



Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics

Spin: style over substance?

Male: But as we already pointed out in the very beginning, Spin has also two other characteristics, which I would like to introduce now. The one is that Spin refers to the fact that style and packaging prevails, over the content of information. And that it refers to an institutionalisation of a culture of control in political communication. Now personally I would prefer to treat these two characteristics, style and packaging. Plus cultures of control. As separate from the one we discussed so far. And the main reason is that I think the latter two, do not necessarily imply a negative development in political communication.

So let's first look at Spin as a communication strategy. Which style of presentation, and packaging or arguments prevails over its substance?

Female: Spin as emphasising the importance of style of packaging, goes right back and is a development from the concerns of ancient and medieval rhetoricians. They recognise that political speech and communication, like all speech and communication, can be done better or worse. Some speakers put their case across well. And other mumble into their shoes and ramble. Everyone has heard good and bad wedding reception speeches for instance. What the ancient and medieval rhetoricians did was to make a science and an art of the techniques and skills of oratory and eloquence. Specifying in manuals things like repetition, appealing to the audience, sarcasm, and showing how an argument could be linked to an agreed principle, as ways of using language to convince an audience.

They weren't Spin Doctors. But just concerned with maximising the resources of language use and argument, to persuade a particular audience.

Male: Yes. But to some extent the mass media had changed just a little bit, I think. And the focus is now more on sound bites, rather than on extensive use of rhetoric's. But of course sound bites share the idea with the old rhetoric's. That form of presentation is very important, and possibly more so than providing evidence that the policy works.

For example the statement that you already referred to 'Poison in the diplomatic blood stream.' It's a good sound bite. But it's not really developing a rhetorical argument.

Female: So you're saying that Spin is also tied up with a marketisation of politics, in which images of leaders getting the right sound bite into the news media etc. predominate over thorough debates about the reasons for and consequences of policies. In other words, the substance of political argument is subordinated to the presentation of the argument.

To me this seems to reinforce the idea that Spin is actually something we should not welcome in politics. This meaning seems to reinforce the negative connotations. I agree that letting formal style dominate over substance is not the same as saying that political communicators are dishonestly manipulating evidence. But we can agree can't we, that debating the substance of politics is preferable to launching sound bites.

Male: In an ideal world, yes. Then politics should consist of different people, with different opinions debating evidence and values, for us to come up with a credible and good policy. And the public can then make an informed choice. However, who of us has time and actually does spend a lot of time listening to extensive debates on policy questions? Politicians have also to capture and convince a wider audience. Not everyone will listen to Radio Four or watch News night. Where there is some space for more elaborate reflection on evidence and policy context. Many of us prefer listening to Radio One or Classic FM for example.

Precisely because the emphasis is not on elaborate explanation and discussion of politics. Politicians do have to engage with these listeners too. And a sound bite and nice packaging are then important to capture attention and to get to the heart of the message across.

Let's for example listen quickly to Radio One Newsbeat and to Radio Four.

Radio is being played here.

Male: Politically speaking, the sound bite is the key message that the government gets across in both radio channels. But more importantly, the sound bite is not just empty communication simply aimed at giving the right impression, or at capturing attention. It's also about controlling the terms of the debate. So in that sense, sound bites and packaging are not necessarily something negative, or to be discredited. They are very serious political stuff.