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Public Relations, Politics and the Media

Somerville, I., & Wood, E. (2008). Public Relations, Politics and the Media. In A. Theaker (Ed.), *The Public Relations Handbook* (pp. 34-51). Routledge.

Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal

Published in:
The Public Relations Handbook

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 15/01/2008

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Download date: 16/04/2024

3 Public relations, politics and the media

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Chapter aims

In this chapter we will focus on an increasingly important phenomenon in contemporary democratic societies, namely, the intersection of politics, public relations (PR) and the media. We will assess the growth of the use of specialist media managers by politicians, and in particular by governments, which is a feature of most Western democratic societies where the presentation of policies and personalities in a media-saturated age is viewed as key to attaining and maintaining political power. The importance of good presentation is hardly a radical new idea in politics but the increasing reliance on 'buying in' PR expertise in this vital area has been controversial, to say the least.

Introduction

Tony Blair 'the master of spin, the great performer' (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 13 May 2007, p. 25) announced his resignation as Prime Minister of the UK on 10 May 2007. Tony Blair's period in office was characterised for many by an unparalleled rise in PR in all socio-economic spheres and particularly in political culture. Now with this era ending there are some who claim there is a chance to develop a political process where some of the worst excesses of the Blair administration have no place: 'I am sure this will mean the end of spin. The whole country is tired of spin' (Lord Paul in *The Sunday Times*, 13 May, 2007, p. 14).

Spin, and indeed the whole PR industry, has sustained fierce criticism for playing a role which has been to the detriment of journalism. 'Hacks still naively pursue something they like to call the truth. Their problem is that it no longer exists. For truth has been destroyed by public relations executives, or "scum" as we like to call them.' This kind of comment, by Bryan Appleyard writing in the *The Sunday Times*, is typical of the journalistic distrust of PR which frequently sees it pilloried in the media for its role in contaminating and corrupting the political process in Britain. Spin doctoring, negative campaigning, and the pernicious influence of lobbyists are all highlighted by some commentators as examples of how PR has degraded the political process. There are frequent calls to return to a type of political activity where these somewhat dubious persuasive tactics had no place. This presumption, frequently asserted by the media and politicians, implying a tainting effect

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of PR on British political culture, should be questioned. Indeed, it could be argued, the media, politicians and PR specialists are increasingly bound together in a relationship that the media and politicians find more beneficial than they care to admit. This does not mean, however, that this is necessarily always a healthy situation for democratic politics but it is the current reality which this chapter will describe and assess.

Any discussion of the role of PR within the political sphere naturally falls into two areas, the use of PR practices by government and the use of PR practices by non-governmental actors, or lobbyists, in the political process. This chapter will discuss the role of political PR in liberal democratic societies with a particular focus on governmental bodies within the United Kingdom. A later chapter in this book (Chapter 8) will discuss lobbying. The first two sections of this chapter will assess the increasing importance of PR specialists in government communications in Britain and will focus particularly on the *information management* and *media management* techniques employed by government PR practitioners. The two processes are, of course, intimately related but for the purposes of our discussion they will be discussed as separate activities. Three specific case studies of the use of PR by the current UK and US administrations will be analysed. Namely: New Labour's 1997 welfare reform legislation; the strategy and tactics used to prepare the UK media and public for war in Iraq in 2003; and the 'War on Terror' proclaimed by the US and UK governments after the tragic events of 9/11. The final section in the chapter will assess the usefulness of the Habermasian 'public sphere' model for debates about the role of government PR and discuss the possibility of developing more transparent, accessible and participative government communication in democratic societies.

Information management

All democratically elected governments must communicate with their electorates. After all, in most theories of democratic government there is an assumption that the government is the servant of the people, elected to carry out its will. However, just because governments have this duty to provide information to the general public does not mean, of course, that they will not attempt to control and manipulate the amount of, and kinds of, information they disseminate. Information management in regard to government simply means the processes and procedures by which governmental agencies disseminate the kind of information they want us to receive. McNair (2003) notes:

> Information is a power resource, the astute deployment of which can play a major role in the management of public opinion . . . Information can be freely given out in the pursuit of democratic government, but it can also be suppressed, censored, leaked and manufactured in accordance with the more particular interests of a government and the organs of state power. (p.157)

The public relations state?

It is an inescapable fact that throughout the 1980s, 1990s and into the twenty-first century there have been massive increases in resources devoted to the aspect of government administration responsible for information management. For example, Moloney (2006) notes that there are '1,200 press and specialist PR officials in the Government Communications Network (GCN) . . . and 300 staff in the Government News Network (GNN) . . . [which] makes democratic government the most resourced, comprehensive and

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continuous PR operation in the UK' (p. 121). There has also been a dramatic rise in the number of special advisers brought in to assist ministers in the development and presentation of public policy. 'The use of special advisers . . . has persisted since they became well-established in 1974. In early 1997 there were 38 in post and by March 2003 the number had reached 81' (Winstone 2003, p.12).

Many commentators note how careful management of information turns it into a very valuable resource. Cockerell *et al.* (1984) suggest that what government 'chooses to tell us through its PR machine is one thing; the information in use by participants in the country's real government is another' (p. 9). Negrine (1996) notes the 'increasing use of carefully crafted communication strategies by governments to ensure that . . . the information they seek to impart to their citizens has an appropriate "spin" on it' (p. 10). Obviously this increased use of PR specialists by the government may merely reflect a more general 'promotional culture' in Britain (Miller 1998). However, some observers have expressed disquiet at the increasing use of information management techniques by the Government. Deacon and Golding (1994) have noted with concern the rise of the 'public relations state' (p. 7) and Schlesinger (1990) notes that there are important questions:

> [A]bout the nature of information management in a society by a variety of groups in conditions of unequal power and therefore unequal access to systems of information production and distribution and these questions are particularly acute in regard to government because 'the apparatuses of the state . . . enjoy privileged access to the media' (p. 82).

There are various ways in which governments manage information in order to privilege their own views on an issue. Leaks of important information, or even important documents, are one way in which the government or powerful interest groups within the state may attempt to control the media agenda, but perhaps the key weapon in the Government's information management armoury is the 'Lobby' system.

The Lobby

The Lobby – so-called because journalists historically assembled in the Member's Lobby of the House of Commons – has been described as 'the Prime Minister's most useful tool for the political management of the news' (Cockerell *et al.* 1984, p. 33). This system is a very important resource that British governments use – and some would argue abuse – for keeping control of information flows to the media and hence to the general public. It is also clear, despite claims to the contrary by those who have utilised it, that it is a unique system within Western democracies. This does not mean that other governments do not attempt to manage information – of course they do – but it is normal practice to appoint a party political spokesperson (such as a Minister of Information) who openly represents the government position and is attributable. This is not the case in Britain: the Prime Minister's Press Secretary is actually a member of the Civil Service and thus officially neutral. However, in reality prime ministers appoint figures who can manage the media, and particularly the Lobby, forcefully and effectively. Cockerell *et al.* (1984) argue that the Lobby system 'mirrors the secrecy that surrounds so much of the government in Whitehall and allows the government of the day to present its own unchallenged versions of reality' (p. 42).

All of the national newspapers and television and radio broadcasters are represented in the Lobby where they are usually briefed by the Prime Minister's Press Secretary.

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Cockerall *et al.* (2004) note that 'what the Press Secretary says at these briefings is what the Prime Minister wants the press, radio and television to report' (p. 33). Franklin (2004) argues that a key change occurred in the Lobby system in the post-war period which involved the 'codification of a set of rules enforcing the non-attribution of news sources while simultaneously obliging journalists to rely on a single source, usually the Prime Minister's Press Secretary' (p. 44). He also suggests that when a government press secretary gives a briefing there is a strong likelihood that it will appear as a news item, 'replete with the political spin he places on it' (Franklin 2004, p. 44).

Clearly the Lobby system works for the media, in the sense that it is relatively easy to obtain a news 'story' in time for broadcast news deadlines or the newspaper morning editions. It also works well for the government of the day, providing it with a system of information management which enables it to control and structure the media's political news agendas to a high degree. However, Hennessy (1987) condemns the practice as not working in the interests of anyone else. He argues that 'any system of mass non-attributable briefings is a restrictive practice rigged for the benefit and convenience of the givers and receivers of information and against the interests of the consumer – the reader, the listener, the viewer and the voter' (Hennessy 1987, p. 14). More recently, there have been attempts to change the traditional, behind the scenes, unattributable 'Lobby' briefings and bring the process more into line with some of the recommendations of the 2003 Phyllis Review into government communications. These included changes such as more on-camera briefings by ministers and televised Downing Street press conferences and were actually introduced by Alastair Campbell in late 2002 once the initial recommendations of the Phyllis Review were made known. Whether such changes have actually resulted in a dramatic change in the way information is communicated to the media by government representatives is highly debatable, with some commentators suggesting that the systematic practice of favoured journalists being given more revealing off-the-record briefings continuing as usual (Assinder 2002).

Media management

McNair (2003) notes that in the context of political communication 'media management comprises activities designed to maintain a positive-media relationship, acknowledging the needs which each has of the other, while exploiting the institutional characteristics of both sets of actor for maximum advantage' (p. 136). However, at the same time the relationship between politicians and the media can obviously involve a struggle between two different sets of interests and agendas. Moloney (2006) offers two conceptualisations of the government-media relationship: one in market terms as an 'exchange relationship' and the other in military terms as a 'contest relationship'. He notes:

> The exchange relationship characterises government and media as traders; the contest relationship as opponents. The exchange relationship implies two equally satisfied parties while the contest one implies winners and losers. The role of the media as watchdogs is consistent with the contest model. Public relations people invariably favour the exchange relationship but are prepared and skilled for the contest one (Moloney, 2003, p. 126).

From the perspective of the contest model, the journalist attempts to seek out and present the 'facts' while the politician will want to ensure that a news story reflects the 'message'

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that they wish to convey. There is nothing particularly new in the attempt by the political elites to try and control media representations, as is revealed in various accounts of the development and growth of political PR from the early years of the twentieth century onwards (Pearson 1992; McNair 2003, L'Etang, 1998, 2005). However, discussion will largely focus on the role of political PR over the past three decades in the UK, a period which witnessed an important and rapid transformation in the role and status of PR within political culture. This expansion of PR activity has unsurprisingly been accompanied by an increasing reliance upon media management strategies. Some commentators (Fairclough 2000; Franklin, 2004; McNair 2003) have pointed to the increasing use of the 'sound bite' and the 'pseudo-event', of 'image management' and 'spin', as key strategies used by politicians to control media representations of them and their policies.

Sound bites and pseudo-events

We noted above that the news media, and particularly the broadcast news, spends a large proportion of its time focusing on the political sphere and journalists, with the key bureaucratic routine of daily and hourly deadlines, find it hard to resist if their news-gathering task is made easier for them. Cockerell *et al.* (1984) note that, in regard to the political process in the UK, 'Very few journalists have had the incentive to dig deeper, to mine the bedrock of power rather than merely scour its topsoil' (p. 11). It is the broadcast journalists' 'job' to pick out the key details or important points of any political event or speech. If that task is made easier, if the speech contains memorable phrases (sound bites) which summarise the main points, then there is a good chance that these portions of the speech will be selected and broadcast on the few minutes allotted to a 'story' on the broadcast news bulletins. Tony Blair's phrase 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' from a speech made when he was Shadow Home Secretary has entered the national consciousness. It is indeed a memorable phrase, but it is important to remember that being 'tough' and talking about being 'tough' was a carefully constructed aspect of the Blair style. Fairclough (2000) argues that 'Blair's "toughness" has been self-consciously built into his communicative style as a matter of policy and strategy' (p. 8).

McNair (2003) points out that many political speeches, which increasingly tend to be loaded with sound bites, occur within the context of the 'pseudo-event', by which he means the staged rally or the strictly controlled party conference. Obviously this kind of political pseudo-event has a long history, from Caesar entering Rome after another famous military victory to the Nuremburg rallies in 1930s Germany. Nevertheless, the impression of a united and adoring audience exulting in the great and powerful leader is memorable and again creates an easy, if rather shallow, 'story' for the few allotted minutes on the television news agenda.

In Britain in the 1980s, the Conservative Party, which was in government throughout the decade, successfully maintained this image of a united party behind a strong leader, Margaret Thatcher. Speeches by Thatcher and the Tory hierarchy at their party conferences were largely successful in supplying news organisations with 'easily reportable "bits" of political information' (McNair 2003, p. 142), which tended to set the news agenda in the party's favour. In contrast, during much of the 1980s the Labour party was presented in the media as being in a state of at best, disarray, at worst, total disintegration. After its election defeat in 1979, Labour, as one would expect, went through a period of internal 'ideological' conflict and, at times, damaging splits occurred (several leading members of the party left and formed the Social Democratic Party). Bitter internal conflicts tended to be fought out at party conferences and the Labour Party leadership found it difficult

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to impose control over events. Media organisations looking for a representative few minutes for the news bulletins tended to reflect this bitter infighting and there was little concerted attempt by the Labour Party leadership to influence, let alone manage, the news agenda. The contrast with the Tory Party, during the 1980s, was stark. The perception was that the Tories were united, Labour were divided; the Tories had a strong leader, Labour had a series of weak and ineffectual leaders; the Tories were in control of events, Labour were at the mercy of them, and so on. The tightly controlled and carefully staged party conferences allowed the leadership of the Conservative Party to successfully manage media representations of them for a significant period of time. Behind the scenes, the party elite was far from united behind the powerful leader, but it was *behind* the scenes where the personal and ideological disagreement, and the subsequent bloodletting, occurred. Ministers were frequently sacked for being disloyal, that is, disagreeing with Margaret Thatcher, and it is clear that during this period bitterness and rancour had existed within the Tory Party as it had within the Labour Party. Yet the fact that the media seemed to be caught by surprise by the eventual internal party *coup d'etat* in 1992 which ousted Thatcher as party leader, and British Prime Minister, only reveals how successfully the media had been 'managed' for much of her rule.

By the early 1990s, the Labour Party led by Neil Kinnock, and under the guidance of political PR experts such as Peter Mandelson, attempted to emulate the success that the Tory Party had in managing the media and setting news agendas. There were significant failures in their attempts to stage-manage media opportunities (McNair 2003, p. 143) but on the whole the Labour Party's media managers learned from their mistakes and, for most of the decade, including their general election success of 1997, Labour proved exceptionally successful at managing the media.

Spin and image management

What is spin? Some commentators note that there is a danger that the term is now used to describe so many activities that it is in danger of becoming meaningless. Andrews (2006) points to the fact that today practically all of a government's promotional activities seem to be referred to as 'spin'.

> Spin is now one of the most overused, and arguably least meaningful, words in use in political communication . . . According to the *Daily Mirror* (Gilfeather, 2002a), the British Home Office spent £27 million 'on spin in just 12 months': in other words, the Government's advertising budget, which includes relatively uncontested items such as campaigns to persuade motorists not to drink and drive, is now defined as '*spin*' (p. 31).

Moloney (2006) attempts to provide a definition of spin by comparing it to propaganda. He argues that spin has some similarities to propaganda in that it is biased information disseminated to the general public by political elites but, Moloney suggests:

> Spin is a weak or soft form of propaganda where weak/soft means that the activity happens in a democratic state; where the activity can be identified as information manipulation; where the information is more accurate than inaccurate; and where the purpose of the spin is known, i.e. to enhance the standing of the government or opposition party . . . but spinning is, above all, associated with the persuasive management of journalists to secure favourable media coverage. (2006, p. 125)

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The New Labour approach to government communication has been criticised for its overemphasis on the presentational and promotional and there is little doubt that the power given to those whose task was media management has caused tension within the party itself. Even during the early stages of the New Labour administration there was resistance to the bought-in spin-doctors as is evidenced by an anonymous comment by a Labour minister: 'These people are running around like pigs in shit, with their bloated salaries, chauffeur-driven cars, and their mobile phones, inventing government policy in pubs' (Hargreaves and Richards 1997, quoted in Andrews 2006, p. 40). Moloney (2006) suggests that a key problem has been a blurring of the distinction between policy-making and, what should be the secondary role of policy presentation and points out: 'This blurring makes it harder to identify what politicians have decided, and runs the risk of taking power away from politicians and transferring it to experts in presentation' (Moloney 2006, p. 120).

It is also clear that the increasing concern with the presentational which manifests itself in spin is also apparent in the concern with image management. A key cultural obsession in contemporary society is the notion of celebrity which in many ways is the ultimate manifestation of image management. Some commentators decry the 'entertainment values' which they see as infecting political culture and which are particularly apparent in the notion of the politician-as-celebrity. Andrews (2006) argues that politicians are increasingly seen and therefore must present themselves as part of celebrity culture. He suggests that 'celebrity' has steadily encroached into serious politics and notes: 'The discourse about media presentation of politics is increasingly a discourse about celebrity' (2006, p. 38).

The whole media management apparatus surrounding the presentation and communication of politics obviously raises important question about contemporary political discourse and culture. These are questions we will return to again in the final section of this chapter. For now, it is enough to note that while politics and PR seem to be closely intertwined in contemporary political culture they are ultimately different. Moloney (2006) points out that:

> [Politics] is about ends as well as means: public relations is always a means to an end. The forms of presentation of PR and of politics are coalescing for politics is parasitical about where it finds its persuasive means. However, politics, as the non-violent resolution of conflicting interests, should be the master activity in relation to policy, with presentation a secondary concern' (p. 123).

The current situation in the UK can obviously be interpreted as suiting the government, but it is also clear that it has led to an extraordinarily high level of mistrust and cynicism about the kind of information governments disseminate. There is an obvious tension between controlling the information flows for one's own benefit and attempting to structure news agendas to such an extent that everything you say is treated as 'spin'. The key issue of what kind of political communication governments of democratic societies should engage in will be discussed again in the final section of this chapter. Before moving on to that crucial debate, the next section will examine several case-study examples of UK and US government media management and information management from the past decade.

Government communication and public relations: three case studies

This section will analyse New Labour's information and media management techniques by focusing on two areas of government policy presentation where the role of political

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PR was seen as particularly significant. Firstly, the 1997 legislation on welfare reform and, secondly, government communication in the build-up to the 2003 Gulf War will be examined. The third case study will analyse the so-called 'War on Terror' declared by the US and UK governments after 9/11, here, the focus of the discussion will largely be on the role of PR in the Bush administration.

Welfare reform: New Labour's domestic media management

Several authors (Jones 1999; Fairclough 2000) have discussed the media management surrounding the government's welfare 'reforms' as a key example which illustrates 'New Labour's management of news and "media spin"' (Fairclough 2000, p. 129). Early in their tenure, Labour opted to launch a 'welfare roadshow' in a bid to attempt to control the news agenda with Prime Minister Tony Blair going 'on the road' to put his case for welfare reform to the people of Britain. Blair's first speech was in Dudley, and the day before this speech his Chief Press Secretary, Alastair Campbell, gave private briefings to the media in which he emphasised, with a battery of facts and figures, the costs to the nation, of benefit fraud. The next day – the official launch of the welfare roadshow – two national newspapers, *The Times* and *The Mirror*, carried articles 'written' by Tony Blair which were virtually indistinguishable from the briefing Campbell had given the day before. That evening, in Dudley, Blair's speech again reinforced the message, with virtually the same language, that he was determined to do something about benefit fraud. Fairclough (2000) notes that 'The risk of unpredictable and uncontrollable media uptake of the speech is minimised by trailing the speech in a way which presents it in the way the Government wants it to be seen – which puts a particular "spin" on it' (p. 130). This was, of course, only the beginning of the welfare reform process which proceeded through a 'consultation' stage and eventually to a Bill presented to the Westminster Parliament. Fairclough (2000) argues that the whole process, from initial campaign, through the consultative stage, to the presentation of the Bill to Parliament, was 'largely managed through managerial and promotional means rather than democratically through dialogue' (p. 129). 'Part of the art of "spin"', according to Fairclough (2000), 'is calculating what additional emphases and foregrounding newspapers . . . will predictably add, which may be an effective way for the Government to convey implicitly messages it may not wish to convey explicitly' (p. 131). In the case of the welfare reform legislation, issues surrounding benefit fraud were only a small part of the Bill but there was a constant stream of messages about how Tony Blair would 'get tough' on benefit fraud. This allowed politically conservative newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* to use headlines like 'Welfare: The Crackdown'. Fairclough (2000) suggests that the *Daily Mail* report 'effects certain transformations which significantly and (from a press officer's perspective) predictably convey a "tougher" message than Blair's' (p. 131), but the key point is that this 'message' will reassure the *Daily Mail's* largely Tory readership.

Weapons of Mass Destruction: Alastair Campbell and the intelligence dossiers

The very effective use of media management or 'spin' in the example discussed above shows its significance and success in respect to domestic political issues. In regard to issues which were outside the domestic political arena, New Labour's attempts to manage and control media agendas were much less successful. One obvious reason why policies which are not purely domestic are more difficult to control, from a media management perspective, is the fact that there are many more actors (partners/opponents/neutral states)

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involved in these events. These other actors may have different priorities, and, of course, have their own domestic media to manage, thus how events are represented in the British media are of minor importance to them.

Taking the 2003 conflict in Iraq as an example, it could be argued that the formidable New Labour reputation for managing media representations of their policies was for the first time significantly damaged. Attempts to apply media management techniques which have served them well domestically, such as the positioning of key sound bites and the dissemination of 'source material' for the media to consume and reproduce has ironically had the effect of turning media attention on the whole apparatus of spin itself. This has had serious consequences for the Blair administration and in particular for the man who became known as the 'spinmeister', Alastair Campbell, who was forced to resign as the British Prime Minister's Chief Press Spokesman.

McNair (1998) notes that a key 'extramedia' factor in influencing media agendas and media content is the provision of source material by 'source professionals' (PR practitioners) so that media agendas and content can be seen to be 'in significant part the product of the communicative work of non-journalistic social actors' (p. 143). Miller and Williams (1993) note that any attempt to understand news coverage and how news agendas and content emerge makes it 'necessary to examine the strategies formulated by sources of information to influence and use the news media' (p. 3). The source professional, McNair (1998) points out, is a significant development in the late twentieth century, following 'in the wake of the media's rapid expansion, feeding the latter's insatiable desire for new material to package as news and entertainment' (p. 143).

Nations need reasons to go to war and in democratic societies there is usually the recognition by governments that the majority of the public must be convinced that these reasons are legitimate. In the build-up to the 2003 Iraq conflict, the British Government needed to communicate its reasons for going to war effectively to the British public. This is the context of the intelligence dossiers which were released to the press on 24 September 2002 and 3 February 2003. These documents set out the reasons why, according to the British government, it was necessary to take action against Saddam Hussein's regime.

Tony Blair himself explained the genesis of the September 2002 dossier in the foreword to that document:

> The document published today is based, in large part, on the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). The JIC is at the heart of British intelligence machinery. It is chaired by the Cabinet Office and made up of the heads of the UK's three Intelligence and Security Agencies, the Chief of Defence Intelligence, and senior officials from key government departments. (*Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government.)URL??*

The intelligence dossiers were thus constructed chiefly by the JIC who collate and interpret information from a range of intelligence sources and which is chaired by the Cabinet Office. The executive summary of the September 2002 document emphasised several key points. Firstly, Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD); secondly, he was prepared to use them against the West; thirdly, they could be mobilised in 45 minutes. It is not necessary to reiterate here the history of events after the government dossiers were put in the public domain. It is enough to say that one of the key functions of these documents was to provide key information for the British media to disseminate. As it turned out, the main points emphasised by the dossiers were not simply reproduced but rather were intensely scrutinised by the media which attempted to assess their accuracy and identify the sources of the information. BBC journalists in particular questioned

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whether the claims made in the September 2002 dossier represented the genuine views of the British intelligence services or whether they had been 'sexed up' by Alastair Campbell who, it transpired, had actually chaired a meeting on intelligence matters at one point. Scrutiny of the February 2003 dossier entitled Iraq – its infrastructure of concealment, deception and intimidation, led to the media discovering that sections of this document had been plagiarised. Embarrassingly unattributed excerpts from a Californian student's PhD thesis (available on the internet) and from articles in the defence journal Jane's Intelligence Review, had been cut and pasted into the dossier.

The issues surrounding the decision to go to war were discussed by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee which subsequently published a report on 7 July 2003 entitled *The Decision to Go to War in Iraq*. This report arrived at several conclusions and recommendations which called into question some of the claims in the September 2002 dossier and Alastair Campbell's role in the process of constructing the February 2003 dossier. It should be noted that the report stated that: 'We conclude on the evidence available to us Alastair Campbell did not exert or seek to exert improper influence on the drafting of the September dossier' (Paragraph 84) and '[We] conclude that Ministers did not mislead Parliament' (Paragraph 188). However, other conclusions reached by the report made less pleasant reading for Alastair Campbell and the government:

> We conclude that the 45 minutes claim did not warrant the prominence given to it in the dossier, because it was based on intelligence from a single, uncorroborated source. We recommend that the Government explain why the claim was given such prominence. (Paragraph 70).

We conclude that it was wrong for Alastair Campbell or any Special Adviser to have chaired a meeting on an intelligence matter, and we recommend that this practice cease. (Paragraph 79)

> We conclude that the degree of autonomy given to the Iraqi Communications Group chaired by Alastair Campbell and the Coalition Information Centre which reported to him, as well as the lack of procedural accountability, were contributory factors to the affair of the 'dodgy dossier'. (Paragraph 122)

> We conclude that the effect of the February dossier was almost wholly counter-productive. By producing such a document the Government undermined the credibility of their case for war and of the other documents which were part of it. (Paragraph 138)

It is clear that this report, whether questioning some of his activities or absolving him of some of the allegations made against him, had the effect of turning a great deal of attention upon Alastair Campbell. More than anything else it was this turning of the media spotlight on Campbell – of making him the story – that began the process that eventually led to his resignation on 28 August 2003. Whether or not Campbell attempted to manipulate the intelligence dossiers and thus provide source material to manipulate and drive media agendas was a question which was central to the deliberations of the Hutton Inquiry. What is clear is that it became a classic case of source provision gone wrong in that attention came to be focused on the provider, the source professional, rather than the source material itself. The effect of the departure of Alastair Campbell in respect to the 'spin culture', which some argue has dominated government media relations in recent times, has divided commentators. George Pitcher, author of *The Death of Spin* notes:

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> [Campbell] has been a symptom rather than a cause of the spin culture we live in. It's something that has developed over the past decade and that he – and others – have exploited. His departure is a watershed in the end of that culture. We will be moving on, not because of his departure, but because of a growing desire on the part of all of us to move beyond spin. (*The Observer*, 31 August 2003, p. 16).

A rather different assessment is given by Daniel Finkelstein, the Director of Research for John Major, the last Conservative prime minister of the UK. Finkelstein notes that: 'All political parties and all governments spin. And there is nothing wrong with it' (*The Times*, 30 August 2003, p. 6). It remains to be seen as to which judgement will prove to be the more realistic. However, looking back over recent political history it could be argued that using 'spin' to convey certain kinds of messages and to produce certain kinds of 'readings' of government legislation or policy is a key media management technique which British governments will be unlikely to relinquish.

Government public relations and the 'War on Terror'

As noted above, governments frequently have to make decisions and develop policy about important, and on some occasions, literally life and death issues. When the presentational or promotional tactics surrounding such issues become just as important as the policy decisions themselves then problems occur. The US-led 'War on Terror' demonstrates graphically the disastrous consequences of employing one-way propagandistic government PR to communicate with the media and the general public. Before we discuss the Bush administration approach to government communication in the 'War on Terror' it is important to come to some understanding of terrorism and, more importantly, its relationship to public relations. Richards (2004) points to an important connection between PR and terrorism:

> Terrorism and PR are often the two most prominent themes in our news . . . The connection between terrorism and PR is deeper than their co-presence in the headlines. For both to be possible, there has to be a public created through the mass media, and an awareness of the power of the media to influence the public. It can be said that terrorism is the media event par excellence, the made for news "pseudo-event" which also has terrible effects in reality. It is a symbolic act; it is not believed by its perpetrators, nor by others, that the actions themselves will physically have decisive military or other material consequences. Their effects are seen to be in the hearts and minds of various publics' (p. 170).

Terrorism, whether carried out by states or groups, can result in appalling human casualties but this should not blind us to the fact that ultimately terrorism can be viewed as the ultimate media relations tactic. If terrorism can therefore be seen as a form of public relations then it should be no surprise that a key strategy in the response of the US and UK-led coalition to the events of 11 September 2001 also involved the use of communicative strategies. Of course, the response also involved physical force – army personnel were sent to various locations around the world – and diplomatic initiatives.

The PR resources devoted to the 'War on Terror', which was declared by the US and UK governments after 11 September, were significant and took many different forms. Some were straightforward information management of the crudest kind with no attempt to engage with the media or the general public. Media organisations were presented with *the* message and expected to reproduce it. The *New York Times* in 2003 described White House media relations:

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> '[T]he communications apparatus at the White House decide on a message of the day early in the morning. That message is repeated so implacably that reporters, especially reporters for the cable news networks in need of sound bites, end up surrendering and head out onto the lawn to parrot what they have heard' (*New York Times*, 23 March 2003 cited in Hiebert 2003, p. 251).

This kind of approach, accompanied as it was by a tide of patriotism for its armed forces and unprecedented levels of fear of terrorist attacks, worked for a considerable period of time in respect to US public opinion. However, global public opinion was less easy to influence. At the end of 2001, the US administration had already turned directly and explicitly to PR expertise to 'sell' the US and its war on terror to an increasingly hostile world public opinion. They appointed former Ogilvy CEO Charlotte Beers who was assigned as Under Secretary of State for public diplomacy and public affairs by the US Department of State. On her appointment, Colin Powell, Secretary of State at the time, said 'There is nothing wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something. We are selling a product. We need someone who can rebrand American foreign policy, rebrand diplomacy.'

Zhang (2007) in a study of the language used to communicate government messages has noted the use of certain key metaphors by US administration spokesman which tended to dominate government communication during this period. For example:

> In his State of the Union address in 2002, President Bush declared that "States like these [Iran, Iraq, North Korea] and their terrorist allies, constitute an Axis of Evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world" . . . Obviously the metaphor attempts to make people see the world through the eyes of the 1930s by comparing those nations to the Axis composed of Japan, Germany and Italy during WWII (p. 33).

Zhang suggests that the use of such metaphors by President Bush and other US government spokesman were, of course, only a partial reflection of reality but they were, however, a key tactic in the PR war. He notes: 'The "Axis of Evil" metaphor highlights that the states are evil as a group but hides the fact that the states did not form an "Axis" (2007, p. 37). The Bush administration used these tactics and others to attempt to persuade its own population and world opinion that its foreign policy was correct and was working. However, the reality of high civilian casualties and rising numbers of military casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan eventually destroyed the effectiveness of such strategies.

It is clear that domestic legislation which affects the lives of citizens, the case for taking a country to war or maintaining an army in a foreign conflict zone can all have serious life and death consequences for ordinary people. Ultimately such policies are not just about presentation or 'selling' despite the fact that in the Bush administration many politicians and political PR experts seem to have convinced themselves that they are. Hiebert (2005) notes:

> The White House, seduced by its power, has fallen for the temptation that one-way communication is easy and effective and thus it could spin its policies and influence not only on its own citizens but the world. However, governments that have depended on spin and information control have never succeeded for long in the modern era (p. 6).

There is clearly an important connection between the main role of government – policy development and implementation – and the presentation of that policy and it is equally

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clear that PR can have an important and legitimate role to play in the latter. However, the two functions should not be confused. Moloney (2006) notes that the conflation of PR and politics, of the presentational with actual policy-making 'blurs the boundary between policy and presentation, to the detriment of the former. Presentation does not bring peace, prosperity and justice: only right policy does' (p.132).

Political communication, public relations and the public sphere

The case studies discussed above raise important questions about the role of PR activity within the context of political communication in liberal democracies. The increased focus on spin and information management and the use of what can only be described as propaganda techniques have all had an impact on how the public perceive the political process. Fairbanks *et al.* (2007) have noted the decline in public trust in government and suggest that this decline 'is an outgrowth of poor communication between government and its publics, where publics feel that they are not well informed about government actions' (p. 23). They note that:

> A healthy democracy requires an informed public and demands that governments provide information to the public about policies, decisions and actions. Public relations principles and theories such as transparency, models of public relations and stakeholder management provide guidance on how to most effectively communicate this information to the public (Fairbanks *et al.* 2007, p.24).

It is clearly the case that governments have the right to present their policies persuasively to their electorate but governments are elected to serve the people and this means they must approach information dissemination in a more open and transparent way than any other institution. They have a responsibility to be accessible and accountable to those who have elected them and in this sense some would argue they have a responsibility to help develop a fully functioning 'public sphere' (Habermas 1989).

The public sphere ideal

Dahlgren (2001) notes that in its original formulation 'the public sphere as described by Habermas consists of the institutional space where political will formation takes place, via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas' (p. 33). In Habermas' analysis the public sphere emerges within the bourgeois classes of late eighteenth-century Western Europe and, aided by the development of mass literacy and the press, grows and deepens in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. The Enlightenment ideals of rational thinking, argument and discussion were, albeit imperfectly, manifested in the clubs, coffee houses, newspapers and pamphlet writing which characterised this era. In his historical analysis, Habermas traces the decay of the public sphere as the nineteenth century develops with the logic of the marketplace coming to dominate the media and resulting in an increasing trivialisation of political debate. Whether or not we have anything today which could qualify as a functioning public sphere has been widely debated (Dahlgren 2001; Sparks 2001) but many commentators would argue that at the very least the concept retains a usefulness as a normative vision. Bennett and Entman (2001) suggest that in the ideal public sphere 'all citizens have equal access to communication that is both independent

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of government constraint, and through its deliberative, consensus-building capacity, constrains the agendas and decisions of government in turn' (p. 2). They note that, of course, this ideal has never been achieved and probably never will. Nevertheless, the concept 'serves theorists well as an ideal type – that is, as a construct against which different real-world approximations can be evaluated' (Bennett and Entman 2001, p. 3). In respect to the political public sphere, Richards (2004) notes that in Habermas' formulation:

> he public in the liberal democracies should be a participatory public, the collective of citizens engaged, ideally, in informed and rational discussion, and in dialogue with their leaders. This is the universal public which occupies the public sphere in the strongly positive sense of shared space, independent of the state, in which public opinion can be formed through exchange and debate. This public (or at least the idea of it) is the creation, and the major historical achievement, of the liberal democratic era, and it requires of course the presence of free and open mass media since the national public cannot physically congregate for their debates (p. 173).

It also, of course, requires a commitment from government to be accessible, transparent and participatory. This kind of thinking has found its way into the discourses which surround democratic institutions. For example, the Scottish Parliament website states 'the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation'. Many governments describe their role in similar aspirational terms but whether they are actually doing anything more than paying lip-service to such concepts is the key issue, of course.

Government public relations and the public sphere

Not all commentators writing about the role of PR and political communication accept the view that the Habermasian concept of the public sphere is necessarily a useful or helpful model of political communication. For example, Motion (2005) explicitly questions the Habermasian concept of deliberative democracy and rejects the notion of idealised participative processes. She adopts what she describes as a 'post-Habermasian view of a "moral compromise" in which individuals can cooperate from their own diverse perspectives but do not have to reach agreement or unanimity' (2005, p. 506).

Motion discusses an attempt by the New Zealand government to engage in 'participative' communication processes (in respect to future economic strategy) across all sectors of New Zealand society. The *Catching the Knowledge Wave* conference, hosted by the New Zealand government to discuss the future of the economy in the context of globalisation, sought the views of a wide range of interests on this issue. Motion notes that marginal groups participating cautioned against globalisation. However, the New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark concluded that globalisation had to be accepted. It is clear that although a participative process was taking place government policy had already been decided. From a PR perspective, there is obviously a danger of creating cynicism about just how important the participative elements of such events really are. Motion (2005) argues:

> The difficulty with using participative processes to normalise and legitimate a discourse transformation is that although conflict must be minimised, it is through accommodation

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> of conflict and engagement with contested discourses that consensus or moral compromises may be established and new solutions emerge. Efforts to minimise uncertain outcomes can, instead, be interpreted as simply a new and more subtle form of domination as expectations of particular outcomes are negated by a closed set of discursive options. Participative public relations, in which stakeholders are discursively engaged with predetermined solutions and conflict suppressed or ignored, may, in fact, simply be a means of masking power relations rather than genuine engagement (p. 511).

Motion is right to point to the problems of developing a genuinely participatory political process and she is also correct to stress that it is more realistic to expect political processes to result in 'moral compromise' rather than universal consensus in respect to policy formation. However, it is also clear that while governments must govern, that is after all what they were elected to do, in democratic societies *how* they govern is of the utmost importance. This focuses attention on how they communicate with their publics and it is clearly unacceptable for governments to manipulate media representations of political realities by providing the media with manufactured stories which divert attention from the real impact of policy decisions. Equally problematic, as Motion (2005) points out, is the apparent engagement in participatory processes with no real intention to accept the outcome of such processes but rather to impose already-decided-upon solutions. Such strategies ultimately encourage cynicism and distrust of government and disillusionment with democratic institutions.

Conclusion

Recent developments in government PR obviously raise important questions in regard to the impact of the activity on the political process in the UK. Ironically, it is Alastair Campbell who suggests that the cynical attitude that all political communication is spin is potentially a significant problem for democratic politics: 'If the public comes to believe all communication is spin, no matter how much we may want to blame the media, it is ultimately our problem, a problem for our political culture' (Campbell 2002, quoted in Andrews 2006, p. 42). Ultimately the key issue is whether or not government communication and PR can actually assist in developing a more accessible, transparent and participatory public sphere. Hiebert (2005) argues that due to economic and political pressures the mass media can no longer be relied upon to fulfil this role. He suggests 'the only possible solution is PR, not in terms of spin or propaganda but in terms of developing real public relationships in the public sphere' (p.3). Fairbanks *et al.* (2007) make the point that all organisations, including governments, must be proactive in reaching out to their publics: 'In addition to the open sharing of information, transparency requires organisations to understand and be responsive to the publics they serve' (p. 26).

Communication is at the heart of a functioning democratic society and PR can play a vital role in fostering two-way communication between governments and their citizens. Cutlip et al. (2000) suggest: 'In a very real sense, the purpose of democracy itself closely matches the purpose of public relations. Successful democratic government maintains relationships with constituents, based on mutual understanding and two-way communication' (p. 448). PR practitioners working for government will obviously have the interests of their organisation and perhaps their boss as a key influence on their conduct but like the politicians they serve they have a duty to put the public interest first. This must involve open participatory government and the dissemination of accurate information about policy-

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making. A failure to take these issues seriously will further increase the public's disillusionment with the political process in contemporary democratic societies.

Questions for Discussion

1. What evidence is there for the growth of the 'public relations state' (Deacon and Golding 1994)?
2. What are some of the issues raised, for the political process in the UK, by the 'Lobby system' of unattributable briefings?
3. What are the key media management strategies used by governments in democratic societies?
4. 'All political parties and all governments spin. And there is nothing wrong with it' (Finkelstein 2003). Do you agree with Finkelstein's assessment?
5. Is the use of specialist government media advisors a necessary element in contemporary democratic societies?
6. Do you agree with Fairclough (2000) that democratic dialogue is being replaced with a 'managerial and promotional' approach to the political process in the UK?
7. What are the dangers of conflating policy-making with policy presentation and promotion?
8. How useful is the concept of the 'public sphere' in the context of government communication and PR?
9. How might the principles of two-way communication be promoted in British political culture?
10. Examine a media campaign surrounding a current policy initiative by the British Government. In what ways have politicians and their media advisors attempted to 'manage' the British media to achieve the maximum favourable coverage of their policy?

Further Reading

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Moloney, K. (2006) *Rethinking Public Relations* 2nd Edition, Routledge.

Motion, J. (2005) 'Participative public relations: Power to the people or legitimacy for government discourse?' *Public Relations Review* 31; 505–512.

Richards, B. (2004) 'Terrorism and PR' *Public Relations Review* 30; 169–179.

Endnotes

1 Bryan Appleyard, *The Sunday Times*, cited in Julia Hobsbawm 'Why journalism needs PR' *The Guardian*, 17 November, 2003, p. 8.

2 McNair (2003) helpfully provides a typology of political PR activity which is useful in that it utilises terminology which most students of PR should be familiar with. He notes that political PR involves four specific types of activity: *media management* (which he regards as something akin to issues management); *image management*; *internal communications*; and *information management*. While recognising the conceptual and practical distinctions McNair draws, for the purposes of the present discussion I have subsumed the first three activities McNair refers to into the general category of media management.

3 For some interesting case studies of the British government's use of leaks in relation to issues surrounding British Coal, Northern Ireland and the sale of the Rover car group to British Aerospace see Negrine 1996, pp. 39–51.

4 Igham (1991, p.158) suggests 'This [the Lobby] method of communication with journalists is universally practised in government and other circles the world over as a means of opening up the relationship [between government and media]' (quoted in McNair 1994, p. 135).

5 See Interim findings published 3 September 2003, www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/ news/2003/ 030903_ review.asp.

6 The term 'pseudo-event' was coined by Boorstin (1962).

7 This process began in 1998 and the Welfare Reform Bill was eventually published on 11 February 1999.

8 British governments publish a 'Green Paper' before constructing a 'Bill' to set before Parliament. Interested parties respond to the Green Paper and are supposed to have a say in how legislation is framed. Fairclough (2000, p. 132–141) provides a useful discourse analysis of the text of the Green Paper on welfare reform.

9 This was declared over on 1 May 2003 by US President George Bush but since then the coalition forces have lost more troops in 'peace-keeping' duties than they did in the actual duration of the 'war'.

10 Campbell announced his decision to leave his post on 29 August 2003.

11 Andrew Gilligan claimed the government had 'sexed up' the dossier on BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme. He subsequently gave evidence to the Hutton inquiry (see endnote 11) stating that Dr David Kelly had confirmed to him that Alastair Campbell had 'transformed' the document to make it 'sexier' (*The Guardian*, 12 August).

12 Serious allegations were made in the media about the contents of both documents but it is the second one, published in February 2003, that was referred to as the as the 'dodgy dossier' in the Foreign Affairs Committee Report, 7 July 2003, Paragraph 122.

13 The Hutton inquiry's counsel, James Dingemans, stated that during the second and final phase of its probe into the circumstances surrounding the death of government weapons expert, Dr David Kelly, the inquiry hoped to answer 15 key questions. Question 4 was: 'Were the Prime Minister, his communications chief Alastair Campbell and others in Number 10 responsible for intelligence being set out in the dossier which was incorrect or misleading or to which improper emphasis was given?' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3109826). When eventually published on 28 January 2004, the Hutton Inquiry astonished most commentators by largely exonerating the British gGovernment and Alastair Campbell of any wrongdoing in respect to the intelligence dossier and censuring the BBC. Alastair Campbell was mildly rebuked by Lord Hutton who noted that the tone of Campbell's complaints to the BBC raised the 'temperature' of the dispute. Lord Hutton also stated that the BBC editorial system was

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'defective' and that the BBC governors should have investigated further the differences between Gilligan's notes and his report, and that should have led them to question whether it was in the public interest to broadcast his report relying only on his notes.

14 See 'Corporate Crimes' in www.corporatewatch.org.uk.

15 This text is taken from a CSG Report which is available online at the Scottish Parliament website www.scottish.parliament.uk.