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THE INFLUENCE OF SPIN DOCTORS ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS

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Prologue

As a part of my bachelor degree in Communications Management, I had the enviable task of writing a project in which I show my understanding of communications. As I had and still have a very large interest in the political life, not only in Belgium, but all across the globe, it was no surprise that I picked a theme from the political world.

As I have spent already more than four years of my life abroad, I also took the chance to write this project in the wonderful language of Shakespeare. As this language has been a real help in opening doors in the past, I also see it as a key to opening doors in the future.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all my lecturers over the past three years. Though I might not have been the easiest student, I have very much enjoyed all my classes and learned even more than I had imagined when I started this education.

On a second note, I also want to thank my parents for raising me as an independent and strong-willed individual. Thank you for showing me how important it is to have an opinion and to stand up for your beliefs. Even though we might have the occasional difference of opinion, I know you are proud of what I have done with the talents you gave me.

I would also want to thank all my mentors during my internships. Geert Sciot, Sofie Versweyveld, Remi Verbeeck, Joost Lecompte and last but not least, Peter Otten. I especially want to thank Peter and the Hill &

Knowlton office in Brussels, for not only giving me the opportunity to prove myself during my internship, but also for believing in me and offering me a job at their office.

And finally, to you, the reader, I hope this document will help you in understanding the intricate and intriguing world that is political communication and spin in particular. Hopefully you will take a message with you after reading this document.

Introduction

In this project, I will try and analyze the influence spin doctors have on the political communication in the last decades. Spin itself is a contentious subject and therefore it is hard to find objective sources and reliable references. I have tried to base my work partly on the books, articles and websites I have read, combined with my own knowledge and the learnings I have gotten over the years. Those learnings not only cover the last three years of my education as a professional bachelor in communications management, but also my previous experiences and observations.

First of all, I will be looking to define in an undiscriminating way, the terminology of the subject. From there on, I will be looking at different cases of spin and even take a look back at one of the 'founding fathers' of spin. The cases that I will discuss, will cover the USA and Great-Britain as well as Belgium. I have chosen these two countries as they are – and most likely will be – always ahead of the peloton in devising new strategies and techniques when it comes to communication. They also offer some of the prime examples and clear cases of spin.

After looking at these examples, I will be looking at the ethics of spin and what the relation is in between spin and propaganda. In the final chapter, I will be searching for alternatives and a future for spin.

As I said, spin is a contentious subject and to avoid spinning any message myself, I have used the original texts in Dutch where possible

and added my own translation too. By doing this, I have tried to keep the text as open and objective as possible. Although I must admit, that my own vision has crept up in between the lines here and there. But then again, what would one be without an own opinion, a vision of his own,... most likely cattle following the shepherd. I sincerely hope that this work is appreciated for what it is. A trial at grasping the extremities of political communication.

Chapter 1: Defining Spin

Before we go deeper into the question that we will be treating in this project, we're going to dissect the question itself. What do we see as political communication, who or what are spin doctors, what is spin and what does it do to influence communication? How can we define these terms.

1.1 What is political communication?

Political communication can be defined as all forms of communication used by either political parties, politicians, governments, ministers or their cabinets,... basically any communication surrounding politics.

It is clear that there is a wide range of messages and impulses that reach us each and every day, that can be categorized under political communication. This can vary from the implementation of a new levy by your local town on issuing birth certificates or the announcement by a political party they want to ban headscarves in public places.

1.2 What is spin?

There are different opinions and definitions that exist for spin. But let's start at the beginning. The word spin itself is taken from the cricket world. In the 'wildly exciting and entertaining' game of cricket, the

bowler puts spin on the ball to deceive the batsman. The spin makes the ball follow a trajectory that is hard to judge by the batsman which may lead to him miss hitting the ball or even loose a wicket.

If we transfer this to the world of communication, this would mean that you try to deceive your audience by putting a different 'spin' on your message. Here the audience can also include a direct opponent in a debate or the general public as a whole.

One of the first mentions of the term spin doctor was back in 1984, in an editorial of the New York Times. The editorial reflected on the activities of Ronald Reagan's re-election campaign and the methods used by his campaign team.

According to Wikipedia : "...spin is a usually pejorative term signifying a heavily biased portrayal in one's own favor of an event or situation. While traditional public relations may also rely on creative presentation of the facts, "spin" often, though not always, implies disingenuous, deceptive and/or highly manipulative tactics. Politicians are often accused of spin by their political opponents."

Noël Slangen (Belgium's most famous example of a spin doctor) gave an interesting view on not just spin, but the way he sees (political) communication. This quote is taken from a book by Annick Vansevenant (De Kracht van Macht - The Power of Power).

"Een kleine groep is geïnteresseerd in de grote hoeveelheid informatie. De grootste groep mensen is slechts beperkt geïnteresseerd. Daartussen zitten veel niveaus. Een communicatiebeleid bestaat erin dat

je multigelaagd werkt, waardoor je verschillende groepen duidelijk kunt maken wat je bent en wat je niet bent. En dat je om strategische redenen dingen die je bent of doet beter niet kunt zeggen.”

“A little group is interested in the large quantity of information. The largest group of people has only a limited interest. In between there are many levels. A communication policy is a multi-layer work which allows you to make clear to different groups, what you are and what you are not. And because of strategic reasons things that you are, or things that you do, are better not told.”

In the book 'Public Relations - Strategies & Tactics' by Dennis L. Wilcox and Glen T. Cameron, the authors reserve a few lines on spin too.

“In the beginning, the meaning of spin was restricted to what often were considered the unethical and misleading activities and tactics of political campaign consultants. By the mid-1990s, however, the media widely used the term to describe any effort by public relations personnel to put a positive slant on an event or issue.”

Another Belgian communications specialist, Peter Frans Anthonissen reflects in his book 'Stop de Pers!' (Stop the Press!):

“De spin doctors, de slimme politieke communicatiespecialisten, proberen vooral op die laatste 2 niveaus in te spelen. Hun rol is aan het einde van de jaren negentig heel belangrijk geworden. Het gaat hen niet zozeer om wat er precies gebeurt, maar hoe dat een positieve weerklank kan hebben bij 'de mensen'.”

“The spin doctors, the smart political communications specialists, especially try to anticipate these last 2 levels. Their role has become very important at the end of the nineties. To them, it does not necessarily matter what exactly happens but how that can get a positive resonance with 'the people'.”

The two levels Anthonissen refers to are within the political reality, the perception by the masses and the hidden agendas plus behind-the-screens charades of politics and politicians.

Out of these four views on spin and political communication, we can distill a few elements that recur in all of them. So I would define spin as follows: “The 'spin doctor' or communication specialist uses his techniques and skill to bring a story or message in such a way that the public has the desired feelings and reactions.”

This of course is a very condensed definition which requires a bit more in depth explanation. First of all, you actually have to start explaining the definition from the end towards the beginning. Because as in most forms of communication, the result is what matters! So you need to define what reaction, opinion or feeling you want to create with your audience. Once you have established these elements, you can look at what media (print, audio, audiovisual, ...) best serve your goal. In my definition, I said “to bring a story or message in such a way” In that 'such' lies the whole complexity of the spin. Because as Slangen mentioned, for strategic reasons, it is better not to mention things that you are or that you do. Hence the need to creatively bring your message across by using all skills and techniques at your disposal.

Chapter 2: Historic spin, cases of spin and spin-offs

2.1 Historic spin

Now that we have established what the terms political communication and spin represent, it is time to analyze how they interact and influence each other. Therefore we will be looking at different cases of spin in the United States, the United Kingdom and Belgium. But before we tackle these modern day spin stories, I would like to take you back in time. To the days where small nations were constantly fighting each other for new territory and power. In those days in Italy, family-clans ruled cities and regions. One of the most powerful of these clans could be found in Firenze (Florence), the banker family 'de Medici'. At the end of the fifteenth century the Medici family was expelled from Florence and the Republic was reinstated. After the execution and burning of the Dominican monk Savonarola, one person by the name of Niccolò di Bernardi dei Machiavelli (1469-1527) was elected Secretary to the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence. The Second Chancery was mainly in charge of foreign and military affairs. Considering the ever-shifting alliances and continuous war-mongering in the European continent, this was one of the most influential positions within the Florentine administration.

But after thirteen years of valuable service to Florence, Machiavelli was exiled when the French army entered Florence once again. The family of de Medici was reinstated into power by the Florentines. In an attempt to return to public service, Machiavelli was writing a 'little work' as he himself described it. This work has nowadays become synonymous with

Machiavelli's name and one more often than not follows the other; this work of course is 'Il Principe' (The Prince). Il Principe was actually only published for the first time in 1532, five years after Machiavelli passed away.

Why all this history about politics in Italy over five hundred years ago, you might wonder? The very reason for this is that in modern day politics, the basics that Machiavelli established in Il Principe are still very much applicable to current politics. By many a politician (or by their communications advisors) it is still considered a work of great value. He can be seen as a spin doctor avant la lettre, with his tips and guidelines on how to gain or retain (political and military) power.

To give a few examples:

On first impressions, Machiavelli wrote: “The first impression that one gets of a ruler and of his brains is from seeing the men he has about him.” Machiavelli already understood that no man can lead without the support of his peers and the dedication of his subordinates.

On flattery, Machiavelli warned: “There's no other way of guarding one's self against flattery than by letting men understand that they will not offend you by speaking the truth; but when every one can tell you the truth, you lose their respect.” Machiavelli points out the difficult balance of constructive criticism and too much criticism, which can undermine a position of power.

Another advice Machiavelli provided us with, talks about the dangers and

traps of being in a leading position and striving for goodness: “A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore, it is necessary ... to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it, according to the necessity of the case.” Machiavelli clearly saw the ambiguity of 'being good' and that in certain scenarios it is better not to be good than it is to be good. In this quote it is easy to make the link to what Slangen has told us earlier about not telling things that you are or that you do, for strategic reasons.

This shows that Machiavelli's Princ(e)iples are still very much an influence in today's politics and communication. This is also substantiated by many a politician who admits to having read 'Il Principe' and possessing a copy in his or her library. Does this mean that nothing has changed in the way politicians communicated and were perceived by the general public over 500 years ago compared to now? Definitely not! There have been quite a lot of changes and especially in the last century, with the exponential growth of the media as a factor in the balance of power. On the other hand the basic principle still stands. Politics and politicians try to get their message across to achieve the most favorable response from the public and their electorate. This with the aim of consolidating or (re)gaining the (political) power.

2.2 Cases of spin

In the next chapter we will be looking at several cases where spin is applied to political communication. We'll start with some examples from the USA to move a bit closer to home where we will take a look at what spin doctors have been up to in the United Kingdom. The final stop will be Brussels where we take a closer look at Belgian and more specific, Flemish cases of spin and spin doctors. We will try and establish if there are different approaches to political communication and spin in the different countries. At the end of the chapter we will try and answer the question whether spin is influenced by a country's culture.

2.2.1 USA

From Oval Office to Oral Office

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky" Bill Clinton, when interviewed by Kenneth Starr

More likely than not, this is one phrase that will haunt Clinton for the rest of his days. It is a wonderfully creative and ingenious example of how spin works. At first sight you can say that Clinton denied to having any form of sexual relation with Monica Lewinsky. But once you start dissecting the sentence, you realize that what he actually says is quite intriguing. First of all, by saying 'that woman, Monica Lewinsky', he is not denying that he might have had sexual relations with other women than Miss Lewinsky. Also the use of the term 'sexual relations' by Clinton,

leaves room for interpretation. In his defense against claims of perjury, Clinton later clarifies his definition. The definition he used in his previous statement was for a sexual relation to exist, there needed to be sexual intercourse in between two (or more) persons. Oral or anal contact for Clinton does not define as a sexual relation. So when Clinton is smoking a cigar and Miss Lewinsky is blowing his 'cigar', according to Clinton's definition this is not a sexual relation.

The question posed then by many an observer and by most of the public was, has President Clinton lied. That claim was made by the prosecutor Kenneth Starr in his crusade to get Clinton impeached. But technically, Clinton did not lie. He just applied a very strict definition of 'sexual relations', and the indirect mentioning of Miss Lewinsky to avoid a confession of an extra-marital affair.

This is a classic example of how word order and interpretation of words can be used to 'spin' your message. In the same category we can also find statements made using the words 'as far as I was aware (at that time)...' or 'to the best of my knowledge...'. These phrases leave room for interpretation but the sender cannot be accused of lying. And for someone aiming at a prolonged career in politics, avoiding the label of 'liar' is crucial. Because once tagged a liar it is hard to convince your voters that it was all a misunderstanding.

How to become President of the United States

In this chapter we will take a closer look at how George W. Bush was able

to challenge for and ultimately win the race to the White House. Bush as a young adolescent was hardly the person one would expect to become president of one of the most powerful nations in the world. He has been described as an alcoholic and he is also suspected of cocaine use. Though he has said that he did not use illegal drugs at any time since 1974, when he was 28. Bush has refused to answer questions about his possible use of cocaine and marijuana prior to 1974. His dad helped him avoid a Tour of Duty in Vietnam and instead he was allowed to serve in the Texas Air National Guard. Even that was hard on young George as he went AWOL (Absent WithOut Leave) for a year.

After finishing Harvard with an MBA to complement his earlier Bachelor of Arts he obtained at Yale, he went into the oil business. After a few ventures with companies such as Arbusto and Harken Energy he purchased a share of the Texas Rangers baseball team in 1989. Five years later he sold his initial \$800.000 investment for over \$15 million.

In that same year, 1994, he also ran for governor of Texas. He started off as the outsider against the democrat candidate Ann Richards. During his campaign Bush was accused of using controversial methods to undermine his opponent. In his campaign team at that time, we already notice the presence of Karl Rove. Rove can best be described as Bush's spin doctor and campaign manager. Rove had previously worked for Bush senior and had built up quite a reputation in previous election campaigns for Republican candidates. According to an article in November 2004 published in the Atlantic Monthly, Rove was the primary strategist on 41 campaigns in between 1981 and 1999. Of those 41 campaigns, Rove's candidates had won 34 of them.

Rove had already advised George W. Bush during his unsuccessful campaign for Congress. But this time around, Rove has had time to prepare Bush and mold him into the perfect challenger. At this time, Rove is already looking beyond the governorship of Texas. He wants to take his prodigy all the way to the top, to Pennsylvania Avenue, the White House... But back to the gubernatorial campaign. When Bush was still lagging behind in the polls against Richards, Rove called upon his favorite tactics to overturn the situation. Suddenly rumors started circulating about Ann Richards. Ultimately Bush was able to convince the voters by going for four simple and understandable points. These points and speeches were well rehearsed with Rove and repeated at every occasion, whether it was a primary school, a nursing home or a pep rally. He won the elections and so started his venture towards Pennsylvania Avenue.

The next step came in 1999, when Bush was running in the primaries for the nomination of the Republican candidate. When the primaries came to New Hampshire one of his challengers, Senator McCain, had defeated Bush comprehensively (49% to Bush's 30%). Time for another trick from Karl Rove's box. Suddenly whispers came out of Washington about an illegitimate black love child. McCain had supposedly impregnated a colored prostitute. The truth of this is quite simple, McCain and his wife had adopted a colored child. But with the rumors going around and spreading all over the United States, McCain's chances on winning the support of the Republican party convention dwindled. Bush was now the clear favorite.

When challenging Al Gore for the presidency in what ultimately turned out to be the closest race for the White House in American history, the usual negative ads were exchanged. But soon rumors about the credibility of Gore were raised. Again the hand of Rove could be recognized in the orchestrated effort to destabilize the opponent. With the votes cast, the ballots counted, the results started trickling in. On the way Bush won the state of Florida, many books have been written and many more will be written. So let's just keep it on the Supreme Court handing the victory to Bush.

How a mediocre president became a war-president

Up until September 11th 2001, Bush was nothing more than a mediocre president who was mainly passing laws that were favorable to the sponsors of his campaign. Bush had racked up a lot of support within right-wing Christian movements. This was also translated in his opinions on abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research and many other ethical issues. But then the 'unexpected' happened. For the first time since the Civil War, the United States were threatened and the sense of security of most Americans was dashed in one day.

The attacks of 9/11 were the start of what Bush had dubbed 'the War on Terrorism'. First of all going after Bin Laden and the Taliban in Afghanistan. But very soon the Bush administration was pointing at the involvement and support of Iraq and other Islamic countries for the Al Qaeda terrorist organization.

In a speech to the Republican National Committee on January 18th of 2002, Bush's senior advisor, Karl Rove, said the following:

“September 11th changed the nature of war forever. We can build on the American people winning this war because they trust the Republican Party to do a better job protecting and strengthening America's military might and thereby protecting America. And we should be proud of the record of our party on doing just that...”

In this speech, Rove also referred to the other countries in the 'Axis of Evil', like Iraq, Iran and South Korea. He was setting up Bush to become a war president. In the State of the Union the next year, Bush mentioned a few words that cleared the path to an invasion of Iraq:

“The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium... from Africa”

Quite a claim, that opened the purses of Congress and Senate to send the troops to Baghdad and overthrow the dictator Saddam Hussein. Were it not that this claim was totally false. The British Government had a report by it's specialist David Kelly, but the text of his report had been 'sexed up' by Alistair Campbell – Blair's spin doctor.

On the American side, the CIA had sent retired ambassador Joseph C. Wilson, to Niger to investigate reports of uranium sales to Iraq. This was about a year prior to Bush's remarks in his State of the Union. Wilson's report concluded that there was no possibility for Iraq and it's leader Saddam Hussein, to have bought uranium from Niger.

His report was delivered to the CIA and also to the White House and the Bush administration. But still it did not stop Bush from claiming Saddam was possessing and/or making weapons of mass destruction. As a reaction on the invasion of Iraq and the unfruitful search for weapons of mass destruction, Wilson wrote to the New York Times. On July 6th of 2003, he wrote a piece called 'What I did not find in Africa'. He wrote:

“... I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat ...”

This was of course a big blow to the Bush administration, to have one of their advisors publicly asking into question the basis on which they went to war. So the Bush administration went to work, well actually Karl Rove went to work. The result was published on July 14th. In a column by the syndicated columnist Robert Novak, the following paragraph appeared:

“Wilson never worked for the CIA, but his wife, Valerie Plame, is an operative on weapons of mass destruction. Two senior administration officials told me Wilson's wife suggested sending him (Joseph C. Wilson) to Niger...”

That was nothing more or nothing less than a frontal attack on Wilson's wife. As she was a covert CIA operative, the unveiling of her identity not only endangered her life, but also that of other operatives working under cover.

In a law passed in 1982 under the Reagan-Bush (senior) administration, the disclosure of the identity of under cover operatives was made a federal crime and to Bush senior was equal to treason.

Wilson recalls in the documentary "Bush's Brain" a telephone call he got at the time from a journalist. The journalist told him: "I just got off the phone with Karl Rove and he told me your wife (Valerie Plame) was 'fair game'." Thus alluding to the fact she worked for the CIA. Apparently Karl Rove was orchestrating a campaign to push the Wilson-Plame story. Looking back it was also not surprising that it was Robert Novak who actually published the story. Back in 1980, Karl Rove was fired by the Reagan-Bush campaign for leaking... to Robert Novak!

It seems in any case that for Karl Rove the old adage (the end justifies the means) still applies. Through a combination of slander and whisper campaigns, combined with frontal attacks on critics and a constant discrediting of Democratic candidates, Rove has worked his way to the top. He had found in George Walker Bush, the perfect puppet he could mold into his perfect candidate.

These last few examples from the USA show us how far the work of a spin doctor can go. Under the Bush administration we have been able to see a formidable communications apparatus that has continuously been pushing its opinions down the American people's throats. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that after almost two terms of the Bush administration, people have enough. Approval ratings which were sky-high at the beginning of the Iraq invasion have dropped to some of the lowest levels ever for a president. It seems that public opinion leaders

have started to realize the victory is not near and that they're facing a second Vietnam. These public opinion leaders, together with politicians from both major parties are criticizing the Bush-approach to the whole Iraq situation. At this point, even the spin-Meister, Karl Rove, is not able to come up with a magical solution. Or is the war on terror ready for an invasion of Iran? The lack of public and international support has most likely saved us from such a scenario...

The complete role of Karl Rove within the Bush election campaigns and within the two Bush administrations mightn't become completely clear for quite a while. What we can say at this time is that Rove has associated himself to such an extent with George W. Bush, that it's hard to see where one ends and the other begins. It seems like the nerd of the class, Rove, has teamed up with the jock, Bush, and combined his own brains with Bush's ability to open doors to become an all powerful and almost unstoppable steamroller. (Un)fortunately they got caught in some sand traps in the Iraqi desert. Even the best plans and the greatest communicators cannot predict the future, let alone a war. But never mind the almost hopeless situation of the American soldiers in Iraq, their leaders were able to convince a whole nation and quite a few allies that it was worth the trouble. For that alone, the spin doctor of Bush can certainly claim the credit. Whether he will be hailed or crucified is up to the historians of the future.

2.2.2 Great-Britain

How “Labour doesn't work” became “New Labour”

Over the past few decades, politics in Great-Britain have changed and evolved a lot. When Margaret Thatcher, went for the job of Prime Minister, she acquired the service of the Saatchi-brothers. They came up with the almost legendary campaign “Labour doesn't work”. But fifteen years of Tory government and the weak figure of John Major in Downing Street 10, gave Labour a chance to reinvent themselves. A young and ambitious Anthony Blair, rises to the top of the Labour party. He acquires the services of Peter Mandelson, the Communications Advisor of the Labour Party for quite some years. As an addition to Mandelson, Blair is able to lure Alastair Campbell away from the Mirror newspaper. Campbell had always been an admirer of Blair and the Labour party. He never hid his sympathies as a journalist and now he was given the opportunity to become Blair's spokesman, a challenge Campbell was more than willing to accept.

They exchanged the dull and boring Labour and renamed the party 'New Labour'. This helped them into rebranding not only the party, but also many of the party's policies. They got rid of a wide array of old fashioned and out-of-date Labour policies and introduced new policies which were closer to the voters needs and wishes. In the run up to the elections of 1997, Campbell was not afraid to attack journalists who were too critical of Blair and his campaign. When Blair moved in to the Number 10 Office

(Downing Street), Campbell was appointed Director of Communications and in that function he controlled the government's press office.

One of the great things about the British administration up until that point was the independence of the civil servants. Unlike many other western countries (like the USA and Belgium), the civil servants prided themselves in their independence. They could work for a Tory government as well as for a Labour or a Lib-Dem government. But when Alistair Campbell took charge of the press office, he made no secret of his dislike for the civil servants. Of the 40 odd spokesmen and communications advisors of the different ministries that were there at the beginning of the Blair-government, all but one were gone within the year. Either they were fired or resigned themselves and they were replaced by Blair or Campbell faithfuls. This led to a more subjective press office than ever before. Press releases from the government were more and more New Labour-press releases.

For his advice Blair turned to a close circle of advisors, including Campbell. The latter was seen as very influential and was dubbed in some circles as 'the Real Deputy Prime Minister'. It does give one an idea of how close the bond between the Communications Director and his Prime Minister was. Because Campbell was no civil servant and clearly a political appointment, he had great power over the accredited journalists for Downing Street. It is almost a certainty that he used this power to reward journalists that were pro-Blair and tried to keep away the Blair critics. But Campbell received praise from not only his supporters but also from some of his critics for his talent and awareness when it came down to managing the news from the Blair cabinet. Because of his prior

experience in the written media, he had built up a great awareness of what journalists wanted and how he could best serve them. Campbell claimed that he could predict the headlines of the papers for the next day.

How the Princess of Wales became the People's Princess

In his first year as Prime Minister, Blair had to deal with a few internal differences in between some of his ministers. But that same year, a few weeks after he returned from a holiday in Tuscany, at the end of August, Lady Diana crashed into a tunnel in Paris. Campbell almost immediately realized that her death would hijack the headlines for the weeks to come. The next day, most of the world sees a meticulously organized scene in front of a church in rural England. Tony Blair arrives in the family station wagon and addresses the cameras. With the sadness in his voice and for once, no smile on his face, he addresses the nation at one of it's saddest times. Blair dubs Diana, the People's Princess and honors her heritage of charity work. Those few minutes probably did for Blair what the Falkland war had done to the Iron Lady. Turn a lagging cabinet into a cabinet that had the full support of the whole nation. In this brief media moment, Blair had chosen the side of Diana and indirectly against the Royal family who had ousted Diana after her divorce from Prince Charles.

After successfully getting re-elected in 2001, Blair started cuddling up more and more to the United States. His unwaivering support for the War on Terror and his help in 'invading' Iraq together with the Americans,

created a big divide in Britain and 'New Labour'. Especially after the Hutton inquiry exposed the so called 'British intelligence' as a cut-and-paste work of some internet searches. Campbell and Blair used the claims that Saddam was concealing weapons of mass destruction and continuously abused human rights to prepare their invasion of Iraq. After a few months a BBC reporter, Andrew Gilligan, went public with his story claiming that the government had knowingly used false information to get the public support for the invasion. In the aftermath of the BBC story, the reporters source, David Kelly (an employee for the Ministry of Defense), had committed suicide. An inquiry by Lord Hutton, eventually cleared Campbell of acting improperly but the fact remained that the dossier was 'sexed up', as the BBC had reported.

Campbell was unhappy by the treatment he received in the press following the publication of the Hutton report. The press judged that in his press conference he was gloating over the misfortune of the BBC. But with the death of David Kelly in mind, the press and the public were not so forgiving... Campbell ultimately resigned from his post in Downing Street at the end of August 2003.

Despite his resignation, Campbell did return to the Blair-campaign team for the 2005 elections, though not in an official (read public) role. With the imminent retirement of Blair, later in June 2007, the publication of Campbell's' Downing Street diaries are eagerly awaited. One thing is for certain, they will make for interesting reading and will give as a peak behind the screens of one of Britain's more colorful communications specialist.

A new dawn for the Tories...?

With the decline of Blair's popularity and his successor Gordon Brown, not too popular with the public either, does this leave the door open for a new Tory government? Since the demise of the Tories under and after John Major, they have fruitlessly sought a new leader. Someone who could lead the party like Thatcher had, to a new victory. During the Blair-years, many faces have passed at the head of the Conservatives and as many have lost their heads. But now a fresh, young face has established himself as the new party leader: David Cameron. In a style almost reminiscent of the early Blair, has been able to boost the belief in the Tory ranks. In an article in the Guardian on the team behind Cameron (dubbed 'the Cameroons'), the following excerpt makes for interesting reading:

“Thirty years before Cameron, another Conservative politician with smart subordinates and a project captured the party leadership. Margaret Thatcher retains a surprising number of fans among the Cameroons, in particular for the way she decisively changed the direction and tone of British politics during the long build-up to her election in 1979 without committing herself to many policies. Cameron's policies are due to start being announced in “the middle of this year”, says one of his strategists with studied vagueness.”

Despite their young, unexperienced looks, the Cameroons have come a long way since leaving Eton. Most of them have been working in the Conservative Party Headquarters for quite a number of years. They've

seen many a leader come and go, but they all like to reminisce over the days Thatcher ruled the Party and the Country as the Iron Lady.

It seems very clear that David Cameron has been observing not only Thatcher's campaign but also the 'New Labour'-revamp by Blair and his team. Will he be able to combine the elements of both and be successful in the next elections in 2009? One thing is for sure, he and his team know what they want; to be in power! Whether that will be with vague policies and a strong communications team, that is something the next two years will point out. But they should not expect that New Labour with their new leader, Gordon Brown, to just roll over and let the Cameroons march into the Number 10, without a fight.

2.2.3 Belgium

The rebranding of parties

Let's take a look now at what spin doctors have achieved in Belgium. Since the nineties we have seen an increased marketing of political parties. One of the first things that jumps out is the name changes the parties have undergone in the last two decades. Let's give a short overview:

- PVV (Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang) changed it's name in 1992 to VLD (Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten). In 2007, with the next federal elections looming around the corner, they once again changed their

name and are now called OpenVLD.

- CVP (Christelijke VolksPartij) changed their name to CD&V (Christen Democratisch & Vlaams) in 2001.

- SP (Socialistische Partij) also changed their name in 2001, they are now known as sp.a (Socialistische Partij Anders or Sociaal Progressief Alternatief).

- VU (Volksunie) has quite a chaotic history of names and divisions. As part of a broadening of their horizons, they combined with the leftist-liberals of iD21 for the 1999 elections. In 2001 the party split up into three fractions of which two ultimately formed their own, new party. The more leftist movement under the guidance of Bert Anciaux formed spirit (sociaal progressief internationaal regionalistisch integraal-democratisch en toekomstgericht) and is now in an alliance with sp.a. The others gathered around Geert Bourgeois and focused on their Flemish-nationalist inheritance and formed N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie). They are now in an alliance with CD&V.

- Agalev (Anders Gaan Leven later changed to Anders Gaan Arbeiden, Leven En Vrijen) changes name in 2003 after disastrous elections and goes now by the name Groen!

- Vlaams Blok was originally a fusion of two Flemish-nationalistic movements (VNP and VVP). They are one of the only parties that would have kept their name, were it not for a court ruling, which forced them to change their name at the end of 2004 in to Vlaams Belang.

On the other side of the language border there has been a similar fad of changing names in the last decade, although there it has been limited to two parties.

- The PSC (Parti Social Chrétien) changes in 2002 to cdH (Centre Démocrate Humaniste)

- The PRL (Parti Réformateur Libéral) forms in 2002 together with the FDF (Front Démocratique des (Bruxellois) Francophone), the MCC (Mouvement des Citoyens pour le Changement) and the PFF (Partei für Freiheit und Fortschritt), the MR (Mouvement Réformateur)

The other parties such as PS (Parti Socialiste), Ecolo, UF (Union Francophone) and FN (Front National) have stuck with their respective names.

An observation you can make with this long list of changing names is an almost never ending urge to reposition their party. The link with marketing and advertising is easily made. To adapt to a changing environment and changing needs and desires of the electorate, the different parties try to reposition themselves to be more in line with what the(ir) electorate expects. It is not surprising that many of these changes were orchestrated by advertisement agencies or communication specialists. For the main parties on the Flemish side, the likes of Wim Schamp, Noël Slangen and Patrick Janssens were the main responsables.

How chickens downed the plumber

Schamp and Slangen have worked and designed campaigns for most of the three major parties. Patrick Janssens was taken from the ad agency VVL/BBDO to take up the presidency of the SP. As part of his rebuilding of the socialist party he introduced the new name and has since become one of the most popular politicians in the province and city of Antwerp.

Schamp has mainly worked on campaigns of the CVP, but has lately fallen out of favor with the major parties. Slangen on the other hand, has done his name proud. He's worked on the federal election campaign of Jean-Luc Dehaene (then CVP) and he has helped his close neighbour Steve Stevaert (sp.a) to an almost iconic status (especially in their home province of Limburg). But most of all he will be linked to the liberal party (VLD-OpenVld) and the current Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt. He was in charge of the federal election campaign of the VLD in 1999. In the run up the elections, a scandal emerged of a fat melter who mixed remnants of motor oil in a mixture meant for cattle feed. More than average and definitely unhealthy values of dioxins were measured in cattle, poultry and many derivatives. As a result, shops and supermarkets had to remove all meat and dairy produce from the shelves. Because of the lengthy period in between the first discovery of the alarming levels of PCB's (Polychlorinated Biphenyl) and the disclosure of these facts to the public, the trust in the government dropped to an all time low. A report (the now famous 'note-Destickere') that was sent to the ministers Colla and Pinxten, outlined the extensiveness of the dioxin and PCB contamination. The note was not disclosed to the public but later a copy ended up in the hands of then opposition leader, Guy Verhofstadt. Instead of taking the

note straight to the press, his campaign manager, Slangen, gave him some advice. He told Verhofstadt, to take the note to the Prime Minister first. By doing this, he would create the impression that he was first of all concerned with the well-being of the Belgian citizens rather than trying to influence voters. As a direct consequence of the publication of the note-Destickere in the press, the ministers of Agriculture (Pinxten) and Public Health (Colla) were forced to resign from their positions. The government of Dehaene (nicknamed 'the Plumber') was shaken to the core and was unable to regain the confidence of the voters in the elections of May.

In what turned out to be a majestic, strategic move, Verhofstadt not only got public praise for his actions, he also came victorious out of the federal elections. He formed a new government with his Liberals (VLD) together with the Socialists and Greens on both sides of the language border. The party of Dehaene, CVP was left in disarray and was forced to retreat to the oppositions benches.

As part of a new image for politics and the new, 'purple-green' government, Slangen introduced a new terminology. Two of the main characteristics were the so-called 'open-debate culture' and the 'voluntarism'. The open-debate culture allowed for disagreements in between the government's coalition partners. While the voluntarism, was an excuse to launch new law proposals without a guarantee that they would actually be approved.

Turning the tables on Slangen

At this time, I want to introduce a SWOT-analysis I developed in June 2006 on Noël Slangen. As part of an oral examination for English we were asked to discuss an example of a spokesperson or a communications specialist. Our eye had fallen on Mister Slangen:

- Strengths

* Because of his past experience in different businesses and various sectors, Slangen has been able to build up a lot of respect and a strong reputation. Being a self-made man, he also commands a lot of respect from his peers as well as his clients. He has been willing to take chances and try his luck in new sectors, such as politics, and make an immediate impact.

* With his connections in the main political parties in Flanders, combined with his experience as a communications adviser for CVP and VLD, he has learned the intriguing political system in Belgium and Flanders from the inside. This view from the inside has helped in communicating effectively, adapting the communication to the appropriate target groups.

* He has introduced the concept of 'open communication' in politics. This has been quite a revolution both for politicians, journalists and the general public alike. Whereas before there was only (or mostly) communication after decisions were made, now communication is constant throughout the process of developing legislation and

governmental decisions.

- Weaknesses

* The big disadvantage of being a marketer and getting involved in politics is that pretty much immediately you will get labeled as a 'spin-doctor'. Together with Wim Schamp and on a lesser scale Patrick Janssens, he introduced marketing techniques into the political landscape. The result being that a lot of people view the communication as 'not genuine' and create a feeling of being deceived. The border in between political marketing and propaganda is also a very thin line and crossing that line can easily happen.

* The lack of content in a lot of messages makes the public feel that they are just being sold a box of hot air with no real vision. This is partly because the 'open-debate culture' means a lot of measures are announced but not all of them will eventually be executed. So people hear a lot of promises and ideas but do not see any concrete realizations that benefit them.

- Opportunities

Right now (June 2006, red.) there are a few roads open to reinvigorate the career and image of Noël Slangen...

* He can go back to his roots and focus on commercial communication ,

marketing and advertising. Thus leaving the treacherous minefield that is political marketing and politics in general. This could be perceived as a withdrawal from battle, but could ultimately help Slangen saving face. For the longer he stays in politics, the more tangled up he gets in dodgy affairs and the more he will be facing allegations of all sorts.

* The other option open to Slangen is to revitalize the VLD-brand he has created. After close to 8 years in government, the refreshing image Prime Minister Verhofstadt once had, has long since waned. So as a good marketer, he could (or should) reposition or revitalize the VLD. This of course still depends very much on the results the current federal government led by the VLD, can accomplish and in how far this is what the electorate are willing to support.

- Threats

* One of the main threats for any political marketer slash spin-doctor is the general perception of marketing in politics. A growing group of disgruntled voters is moving towards the extremes and thus putting increasing pressure on the current majorities. Whether this is a direct consequence of the view that the current governmental communication is close to or is propaganda, is another discussion that we will not embark on today (but this year I will, see the next chapter).

* Another big threat for the career of Slangen is that in the next communal elections and subsequent federal elections in 2007, the VLD gets booted out of government. A return to the opposition benches can

for a party as a whole, be a time for reflection, but for a marketer it is a failure. So that could mean the end of the line for Slangen's highly publicized venture in politics.

When I wrote this analysis last year, I could have hardly imagined how close to the truth I had come. Since then Slangen has returned to the VLD to revitalize their image and has now become a part of the party's board. Slangen has chosen to take on the challenge of keeping the 'OpenVLD' in government and put his name and fame on the line. But at the same time, he has come under increasing scrutiny from written press. Especially the Roularta Media Group, fronted by the magazine Knack has put its teeth in the juice affairs Slangen has been a part of. As his defense Slangen has chosen to go on an unrelenting attack on Knack and the owner of the Roularta-group, mister Rik Denolf. With accusations being thrown back and forth in between the two camps, it's hardly what you could call an example of effective crisis communication. Slangen has taken the accusations very much personally and so far has not refrained from using almost 'Rove-esque' tactics to discredit his enemies.

2.2.4 The common denominator – The Third Way

Now that we've had an overview of the spin-doctors in different countries, it's time to take a look at what similarities we can find. In this context it is hard to ignore the influence of Dr Anthony Giddens' view and analysis of the political landscape in the nineties. In his book "The

Third Way, The Renewal of Social Democracy" (1998), Giddens throws the left-right divide out of the window. Instead he portrays the political landscape around two axes. One axis divides the field in between more or less state; the other axis represents the scope of more or less social control. According to Giddens, the party that can reach the large mass of people/voters at the crossing of the axes wins the elections. He looks at the political landscape as a market with different producers offering their product and positioning their 'brand' within the above mentioned axes.

The Third Way was the basis for the reform of Labour into New Labour. The former US-President William Jefferson Clinton, also claims to be a pupil of Dr Giddens' Third Way. It's no surprise then that one of the Democratic 'think-tanks' is called 'the Third Way'. In Belgium, the VLD has taken the center position for now. A position also desired by the sp.a and Patrick Janssens. As for any political party that aims to be in government, it is imperative to find a resonance with the larger part of the voting public. Therefore within the scheme Giddens has drawn up, it should be no surprise that most parties are looking at marketers, advertisers and communications specialists to reposition their party as close as possible to the center of the grid. Whether this is a temporary phase or a continuing generalization in which the parties move ever closer to each other, only time will tell. But we can still distinguish a difference in between the US and the UK on the one hand and Belgium on the other hand. The US and UK have been dominated for centuries by a bi-partisan system. In Belgium, there has for the last century always been a wider range of parties and opinions. Of course we cannot deny the fact that in the UK, the steady growth of the Liberal Democrats may

lead to a different situation in the near future. The only problem for the Lib-Dems, is the voting system of 'first-past-the-post', which limits the possibilities of a wide variety of parties to establish themselves in the House of Commons.

Chapter 3 : Spin versus Ethics

From the previous chapter and the different cases we have discussed, we can see that spin and spin doctors more often than not flirt with the fringes of ethics. Does spin and political communication follow the ethics code established by communications and Public Relations organizations? How does spin compare to propaganda? Do spin doctors behave in an ethical and legal manner? A few questions we will try to answer in this chapter.

3.1 Spin or propaganda?

When discussing spin, it is hard not to make a comparison to propaganda. Prime examples of propaganda – for example during World War II - could be described as spin and vice versa. The German Propaganda Minister under Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, would today be described as a spin doctor. At the same time, politicians and their messages often get labeled as propaganda. So it seems to be a fine line or is there a line at all? To find an answer to this question we need to define propaganda.

3.1.1 What is propaganda?

If we look up propaganda in Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary (of the English language), this is what we get:

- “1. Any institution or scheme for propagating a doctrine, or system
2. Effort directed systematically toward the gaining of public support for an opinion or course of action.
3. The tenets, views, etc., put forward by propaganda.”

The dictionary of the Dutch language (Van Dale – groot woordenboek der Nederlandse taal 13e herziene uitgave) has the following on propaganda:

“... activiteit m.n. van een organisatie, om aanhangers te winnen voor zekere principes (van propaganda spreekt men vooral wanneer in het gepropageerde een ideëel element aanwezig is of verondersteld wordt, anders spreekt men van reclame): propaganda is de kunst om een ander te laten geloven wat je zelf niet gelooft (Huizinga)...”

“... activity by an organization, to win supporters for certain principles (one usually speaks of propaganda when the propagated contains or is presumed to contain an ideological element, otherwise one speaks of advertising): propaganda is the art to let another person believe what you don't believe yourself (Huizinga)...”

Wikipedia's explanation is a bit more extensive:

“Propaganda is a type of message aimed at influencing the opinions or behavior of people. Often, instead of impartially providing information, propaganda can be deliberately misleading, or use fallacies, which, while sometimes convincing, are not necessarily valid. Propaganda techniques include: patriotic flag-waving, glittering

generalities, intentional vagueness, oversimplification of complex issues, rationalization, introducing unrelated red herring issues, using appealing, simple slogans, stereotyping, testimonials from authority figures or celebrities, unstated assumptions, and encouraging readers or viewers to “jump on the bandwagon” of a particular ideology.”

3.1.2 Propaganda versus spin

In the definition from Webster's, we can find a resemblance to spin. As they are both aiming to gain public support for an opinion or a course of action. But in the Dutch definition the condition of containing an ideological element in spin, is something we so far have not discussed. Does the same condition apply to spin? On a first assessment, I would say no, as spin can be found in more than just ideological communication. The Clinton-quote would support this claim. As in that phrase there is no real ideological element. What we can say, based on the different techniques and methods mentioned on Wikipedia, is that they are using the same or similar techniques.

So far we have been able to establish that there are a lot of similarities in between propaganda and spin. But there sure must be more differences than the underlying ideological vision that propaganda promotes which is not a necessity for spin. Spin does carry some ideological purpose, but it usually focuses on one issue at a time, like the dioxin crisis prior to the 1999 elections in Belgium. Can we say that propaganda is a more generalized effort to promote an ideological vision, while spin is a way of

communicating on certain issues without ... ?

If we look at the Minister of Propaganda in Hitler's "Third Reich", Joseph Goebbels, he now also gets the label of spin doctor. But was he really spinning the news? He definitely introduced a terminology and coined phrases that could be described as spin. But in modern times, propaganda is still very much linked to the negative examples of Goebbels and of the former Soviet propaganda machine.

Therefore I think it would be fair to see spin as an evolution of propaganda. Whereas propaganda combined the knowledge of psychology to influence the people, spin has added the modern marketing techniques to take political communication to the next level.

3.2 The ethics of spin

After reading through the examples of spin tactics used by Karl Rove and other spin doctors, it is only fair to ask the question of how ethical spin and spin doctors are. To find an answer to this question, I would refer to the code of ethics used and followed by the PR-companies worldwide. The six core values are advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty and fairness. So one could argue that some of the tactics used in the aforementioned cases are in breach with these core values.

Ultimately, it depends on how the spin doctor sees himself. Is he a ruthless humanoid that won't stop at nothing to achieve his goals? Is he in the first place a human who respects the individuality of every person? Or is he floating in between these two extremities. One thing is for sure, at the end of the day, the ones who find themselves under the second group will be more respected, while the first group will be loathed by their opponents.

In any case, as a communications specialist and advisor of politicians and parties, you still have to abide by the laws of the country. Whether you want to push to the edge or stay clear of controversy and dubiousness will depend on how conscientious you are. But do keep in mind that whatever you say or do at some point in time, the truth will always come out on top.

On the question of the legality of the actions of spin doctors or political advisors, we can only refer to the different cases brought up against the 'spin doctors'. In a democracy we believe that our judges can make

impartial decisions that stay true to the spirit of our laws. We cannot be judge and jury at the same time, but luckily as voters we do get to voice our own opinion once in a while when we are called to cast our ballots in the elections.

Chapter 4: Spinning the future

4.1 Is there a future for spin?

To answer this question, we need to look at the reasons and the grounds that allow spin to exist and be successful.

For one, the role of the media must be scrutinized. With the growth of international and global multimedia concerns, the media become an increasingly powerful element in the political communication. Because of the commercial demands governing the media corporations, the media itself become less critical in their reporting. The majority aim, just like the political parties in the Giddens' scheme, for the largest possible audience. In that retrospect, it is good to scrutinize the American media landscape. In the USA, there has been an ever increasing polarization of the different media. Right now there are four mammoth concerns with News Corporation (led by Rupert Murdoch), CBS Corporation, Time Warner and ViaCom. They all offer a broad array of services from print, radio, television, film to Internet and other upcoming new media. Together with the growth of these multimedia companies, they have created an increasingly similar set of programs and publishings. Because the media are still very much depending on the revenues of advertisements, they want to and need to cater to as wide an audience as possible. Unfortunately, this always ends up going towards the lowest common denominator and the so-called dumbing down of the mainstream media.

But of course it would be unfair to just point the finger at the media alone. The public still has the choice to select a different channel, read another newspaper, visit another website,... But in a society driven by the laws of economics and profitability, even the public feels the daily strain of having to perform. So when Tom, Dick or Harry come home after a hard day's work, they gladly swallow what the media offers them in size bite formats; easy to digest and entertaining programs; infotainment shows and so on.

Within such a system, it should not surprise that the spin doctors succeed in almost effortlessly spinning their message. Because a simple message will go down easy with the greater masses and only a minority might ask questions on the validity and purpose of their message.

So is there a future for spin? Right now, there definitely is! How it will evolve in the future will depend on the evolution of the media and society. Not only the evolution in the western societies, but also the upcoming industrialized nations such as China and India, the South-American heavyweights Brazil and Argentina and on a longer term maybe the African nations too. Their evolution will ultimately determine whether spin has a permanent future or whether it is just a passing phase, to be replaced by another more attractive and adapted alternative.

4.2 Are there viable alternatives to spin?

There are definitely alternatives to spinned communication. But they do not have the same time frame as spin. Thorough, clear and honest communication takes a lot more time and requires the receiver to think and analyze the message. As previously discussed, in an ever more stressful society the chances of people getting more time to form their own opinions is small.

Although small they might be, they are still there. It will be up to the society to decide whether they want to continue listening to spin doctors or whether they will be looking more and more to form their own opinion. In that respect, the growth of the Internet blogging community can be seen as a counterweight to the mainstream media. Millions of people, write or read blogs, comment on posts and learn that there is more than one true opinion. So it is not a time to be plan doomsday just yet. It is rather the right time to start your own blog, read other blogs and form your opinion. Because an informed and opinionated person is someone who will think before swallowing the ball of yarn the spin doctors have been spinning.

On that note, I would like to end this chapter on a quote by Robert Dilenschneider, who owns his own PR-firm in New York. It's a quote out of an article he wrote for the Wall Street Journal:

"I think the time has come for public relations professionals to condemn 'spin' and 'spin doctors' for what they are: purveyors of deception, manipulation and misinformation. Spin is anti-ethical to legitimate public relations, which aims to enhance the image of companies and individuals to generate public approval for the programs

and policies they advance ... Spin is to public relations what pornography is to art ...”

Chapter 5: Conclusion

At the outset of this document, we tried to establish what spin is and how it can influence political communication. But because of varying opinions and definitions it was hard to come up with one, single definitive definition. I ended up creating a condensed version: "The 'spin doctor' or communication specialist uses his techniques and skill to bring a story or message in such a way that the public has the desired feelings and reactions."

At the next stage we took a look at the learnings of Machiavelli in his book, 'Il Principe'. Machiavelli is seen by many as the first spin doctor and remarkably the wisdom and guidelines he has written down almost 500 years ago, still apply to today's world of politics. But maybe that is because if there is one thing that hasn't changed in these 500 years, that is, that we are still only humans. Humans with our strengths, our weaknesses, our desires and our fears. Ultimately, what a spin doctor tries to do and (sometimes successfully) does, is to play onto these desires and fears, prey on our weaknesses and try to defeat our strengths. But to say that they are all evil-doers, probably would be too quick a shortcut. In today's society, we are bombarded with many impulses each and every second. To filter, analyze the information and give it a place within our own references takes up a lot of time. Simplified communications, can help us deal with this tsunami of impulses. But then the spin doctors will need to ensure that their communication is no longer misleading. That they try and use their skills to the benefit not only of their voters but all of the people in our

country. Only when they remove their own interest and leave their egos at the door, spin can be a useful method to inform, and educate our citizens.

Examples of how whisper campaigns, not only damages someones public image, but also their person and the feelings of one's family and friends, are aplenty. But these practices can best be described as unethical and unacceptable in a democracy where everyone has the same rights and the same obligations.

What is left of our democratic system if we allow, spin doctors to distort the truth, embellish and falsify the facts just to gain or retain (more) power? To attack, accuse and abuse other humans for having a different opinion than the one they represent? I am sad to say that if we let these practices continue to go uncontrolled and unpunished, we may be facing the end of what is our democratic system. Instead it will make place for a system were votes are bought by smooth talking, wise cracking communications advisors.

Probably I could have taken a closer look at the different techniques applied by 'spin doctors'. Analyzed the effectiveness of their methods and the creativity they use to talk them out of the most impossible situations.

I can accept that criticism. But I prefer using my energy, knowledge and communications skills in a more positive way. In giving people hope, joy and happiness.

One deed of goodness will make more friends, than a twisted word, which will only provide you with enemies.

On that note, I would like to thank you once again for reading this project. I hope you will strive, just as I, for a system where there is a place for equality, fraternity and liberty both of speech and of actions!

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Suggested Reading

There are quite a lot of books and websites that offer interesting reading in regards to the subject of spin and spin doctors. The list you will find here is a shortlist, but any of these books and sites will bring you on the track of many more books.

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Suggested Websites

Spinwatch - <http://www.spinwatch.org/>

PR Week US - <http://www.prweekus.com/>

PRSA - <http://www.prsa.org/>

BBC News - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

Annex

Summary in Dutch

Summary in French

Samenvatting: De invloed van spin doctors op de politieke communicatie

In dit project wordt gekeken naar de invloed die de spin doctors en hun technieken hebben op de politieke communicatie. Maar om deze analyse te maken is het imperatief om een goede definitie te vinden voor spin en spin doctors.

Op basis van definities en bedenkingen uit vier verschillende bronnen is een definitie gedistilleerd: “De spin doctor of communicatiespecialist gebruikt zijn technieken en vaardigheden om een verhaal of boodschap op zo’n manier te brengen dat het publiek de gewenste gevoelens en reacties krijgt.” Deze definitie is natuurlijk slechts één van de vele manieren waarop spin kan omschreven worden.

Om een beter perceptie te krijgen van waaruit spin vandaan komt, is het handig om een 500-tal jaar terug te gaan. In die tijd schreef Niccolò Machiavelli zijn boek ‘Il Principe’ (De Vorst). Ondanks de vele jaren die voorbij zijn gegaan, blijft Machiavelli een must-read voor elke aspirerende politicus. Zijn adviezen zijn nog steeds toepasbaar op het huidige politieke leven.

Om een idee te krijgen van hoe spin werkt en wat spin kan doen, worden enkele voorbeelden behandeld. Zo kan door middel van een licht gewijzigde zinsconstructie of een tussenwoordje, de volledige betekenis van een zin veranderen. Of het verschil betekenen tussen leugen en waarheid, zij het dat die waarheid niet altijd even zuiver is. In kiescampagnes in de Verenigde Staten, heeft Karl Rove zich over de jaren opgeworpen als een meester-tacticus, die slechts weinig veldslagen verliest. Door een combinatie van goede training van de eigen kandidaat en negatieve (fluister)campagnes om de tegenstander uit zijn evenwicht te halen, is Rove er in geslaagd een wel heel bijzondere plaats in de Bush-regering te veroveren.

In Groot-Brittannië is de opkomst van ‘New Labour’ onder Blair en zijn spin

doctor, Alastair Campbell, een duidelijk voorbeeld van de invloed die een communicatie adviseur (of spin doctor) op een kiescampagne kan uitoefenen. Maar ook hier gaat de spin doctor mettertijd, de negatieve kritieken opstapellen waardoor hij noodzakelijk of niet een stapje opzij zet. In België is de ver-marketing van de politiek reeds enige tijd te merken aan de (immer) veranderende namen. Een nieuwe naam om de partij te 'herpositioneren' en een nieuw kiezerspubliek aan te spreken. Maar ook België heeft zijn eigen spin doctor, Noël Slangen. In de aanloop naar de federale verkiezingen van 1999, helpt hij Verhofstadt bij het maken van de juiste strategische keuzes om zo de stembusslag binnen te halen.

In zowel de VS, het VK en België merken we de neiging om de partij of de politicus te herpositioneren. Dit gebeurt vaak volgens de theorie van 'The Third Way' (De Derde Weg) van Dr Anthony Giddens. Hij gooit de klassieke rechts-links vergelijking uit het raam en verdeelt de partijen langs 2 assen. De ene voor meer of minder staat, de andere as voor meer of minder sociale controle.

Spin en propaganda worden vaak door elkaar gebruikt, toch zijn er enkele kleine verschillen. Bij spin is in de communicatie niet alleen de psychologie van belang maar wordt ook marketing in de mix geworpen. Van daaruit kunnen we spin als een soort evolutie van propaganda zien.

Uiteindelijk is door het vage karakter van spin, al te vaak onduidelijk wat kan en wat niet. De spin doctor veegt nogal gemakkelijk zijn voeten aan de ethische codes die andere communicatiesectoren zich wel sterk aantrekken. Is er een toekomst voor spin? In de huidige maatschappij wel, maar niet voor eeuwig. Want uiteindelijk zal de publieke opinie zich tegen de spin doctor en zijn spinsels keren. Als spin zich omvormt tot een socialere vorm van communicatie en meer rekening houdt met de rechten, plichten en vrijheden van de mens, heeft het misschien toch nog een toekomst. Maar dan moet iedereen daar zijn stukje toe bijdragen.

Synthèse: L'influence des 'spin doctors' sur la communication politique

Dans ce projet on observe l'influence que les 'spin doctors' et leurs techniques ont sur la communication politique. Mais pour faire cette analyse, il est impératif d'avoir une bonne définition pour 'le spin' et le 'spin docteur'.

À base des définitions et des réflexions de quatre sources différentes on a distillé une définition: « Le 'spin docteur' ou spécialiste de communication utilise ses techniques et ses aptitudes pour présenter une histoire ou un message d'une telle manière qu'elle invoque les sentiments ou actions désirés. » Cette définition n'est bien sûr qu'une des multiples façons de décrire le spin.

Pour avoir une meilleure perception d'où vient le spin, il est utile de retourner environs 500 ans dans l'histoire. Dans ce temps-là, Niccolò Machiavelli écrivait son livre 'Il Principe' (Le Prince). Néanmoins les centaines d'années qui sont parcouru depuis, Machiavelli est un livre obligatoire à lire pour des futur politicien. Ses conseils restent toujours adapté à la vie politique actuelle.

Pour avoir une idée comment marche le spin et ce qu'il peut faire, on traite quelques exemples. Alors par un changement dans la construction du phrase ou l'addition d'un petit mot, la signification de la phrase complète peut changer. Ou ça peut faire la différence entre mensonge et vérité, même si que la vérité n'est pas toujours pure non plus. Dans les campagnes d'élections aux États-Unis, Karl Rove c'est produit comme un maître tacticien, qui ne perd que peu de batailles. Par une combinaison d'une bonne entraînement de son propre candidat et des campagnes négatives pour déstabiliser l'adversaire, Rove a accompli de conquérir une place assez spéciale dans la Maison Blanche de Bush.

Au Royaume-Uni l'ascension de 'New Labour' sous la direction de Blair et son 'spin docteur', Alastair Campbell, est une exemple parfaite de l'influence qu'un conseiller de communication (ou spin docteur) peut

exercer dans une campagne électorale. Mais ici aussi, le 'spin docteur' accumule les critiques négatifs qui lui laisse peu d'options que se retirer du podium publique.

En Belgique on peut remarquer le marketing politique déjà depuis quelques années avec les noms (constamment) changeant des partis politiques. Un nouveau nom pour 'repositionner' la partie et faire appelle à un nouveau publique électoral. Mais aussi la Belgique connaît son propre 'spin docteur', Noël Slangen. Dans la prélude des élections fédérales de 1999, il aide Verhofstadt à gérer les choix stratégiques pour sortir victorieux des élections.

Aussi dans les Etats-Unis, que dans le Royaume-Uni et la Belgique on remarque l'intention de repositionner la partie ou le politicien. Ce repositionnement se passe souvent en accordance avec la théorie du 'Third Way' (la troisième route) du Dr Anthony Giddens. Il jette la comparaison traditionnelle gauche-droite par la fenêtre et divise les partie au long de deux axes. L'un représente plus ou moins d'état et l'autre signifie plus ou moins de contrôle sociale.

Spin et propagande sont souvent utilisé ensemble mais il reste quand même quelques petites différences. Pour le spin, non seulement la psychologie est importante mais le marketing aussi est ajouté dans le mixe. De ce point de vue on peut voir le spin comme une sorte d'évolution du propagande.

Enfin par le vague caractère du spin, trop souvent il n'y a aucune clarté par rapport à ce qui est admis et ce qui n'est pas permis. Le spin docteur ne s'occupe pas trop avec les codes éthiques suivi par des autres secteurs de communication.

Y a-t-il un futur pour le spin ? Dans la société actuelle, oui, mais pas éternelle. Car ultimement l'opinion publique va se tourner contre le spin docteur et ses fabrications. Si le spin se transforme dans une forme plus sociale de communication et tiens plus en compte les droits, devoirs et libertés de l'homme, le spin pourra avoir encore un futur. Mais pour ça il faut que tout le monde fait un effort.