann, Walter, *Public Opinion*, (London: Allen&Unwin, 1932). For a critique with a particularly Australian focus see: Carey, Alex, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1995).

² For a particularly virulent attack on spin doctors see Robert L. Dilenschneider, 'Spin Doctors Practice Public Relations Quackery', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 June 1998. p. 18.

³ Nicholas Jones, *Sultans of Spin*, (London: Orion, 1999).

⁴ R. Spero, *The duping of the American voter: dishonesty and deception in presidential television advertising*, (New York: Lippincott and Crowell, 1980).

⁵ S. Ansolabehere and S. Iyengar, *Going Negative*, (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁶ A. R. Pratkanis and E. Aronson, *Age of propaganda: the everyday use and abuse of persuasion*, (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1992).

⁷ John A. Maltese, *Spin Control*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

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