



Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics

Spin: control and centralisation

Male: So let's complicate things even further, and move to the third characteristic or third definition of Spin. The cultures of control and a strong centralisation of political communication.

Female: I suppose an example of this, is when individuals ministers have to clear their political communications, through a central communication office.

Male: Yes. And this way of organising communication aims at avoiding that conflicting views are expressed in public, by different members of the government.

Female: Would I be right in thinking that this third definition, this organisational interpretation of Spin, is often also related to a professionalization of political communication? By professionalization, I mean that government's hire communication professionals, rather than party members or party loyalist, for this job. Communication professionals have often worked in the news media, or in public relations or marketing.

Male: Yes, that's right. But it isn't only the governments that use Spin in this sense. During the Iraq war it probably wasn't even primarily the governments, but US military that organised communication most meticulously along these lines. They centralised communication, in the Coalition Media Centre in Doha. And they embedded journalists in the military, which gave journalists access to first hand information of the war, but also required of them to be very careful what information that would send out. And that information was heavily screened.

American: When I got there, I began to try to create processes that would make it possibly for us to bring together intelligence information. They would let us de-classify imagery in some cases. To have good awareness of what was happening operationally. Building a process that made that possible on a recurring basis. To actually stand up and speak about the operation.

English Male: This huge frustration on the part of the media, with the way that the Americans have been handling their media operations. Essentially, it's been a disaster. Apart from some set piece events, at the end of the day. The Americans are simply not giving out any information at all. And it is left to the British to enlighten us during the day as to what's going on. And they're doing their best, but it is causing a great frustration. Particularly among my American colleagues. Who wonder frankly what on earth they're doing here.

Female: Why has that happened?

English Man: I think it's all about control freaks in Washington, to be honest. I don't think they want people here, stealing the limelight and the message from Donald Rumsfeld and General Myers at the Pentagon. Clearly that is the set piece of the day, as far as the Americans are concerned.

American: It was bringing the operation into the public view. And indeed also engaging in operations to a degree. Like the fact that we would have to work against our adversary in the eyes of the public. And so I viewed it as an operation opportunity.

English Man: The 'embeds', as they're known. The journalists travelling with the military units are the absolute heart of this media campaign. And this perhaps is the other reason that explains why not much is being said here. And it is an extraordinary business. And was

absolutely unprecedented in some cases. For example, the American networks have all managed to figure out how to broadcast live on the move inside Iraq. As they accompany the American forces. It's mesmerising to watch on our TV screens. And it is bringing us a kind of flavour of life at the front if you like. Very small narrow snapshots. They don't tell us a great deal about the bigger strategic picture. But they are riveting to listen to.

Male: But when it comes to the issue of embedding, that's a much more serious issue. Because that's taking you to the real difficulty of modern war reporting. Or the reporting of modern wars. Which is that it's not possibly any longer to stand on a piece of high ground and watch what's happening. All of this is coming through screens. Often many thousands of miles away from the actual conflict. And it's more difficult than it ever was for journalists to know what's really happening.

Male: It's interesting to see that both contemporary politics and military actions seem to respond to an assumption that one needs to control information. And thus wants a relation with journalists very carefully, if one is to survive. Both politically and military.

Female: I find this comparison interesting for another reason. For me, this desire to control information borders on censorship. It explicitly reduces the freedom of journalists to report different views of a conflict. This strategy went hand in hand with warning about the dangers of roaming about freely that is outside of the embedded system. To gather information on the war. It thus reduces the possibility to test the official stories. And remember also, that Iraq has been one of the most deadly conflicts for journalists who did not work in an embedded system.

Male: Yes. At this point we should maybe be careful with it as an ology. Centralising political communication and institutionalising a culture of control in politics, does not mean that the members of government do not have different positions and opinions on the policy. Neither does it mean that civil society does not have access to the media. And finally, not all political journalists are equally politically embedded in the political machinery. So there is argumentation, informed by evidence, values, personalities. And what a culture of control and the centralisation of communication does, is to try to keep some of the political battles that take place within a cabinet, away from the public eye. They try to prevent that these differences emerge in the public domain. And the assumption underlying this is that if one comes out a bickering government, or if one appears as a party that seems not to be able to agree on anything, this is politically suicidal.

Female: Yes. But you can't deny that it does limit considerably the information that enters the public realm. And thus could enrich the debate in the more substantive way. Is democracy not ultimately about trying to put arguments for a policy in the public realm so that they can be contested. Trying to limit this contestation, may well be an objective of governments. But it doesn't mean that we should endorse it.

But I'd like to make another point as well. I think it's interesting, that you try to separate these three characteristics of political communication that are related to Spin. For me they hang together rather closely. They're part of the same reality. Which is a strategy of political communication, that at least facilitates if not encourages deliberate and dishonest manipulation of evidence, in support of a policy.

There's good ground for Spin having a negative meaning. And if governments are spinning information, there are good grounds for asking oneself if one should trust this government, or that military institution for the information they provide. In other words, the concept of Spin is indeed a political weapon to discredit ones opponents. But it's not without testable grounds. One can check if a government, a politician or a spokesperson is heavily centralising political communication, emphasising sound bites, and heavily embroidering communication. If that's the case, I do indeed think this is negative, and there's some ground for undermining the political credibility of that government.

Male: I'm not sure I fully agree with that conclusion. I accept that the three characteristics may be linked more closely, than I would like to believe. But the reason why I would like to

separate especially the first meaning. This in my opinion carries a negative connotation of Spin most heavily, from the other two. Is that connecting them closely as you do risks discrediting the political importance of style and sound bites. and of centralising control in political communication. Both want political survival as a leader, and as a party. And the survival of ones policies seems to depend today quite heavily on being able to come up with the right sound bite. And to make sure that arguments within the government are not presented in public.

Female: I am not so sure about this. I think there is a serious problem with political culture of control, and emphasising formal style of communication over substance. If the packaging and the marketing of the message starts to dominate over the content of the argument, doesn't this imply that politicians aren't taking citizens seriously? And when political communication of arguments in evidence is extremely controlled, so as to reduce counter arguments based on similar or conflicting evidence. Doesn't that imply that they consider citizens to be passive consumers of information? Who can easily be seduced into believing anything? So on this basis, why should I then in return, trust politicians and the information they provide? And it follows why should I trust that politicians act in the best interests of society. Don't they first of all act in their own interests?

Male: Maybe I can introduce another reason why I would like to try out distinction between Spin as lying and Spin as styling and controlling. I think the latter two characteristics, or the latter two definitions. Refer to something that's going to stay with us in politics for the near future. We might prefer it differently. But political parties and leaders will seek to centralise communication. And will have to carefully work on style, presentation and sound bites. Possibly to the disadvantage of substantive arguments. And if that's the case, I think one should refrain from tainting this development as inherently negative. Because when you do not carefully distinguish between dishonest manipulation and the other two aspect that Spin seems to refer to. You're not simply discrediting a particular government or political leader. But political communication as such. If you would be a politician, you might find it extremely difficult if not impossible to survive politically without institutionalising a culture of control. And without giving priority to presentation and sound bites, in the way you present your policies. If I am correct, that that is the case, then by trying to discredit political leaders, parties, governments for using a communication strategy that centralises communications and focuses on form, you're discrediting politics as such. That's why I think using Spin as a political weapon is self defeating. If you believe that politics is important for policy making. It will fire back upon you. Once you are in power, and even probably when you are trying to win the elections.

Female: This argument relies on one important assumption, which you haven't explained. Why do you think centralisation and sound bites are going to characterise political communication in the future?

Male: Political communicator, Lorraine Davidson, makes an interesting point here.

Lorraine Davidson: But I think that Spin is something that you require in modern politics. It's with us now. It's never going to go away. I think that a government has every right to try and get across a positive message, and to use Spin to do that. That's not lying. It's using helpful journalists, helpful newspapers. It's using whatever vehicle you feel is going to be most friendly to you, to get your message across in the best possible light. And then to build on that and to freeze out people who are not helpful to you. So I think that Spin is with us. I think Alistair has been very clever in saying I'm stepping back into the shadows, from a perception point of view. And to make it harder for the Tory's to attack him. I think actually he's going to be working even harder behind the scenes, in ensuring that we see not less Spin but far more. Only you just don't know where it's coming from.

Male: And I tend to agree with her. I also think Spin, or at least centralisation, and sound bites, are to a considerable extent a response to structural long term developments in both the news media and politics in western democracies.

Female: But just because Spin is inevitable, doesn't make it acceptable does it?

Male: No. And it's worth bearing that in mind. But let's look for a moment more closely at the developments in the media, and in the political field. That help to account for the rights of Spin and for what's happening with political communication at the moment. And so I'd like to start from the news media, and developments in relation to the new media. Political communicators, who wish to get media time, have to respond to the media's understanding of what makes a good story. Of what's news worthy. And this can imply tough negotiations, and bargaining, about the time, the format, the language and the content of the message. And they also have to understand how the media operate. For example, if the BBC has a central newsroom, where a first selection of news worthy material is done. Which is then distributed to the different outlets. Radio channels, TV channels etc. It's important that one gets ones message through this first hurdle. And that one presents it in a way that allows the core message to be broadcasted on the different channels with their different styles. Political Spin in that sense can be seen as an attempt to influence these negotiations. And hiring communication professionals can be seen as a response to the need to understand the varied and complex media landscape.

Female: But that's not really something new is it? How can it then justify the rise of Spin and cultures of control?

Male: No, It's not something new. But the pressure upon both political communicators and the new media has been changed. By what some observers refer to as a marketisation of the news media.

Female: So what does this term mean this marketisation of news media?

Male: Marketisation implies a number of inter related developments. The first is that the competition between the media has intensified considerable. There's competition for advertisement, for readers and viewers. For spectacular news stories. There are many more media players around. And the media will try to play on personalities and frame stories in rather spectacular ways. So as to capture attention. Listen for example to how Radio one started increasing the tension, reproduced to build up to a war after the French veto.

Radio One is being played here..

Male: This style of presentation suggests that the war could happen any time now. That this captures attention. And it thereby also reproduces the assumption that the French have brought a war nearer. The media landscape has also changed considerably in another way. For example, their 24 hour news channels. There is the internet. And they all mean that politicians have to be increasingly aware that their statements can be used across a variety of media. Which they have increasingly difficult to get a grip on, or to control to some extent. And finally, there is a third change as well. Which is the speed with which news is broadcasted. And the vast array of communication channels, that are available. They put a lot of demand upon political communicators. If they wish to control or at least to be aware of what's happening to their political communication.

Female: I am not sure I fully buy this view Geoff. Spin Doctors themselves often come from the media or a marketing field. And thus import some of the requirements into the political field. In doing so, they may be reinforcing the tendency to package political news in dramatic personalised and simply stories. And so we end up here in a vicious circle. You also mentioned that changes in the political field are important.

Male: The most prominent of the changes in the political field that are relevant for Spin, is political de-alignment. It's a difficult concept. But it refers to a decline in party loyalty of citizens. Parties can no longer count on a big cohort of loyal voters who always vote for the party on ideological grounds. Or because they were socialised into party loyalty, through local networks and organisations.

Female: Are you suggesting that in a situation in which these allegiance of citizens tends increasingly to fluctuate between parties. Depending on an evaluation of achievements,

mood of the moment, or general image of a party and its leader. That in that situation, Spin becomes almost inevitable.

Male: Yes. Or at least Spin in the sense of increasing control over information. And valuing the style of the message, as much as the content. When the electorate is increasingly volatile, politicians will have to sell themselves and their policy, more continuously, and intensely than before. And as a result, the news media become increasingly important for reaching out to voters. And to social movement.