



SPINtelligence – trick you into beli

PART 2 – The Techniques of Spin Doctoring

how governments eviling them

In this article, the second of a series of four, Associate Professor Ian Wing shows the twenty tricks used by 'spin doctors' to persuade the general public to support the government.

Intelligence is a powerful tool and it should be used with caution. Few would disagree with this statement. Professional intelligence officers are often the most cautious in its use and this is because they understand the capabilities and limitations of intelligence. Despite this, the value of intelligence as a tool to persuade and manipulate public opinion is frequently too tempting for governments to ignore.

The first article in this four-part series described what happened when spin doctors learned how to misuse intelligence to win public support for government policies. During the late 1990s, the aggressive world of advertising and public relations (known as 'spin') collided with the time-honoured doctrine of intelligence. The collision was known as a 'zero sum game' – meaning that there could only be one winner – and the clear winner was spin. Governments needed intelligence to maintain public support

and it became clear that they would even compromise intelligence to win votes and stay in power.

In 2002, intelligence was misused by the governments of the United States, Great Britain and Australia to advance the cause for war against Iraq. The most telling arguments in favour of war were delivered by US Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, claiming that they had intelligence that proved the imminent threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. US President George W. Bush announced the war in Iraq was central to the war on terror "that began on September 11, 2001" and this led seventy per cent of Americans to incorrectly believe that Saddam Hussein was linked to Al Qaeda. This intelligence was massively exaggerated – but it worked. 'SPINtelligence' convinced many people that the invasion of Iraq was necessary.

The lesson to be drawn from the events of 2002 is that while intelligence officers are often reluctant to make definite predictions, spin doctors will tell politicians to say whatever they can get away with. Spin doctors believe

that they should do whatever it takes in order to win.

SPINtelligence is clearly a powerful tool – and it is here to stay. This does not mean that democracy is powerless or unable to resist the tricks of spin. By learning the origins and secrets of successful spin doctoring, how spin is used to persuade, confuse and mislead the general public can be understood.

Spin has its origins in PR (public relations) – a widely accepted field of employment that involves managing an organization's external communications to create and maintain a positive image. PR evolved from corporate marketing departments and it still uses terms like 'selling' when it delivers a message to the public. It promotes good news and downplays bad news and it does this through market research, press releases and lobbyists (who are professional industry spokespeople). PR can involve damage control when things are going badly and, in the field of business continuity, this is also known as crisis communications. Good PR will seek to promote the positive side of a debate but it never tells lies.

When taken to the next level, where honesty and ethics are disregarded, a public relations manager can morph into the more sinister world of the spin doctor. Spin doctoring in the political arena uses many techniques. Here are twenty of the most important.

Monitoring the Media – Spin doctors must be aware of all relevant developments on a 24/7 basis. The worst mistake for a spin doctor is to

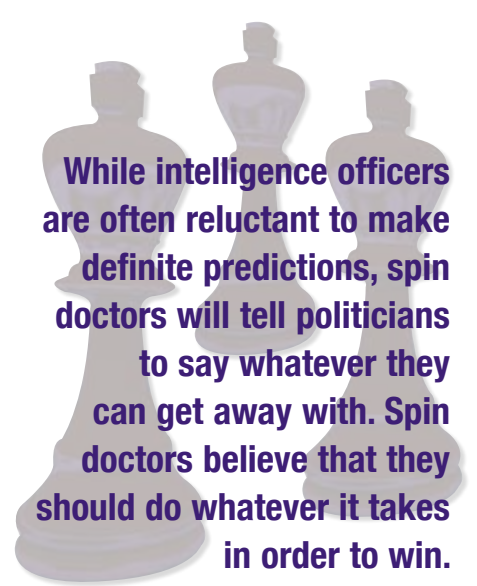
allow their politician – known as their principal to be surprised or blind-sided by bad news.

Agenda Setting – This is use of the media to maximize the coverage of positive issues. Spin doctors believe that the more that people hear or read about a political message, the more they accept it. Even a false message will gain credibility if it is repeated often enough.

Staying on Message – In this process, all members of a political party are given clear directions by spin doctors on exactly what to say about any given issue. Spin doctors develop a list of persuasive key words that all politicians are told to repeat during all interviews. Politicians know that they usually only have a five- to ten second sound bite to get their message out and they all try to say the same thing. This gives the political party an appearance of unity and coordination. Any politician who 'shoots from the hip', or otherwise strays from the party's message, is disciplined.

Rapid Rebuttal – Rebuttal is the use of information to nullify an opponent's argument. The more sophisticated spin technique of rapid rebuttal uses a computerized database system of all political statements. When a political opponent makes a new statement, the database is searched by spin doctors to reveal any contradictions with previous ones. Politicians are immediately provided with these contradictions as part of their 'message' to quickly rebut their opponents' statements.

Selectively Presenting Facts – Spin doctors choose information that supports their



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political case and either ignore or discredit information that does not. This practice seeks to control the general public's understanding of an issue, rather than to advance the debate or raise understanding. This practice is completely forbidden in the academic world. It is seen as unprofessional in the intelligence world – where it is known as 'cherry picking'.

Smear Tactics – These are used to attack the professional or personal reputation of opponents. Unsubstantiated negative information about the opponent is widely repeated until it gains credibility.

Marginalization – This involves describing opponents as having extreme views, which belong on the margins of politics. This technique is used to weaken the impact of any comments made by opponents on the grounds that they are out of touch with mainstream Australia.

False Labelling – Spin doctors use this

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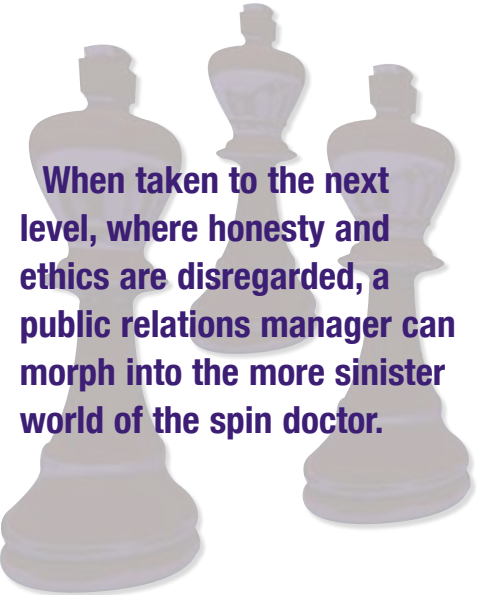
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technique to attack the credentials of political opponents. For example, calling people who believe in protecting the environment naïve left-wingers; describing people who believe in the benefits of private enterprise as rich and selfish; and labelling people who questioned the need for the invasion of Iraq as pacifists.

Demonization – This is the most vicious form of marginalization and it resorts to falsely labelling political opponents in the most unscrupulous manner. Opponents of government policy may be typically demonized as being un-Australian or, in some cases, even as supporters of terrorists.

Distractions – This is the use of other events, fallacious statements or the creation of scapegoats to keep attention away from negative news.

Timing of News Releases – Very bad political news is released by spin doctors at the same time as another major event, which keeps the bad news out of the headlines. The most notorious example of this was when UK government press officer, Jo Moore, described September 11, 2001 as, “A very good day to get out anything we want to bury”.

Non-Denial Denial – This technique is favoured by politicians who evade actually denying a question by characterizing it as ridiculous or unworthy of an answer. This tactic can be seen regularly in Australian media interviews. Politicians are also coached by spin doctors to reinterpret difficult questions to make them more specific – and then to emphatically deny the more specific versions. This method was used by President Bill Clinton in his statement that, “I did not have sex with that woman”. In this case, he skilfully reinterpreted the question to refer specifically

to sexual intercourse, rather than any other form of sexual relationship, and then denied it had occurred.

Non-Apology Apology – Politicians are reminded by spin doctors that they must avoid making any public admissions of errors, mistakes or oversights. If anything is found to have gone wrong, politicians will lay the blame at faceless members of the public service, rather than themselves. A common spin doctor’s way of avoiding saying sorry about something is to say that, “It is regrettable that something has occurred”. This depersonalizes the issue, making no admission of responsibility, but still gives the impression of an apology. Another method of non-apology apology uses the wording, “I am very sorry that you think I have done something wrong” – this avoids actually saying sorry.

Phrasing that Assumes Unproven Truths – This technique is a rhetorical device where politicians refer to their information as if it is unquestionably true. The terms ‘it is well known that’ or ‘it is generally accepted that’ will often precede the use of unproven truths.

Rejecting the Validity of Hypotheticals – Spin doctors always advise politicians to avoid any hypothetical questions. This is because entering into a hypothetical issue can lead to unanticipated questions that the spin doctor has not trained the politician to answer.

Euphemisms – This is the use of less-offensive terms to describe unpleasant things. Euphemisms are a part of our everyday language and an element of so-called political correctness. Examples are: ‘passed away’ instead of ‘dead’; ‘bathroom’ instead of ‘toilet’; ‘gay’ instead of ‘homosexual’ and ‘pro-choice’ instead of ‘pro-abortion’.

Doublespeak – When George Orwell wrote his futuristic masterpiece, 1984, in the late 1940s, he did not foresee that terms in his novel such as newspeak and doublethink would later coalesce into the modern term, doublespeak. Today, the term refers to a special form of euphemism, which is intended to hide actual meanings or implications. Examples are: ‘extraordinary rendition’ instead of ‘kidnapping’; ‘alternative procedures’ instead of ‘torture’; ‘neutralize’ instead of ‘kill’; and ‘transfer tube’ instead of ‘body-bag’.

Informal Code Words – These are a type of euphemism, which sound inoffensive to most people but retain a more sinister meaning for smaller, highly interested groups. The most

specialized informal code words are referred to as dog whistles because their real meaning is heard only by very small, highly motivated groups. The current political debates on race, religion and immigration contain many examples of these informal code words and dog whistles. These words are too sensitive to reveal in this article but can probably be recalled by those who follow the political debates closely.

Equivocation – Spin doctors coach politicians to gloss over the meaning of a particularly sensitive word and then use the word in another context so as to appear to have dealt with the issue. Politicians can also skirt a negative issue by mentioning it very briefly and then quickly moving on to something else that is more positive.

Weasel Words – These are words that are intended to deceive through the use of ambiguity, vagueness, generalizations or clever language. When weasel words are combined with the use of an impersonal passive voice style, and some euphemisms, a politician can talk for a long time and say very little of any substance.

This review of the techniques of spin doctoring provides many clues on how spin is used to alter the public’s beliefs and win support for government policies. The third article in this series will discuss some of the many other techniques of spin doctoring and show how to tell when the techniques of spin doctoring are combined with intelligence.

The key point to take away from this article is that the political news that people read in the newspapers and watch on TV is influenced by many spin doctors. Things are seldom what they seem. And when politicians tell the public to believe them because they have ‘intelligence’, it would do everyone well to remain sceptical. ■

Associate Professor Ian Wing has worked as a professional intelligence officer for over twenty years and he served for seven years as president of the AIPIO (the Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers). While serving with the ADF (Australian Defence Force), he was decorated for extremely meritorious service in combat in Iraq. He now teaches intelligence and security at Charles Sturt University.

