

SPINtelligence

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In this article, the final in a series of four, Associate Professor Ian Wing discusses the dark secrets of spin and the damage caused by governments when they use SPINtelligence to trick the public into believing in their policies.

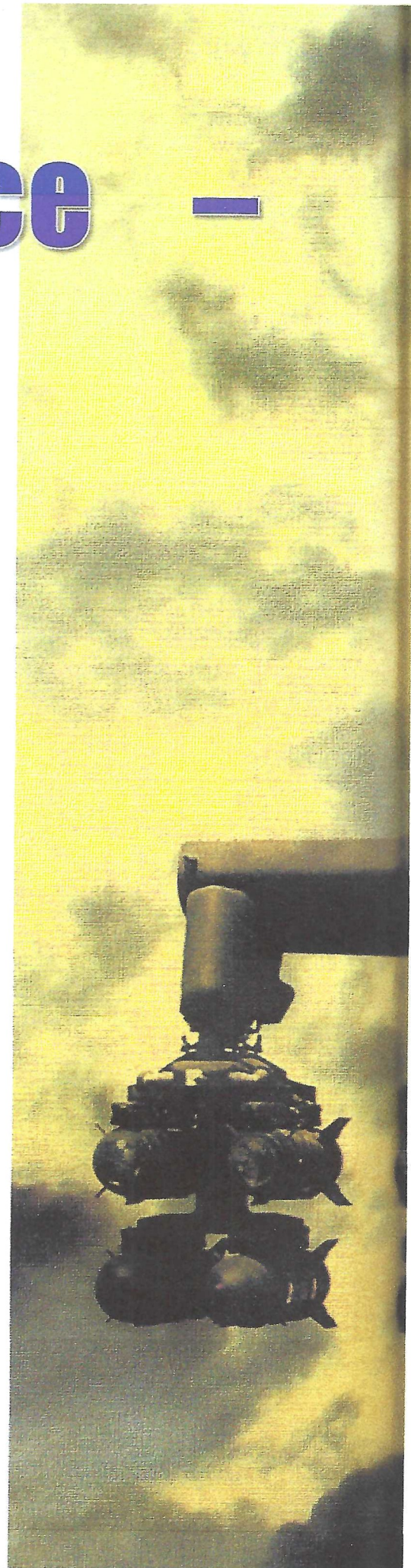
Intelligence is one of the most important tools available to any government. When used correctly, intelligence provides insights into future developments and actionable information about how to react. Until recently, intelligence was seen as something too valuable to risk. The need to protect intelligence capabilities was well understood. But in the 1990s, the doctrine of intelligence was subverted by a new breed of aggressive win-at-all-costs operators known as 'spin doctors'. Their willingness to mislead the general public with intelligence has reduced the public's confidence in government statements and promoted failed foreign policies, including the invasion of Iraq.

The first article in this four-part series described how spin doctors overcame the resistance of the time-honoured doctrine of intelligence, creating 'SPINtelligence'. The second article revealed the

secrets of spin doctoring and described twenty of its most successful techniques. The third article revealed ten devious techniques that spin doctors have gained from intelligence and how they can be used to deceive the general public.

Previous articles have shown that spin is basically dishonest public relations. The level of dishonesty varies as a result of the level of unscrupulousness of the government and its spin doctors. At the most dishonest end of the spin spectrum are its five darkest techniques:

Information Subsidy – This is the constant stream of news releases, opinion pieces, advertorials and other information that is received by the media. This material is frequently pre-packaged in the format of actual newspaper articles or television stories. The sponsors of this material provide it because it promotes their side of the story and they can ensure that it seems to come from a genuine news source. The media cannot object to this phenomenon because this spin makes its work so much easier. After all, when spin doctors provide ready-made stories, the media can save on the costs of real journalists. Editors can reject items that appear





how governments trick you into believing them

Professor Ian Wing

PART 4 – The Damage Caused by Spin Doctors

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too biased but they do not have time to check everything. The information subsidy is a dark secret, which is highly susceptible to the bias and objectives of spin.

Media Manipulation – It is a truism to say that the media does not always get everything right. Incorrect information is released frequently but often simply by mistake. 'Misinformation' is inaccurate information with no deliberate intent. 'Disinformation', on the other hand, is deliberately inaccurate and it is designed to mislead. The principal purpose of spin doctors is to monitor and manipulate the media through disinformation. Some of these spin doctors work in prominent media positions, including talkback radio hosts and newspaper columnists, and this enables them to promote important political or corporate messages. Even the Internet is not immune from spin. In the months prior to the 2007 Australian Federal Election, it was

reported by the Australian media that Wikipedia had found over 5,000 edits were made to its records by members of Prime Minister John Howard's staff.

Fake News – Completely fictitious events can also be publicized for spin. In some cases, real news is mixed with misleading messages to achieve spin. One of the best examples occurred following the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. A young nurse claimed that she had seen Iraqi troops in a hospital throwing Kuwaiti babies out of humidicribs. This shocking news echoed around the world and it galvanized the governments of the Coalition of the Willing that would force the Iraqis to leave Kuwait. It was later revealed that the nurse was an actress and the incident never happened.

Media Passivity – In response to this flood of pre-packaged news, the media is often strangely passive. Much of the spin comes from government sources and so the media has little option other than to accept what it is given. Rather than reject the information outright, the media is willing to use it in the interests of saving money. A recent spin doctor company claimed that, "Ninety per cent of TV newsrooms now rely on video news releases". Australian newspapers increasingly run features provided by large corporations, which have the same look and feel as genuine news reporting. Compliant think tanks provide another useful means of disseminating the government's message.

Propaganda – Sir Winston Churchill often used Joseph Stalin's observation that, "In wartime, the

truth is so precious that she should always be attended to by a bodyguard of lies". The need to keep secrets and confuse the enemy in wartime is the origin of propaganda. Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, his Minister of Propaganda, were famous exponents of spin. Hitler believed that a big lie was more likely to be believed than a small one and it led to his ability to control Nazi Germany's masses. Propaganda is spin delivered in wartime. It is now officially obsolete because it requires deliberately misleading the general public and the media. But propaganda is still part of the spin doctoring business, particularly since September 11, because there has been almost continuous involvement in combat operations. Propaganda uses all of the tricks of spin combined with patriotic messages, censorship of the opposition and the overt demonization of the enemy.

History has many examples of propaganda spokespeople, including Lord Haw-Haw and Tokyo Rose during the Second World War. Another recent example of failed wartime spin was the nightly appearances of Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf, the former Iraqi Minister of Information, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Even as coalition forces advanced inexorably towards Baghdad, al-Sahhaf continued to promise an Iraqi victory with the famous words, "Everything is just fine".

Military forces operating on the battlefield attempt to win support from local civilians using a 'hearts and minds campaign'. This campaign makes up one part of a more complex war

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fighting strategy called information warfare. This strategy, which was used successfully in Iraq in 2003, combines psychological warfare, communications disruption and direct attacks to terrify the enemy into surrendering.

A notorious recent example of propaganda was the death of Corporal Pat Tillman. Tillman was a famous American football linebacker playing for the Arizona Cardinals. His decision to leave football to enlist in the US Army following the September 11 terrorist attacks won him great respect. It was announced in 2004 that he had been killed heroically leading his men in combat in Afghanistan. But it was later revealed that he had been killed by accidental friendly fire and that the news was changed to emphasize its spin value. Subsequent congressional hearings described the spin as utter fiction. This very sad story, which was uncovered by Tillman's brother, epitomizes the low depths that spin can reach.

It is officially illegal for propaganda to target the domestic population of the United States, although there are no restrictions on US international propaganda. Non-democratic countries have fewer scruples about the use of propaganda. China's Xinhua News Agency always promotes the position of the Chinese Government. Russia is currently reviving its state propaganda agency, the National Information Center, which will monitor Western journalists and promote a positive national image. The spin doctors who control modern spin have given themselves a new title, perception managers. And those involved in wartime propaganda are now referred to as information warriors.

The general public's best insight into the work of spin doctors comes ironically from Hollywood. In 1997, Robert de Niro and Dustin Hoffman starred in *Wag the Dog*. This was a thinly veiled story of spin doctors causing a war to improve the popularity of the US President. A similar black comedy, *Thank You for Smoking*, starring Aaron Eckhart, was released in 2006. The movie showed how US spin doctors operate front groups in favour of tobacco, alcohol and guns. These films caused widespread comment from within the spin doctoring industry. A review of blogs on the subject shows that spin doctors are actually proud of the image this portrays. The author once overheard a spin doctor exclaim, "There is no business like show business" – and his comment sums up the real meaning of modern spin.

The overall effect of spin is the loss of confidence in statements from the government and reporting by the media. This is known as spin fatigue and it is a common feature of the increasingly cynical society. Sadly, it also has a corrosive effect on the general public's confidence in the democratic system. The feeling of powerlessness and disillusionment experienced by many citizens is, in part, a result of spin. The old political adage states that information is power. Governments and their spin doctors know that they must maximize their control over the flow of information. As a result, the number of official government media advisers is constantly growing and all government employees are warned that all statements to the media must be cleared prior to release. Occasionally, an uncleared comment will slip through the net and embarrass the government but it can rely upon a tame public servant or official to step forward and reaffirm the official government position.

The most disturbing damage caused by spin is the creation of 'dirt units' funded by political parties. These aim to find out embarrassing secrets about the other side of politics so that they can be leaked to the media. This exemplifies the influence of spin doctors and their win-at-all-costs influence. The goal of a successful democracy should be to represent the general public through good governance and truth in government. Spin doctors reduce the honesty, ethics and truthfulness of governments. In so doing, they allow governments to trick people into believing them. It is fast becoming naïve to say that governments are elected by the people to govern in their interests, but not to mislead and trick them.

This is the final part of this four-part series. The series has described the twenty techniques of spin, the ten techniques spin has gained from intelligence, and

spin's five most devious methods. Intelligence is a very fragile capability and it is being damaged by spin. It must protect its sources and maintain the confidence of its clients. Spin is an aggressive and dishonest activity with few, if any, such concerns – except exposure. Spin gains unwarranted credibility when it leverages on the respected capabilities of intelligence. Ultimately, spin doctors believe that the ends justify the means, while professional intelligence officers search for the objective truth.

The intelligence profession may never fully recover from the misuse of its capabilities for government spin. The only positive aspect of this disturbing trend is that the general public is now becoming more aware of the methods and dangers of SPINtelligence. ■

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

