

The Death of Spin?

Communication in the 21st Century

George Pitcher

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About the author

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This pamphlet is based on his forthcoming book, *The Death of Spin*, to be published by John Wiley in November 2002, price £16.99. It will be available from all good bookshops or by contacting Wiley on 01243 779777 or email cs-books@wiley.co.uk

1. The birth of a manipulable media

We may be witnessing the death of spin. If so, the impact of its demise will be felt most keenly in politics and business, where communication has become a formidable industry in its own right. We should know what to expect when the communications industry emerges chastened on the other side of change. Even more importantly, we should be able to address in public debate the wider implications of the communications culture, and its connection to the issues on which prosperity, well-being and institutional reputations depend.

Despite the outrage generated by spin's recent excesses, knocking negative stories off the front-pages is nothing new. So long as there have been people to be influenced, there have been spinners. St John spun the teachings of Christ. The synoptic gospels dealt with what He did, while John addressed what He meant. History is saturated with the same.

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But especially over the past 20 years, something new has developed; in British politics in the 1990s especially, and more broadly in all the establishment institutions, from the Church to the royal family. The media, industry, politics, the establishment and the arts conspired to bring us not their constituent parts, but a presentation of what they would like us to think they were.

During the 1990s a widespread sense developed that presentation had become all. Across society there was a new vacuity; style was not just more important than substance, it overcame it. We no longer seemed to discuss what something was, but what we thought of it.

Today the term 'spin' has become pejorative; anything of which one disapproves has become spin. Political, economic and, indeed, commercial debate is blighted by a dearth of dialectic. The easiest and most damning knock-out conclusion is 'it's all spin'.

At one level spin means a lack of substance, interpretation parading as fact, image creation at the expense of tangible evidence. The unfortunate implication is that there is little of value or substance in our institutions.

But this is not the case, even though many of our institutions are struggling to cope with the reality of the new environment. There are signs that the spin cul-

ture has run its course — most visibly in politics, it is now a most apparent irritant, but also throughout commercial life, where shareholders and corporate activists are no longer tolerating shallow justifications of greed, and corporations are busy developing new approaches to strategic communication.

What is spin?

The term ‘spin doctor’ migrated across the Atlantic in the late 1980s and was applied to that breed of highly politicised adviser who sought to ‘interpret’ the words of a politician for the benefit of the media. They decoded the coded language of politics, but naturally in a way that put the best spin on the story.

In Britain, spin is associated with any form of partisan communication — often, but not necessarily, aimed at the media. In relation to the highly hypothetical idea of the ‘straight’ release of information, spin can mean just about anything. But there are a few techniques which have become synonymous with it. They include:

- The leaking of a part of a political story which amplifies controversy to prepare public opinion for the less controversial actual announcement;

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- Trading information with selected journalists on the tacit understanding that it will be reported in a friendly manner;
- Slipping out announcements which are likely to be reported negatively when another story is dominating the news agenda;
- Aggressive complaints about the interpretation of stories by journalists – in the case of broadcast media while the programme is still on air;
- Briefings which make highly personal attacks, in a way which can be reported without their source being identified, in order to gain tactical advantage over a rival.

The possibility of using ‘spin’ to achieve competitive advantage is based on the idea that communicators can manage the messages being sent through specific channels of communication – newspapers, television, annual reports, and so on – to target specific audiences. As we will see, the ability to separate these channels and audiences from each other is collapsing.

I advocate, you spin

Any effort at advocacy in communications can now be met with the charge that it is spin, which means that it is a lie, or at least obfuscation. There is an argument

that we should perhaps not take all this too seriously – politicians have long been dubious in the public mind.

But the point is that the opposite of substance is not spin. Good corporate or political communication is about dialectics. And to be dialectical, you have to hold a position. That means the skills of advocacy. And you can't advocate the absence of something. It follows that good communication requires (or demands) substance; it doesn't seek to replace or usurp it.

In the adversarial system on which our media and political cultures thrive, advocacy requires an argument between two positions. In a modern networked society, the positions taken and the way that they relate to each other decreasingly correspond to this bipolar separation; many of the oppositions which have defined adversarial conflict have collapsed. As a result, advocacy requires the construction of adversarial positions. That is where spin comes in.

Twenty years ago there was a turning point: the start of a new communications age, whose components, from the financial markets to industry and politics, would conspire to bring us the spin industries that underpinned our spin-culture.

Bernard Ingham, who started as Margaret Thatcher's press secretary and finished as her apologist and faithful Boswell, dictated the Prime Minister's press policy

in a manner that was potentially far more dangerously autocratic than any move that Alastair Campbell could later make in the same role for Tony Blair.

Ingham was the first head of his profession – the government-information top job – to come from outside the Central Office of Information. He was to bring professionalism to the Government Information Service (GIS), later to become the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS). Despite his elevation, it was not Ingham who invented the spin industry, but a set of socio-economic factors that produced a media that could be manipulated.

The rise of the chattering classes

Post-war journalism in the second-half of the twentieth century developed from a straight news-driven agenda, supported by classified advertising and executed by tradesmen, to a polemical profession in the ownership of middle-class graduates; a process that was spurred by improved education and a consequent increase in mass literacy, as well as a developing prosperity that further drove a growing industry in display advertising.

Sometime after the Second World War, when rationing and austerity had gone, the educated middle-classes started to consider journalism a real career choice. It may not have acquired the standing of the

law or accountancy, but after the photo-reportage from the Vietnam war in the 1960s and the *Washington Post's* central role in the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, there grew a kind of inverted middle-class snobbery about the profession.

Deference to authority was binned, encouraging the well-to-do to air opinions that could be iconoclastic and clever. Journalism, over a century after Karl Marx had tried to get things moving in politics, had become dialectic.

According to media-watcher Stephen Glover: 'Successful journalists tend to be better paid and better educated than they used to be. Leading politicians are less well educated than their predecessors, and many of them are not as rich. The new media class has vaulted over the political class.'¹

Coffee-bar politics had been joined by café-society journalists. The bars of Fleet Street began to ring less to the talk of scoops and more to the reasonably learned arguments of who was right and wrong in politics or trade. And as soon as journalism began to have opinions of its own – rather than exclusively the opinions of its proprietors, with all other space given to dispassionate news reporting – there was a market created in commentary. Journalism had effectively become part of an emerging spin-culture.

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If an early factor making the media spinnable was sociological, it was followed by another that was brutally commercial. The old British press aristocracy had owned newspapers to enhance political and social standing at a financial cost to them. The new press barons, led by Rupert Murdoch and including Conrad Black, David O'Reilly, Lord Hollick and Richard Desmond, as well as shareholders of publicly-listed corporations such as Pearson, endeavoured to make money from the media, which co-incidentally brought them political standing.

From hack to flack

This had two important effects. The first was to expand their newspapers' formats in a quest for richer seams of advertising revenue, creating more space to fill. The second was to break up the Fleet Street pack of journalists, making them more susceptible to outside vested interests.

At the heart of the newspaper, in politics and in business news, there was a demand to expand to accommodate new readers and further advertising space to reach them. The old news agenda was subsumed in a mania for lifestyle content. Particularly in business coverage, which had hitherto been technical stock-market reports, there grew new, separate sections,

with vast space devoted to the burgeoning neo-economy in retail financial services. Reporters were never going to find enough from their own resources to fill the newspaper space available, so journalism became spinnable as it sought material.

The Fleet Street Diaspora in the 1980s made its own contribution to the PR supply industry that was growing around the new journalistic prosperity. The emergence of Thatcherism had created the political environment in which the new commercial class of newspaper owner could take on the Fleet Street print unions. These unions had exploited the financial indolence of the old press barons, for whom newspaper profitability was a low priority.

The journalists, demoralised by mismanagement and rationalisation, were scattered away from where the action was in Fleet Street, like a herd of wildebeest. The communications industry – which was within a decade to be almost universally known as spin – were like jackals ready for a feast.

In their technological palaces, the newly remote journalists were grateful for visits from outsiders with information. Where political desks had always had the lobby system, firmly anchored in Westminster, spin developed its most visible presence. Now also on City and business desks, the geographical dispersal of financial

journalists made them more vulnerable to vested interests.

Highly experienced journalists on subbing and production desks were being progressively replaced by technocrats who could make the story fit. The technological revolution removed a layer of editorial management that it never strategically intended to, and it has not been to the benefit of the quality of British journalism.

Journalists – and it is most dangerous at the level of the young and inexperienced – can today get more into their newspapers unchecked, qualitatively or quantitatively, than they could before the Fleet Street Diaspora. As a result, journalism is far more susceptible to spin.

Broadcast media have not been exempt from similar pressures, though their own technological revolution – the dawning of the digital age – has not had the same potentially catastrophic effect on quality as is the case in newspapers. Nevertheless, the quality of television journalism has suffered, not least through the franchise break-up of ITV regions.

The BBC, meanwhile, has been too obsessed with public-service broadcasting to play its part in the development of the debate over vested-interest content. It has often appeared that the BBC's attitude, whether

on radio or television, is that if it hasn't been in the papers, then it isn't news. Given the state of newspaper journalism as described, this attitude leverages the influence of spin-culture.

Moreover, with the broadening of appeal of the BBC's coverage in politics, economics and business, comes a wider sphere of influences and vested interests. The BBC has grown under Dyke's stewardship to be a greater contributor to and participant in the spin-culture in which it operates. How could it be otherwise, when its business coverage is no longer simply aimed at industrialists and City financiers, but at anyone with an interest in money; and when its political commentary appeals to the electorate, rather than a small clutch of drones around Westminster and Whitehall?

2. City slickers: spinning like tops

Financial PR is not the heartland of today's spin-culture. That has been occupied, reluctantly of late, by the communications machine surrounding New Labour. But, from the end of the 1970s and particularly in the 1980s, financial PR was where the money was made. It was where the power of spin – as it then wasn't called – was discovered and developed and from which, ultimately, the commercial disciplines were to be learned that informed the development of a political spin-culture.

The paternity of City PR is widely attributed to the late Stanley Gale, an ex-deputy City editor of the *Daily Express* and the *Evening Standard*. Gale was consistently approached in his journalistic capacity by companies concerned about the presentation of their results and he consequently founded Shareholder Relations in 1958.

In a conversation in the mid-1980s, he revealed

much of what we need to know about the subsequent development of financial PR and the modern political spin-doctor:

‘A scoop is something that one of the parties does not want published. When it is published because the parties concerned do want it published, it is not a scoop – it is a leak. The purpose of that system is twofold. First, it is an attempt to swap news for views – the PR hopes that in exchange for exclusives a City editor will support his clients when needed.

‘Second, predators want the shares of their targets in the hands of speculators and a well-placed tip in the financial pages of the press can aid that purpose. I have heard some PRs tell their clients that they can find out what a Sunday newspaper is going to print – and they have.’

Driven by financial globalisation and privatisation during the 1980s, the markets in EC3 were spinning like tops more than a decade before the word spin was heard in SW1.

Shareholder democracy and the Big Bang

When Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979, there were fewer than two million private shareholders.

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Estimates vary, but by the end of the programme of utilities privatisation in 1990, there were as many as 12 million. The new share-owning democracy brought with it new accountabilities for companies and for Government. Companies had to communicate with their shareholders as never before, and not just sophisticated City institutional shareholders, but also members of the public. The new PR discipline of investor relations had to undergo radical revision.

Environmentalists had to be appeased, for fear that regulators might impose new sanctions or restrictions on trade. That generated a whole new industry in the communication of green credentials, the antecedents of how non-government organisations (NGOs) communicate today. Similarly, customer satisfaction had to be delivered by utilities as well as retailers, not only because it said so in their mission statement, but because customers needed to be told they were satisfied.

Politics, the financial markets, the environment, staff and customers all needed messages delivered and the old communicational disciplines were falling down. Spinning a line in Westminster in isolation no longer sufficed – you had to know how it would play in the City, with Greenpeace and among employees.

From all this, a new breed of communicator was to emerge: one who not only knew the importance of

addressing markets, but also of addressing shareholders, institutional and retail. It was this slicker, more knowledgeable operator who was to drive financial PR to the hegemony in communications functions that it enjoyed by the early 1990s. Shareholders were the most important target audience for the most senior executives in industry; their communicators had to reach them and the constituency was now a global one.

Over the past two decades, the City has been drawn into being an integrated part of political spin-culture. That process started in the early 1980s and gained momentum with the City's Big Bang of deregulation in 1986. By allowing foreign interests to own British financial institutions for the first time, the Big Bang broke the cosy cabals of the Square Mile. Now it was to be populated by Americans, Germans, Swiss and Japanese who cared little for the British political scene, other than for being allowed to trade in London unrestricted.

Politicians had a vested interest in keeping these foreign institutions in the City because they wanted to maintain London as the pre-eminent European financial centre. From being the engine of a British economy within Europe, the City was now part of a global stage and, as such, a more visible component of foreign policy and relations with other Governments than it had been previously.

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The development of the role of markets on both sides of the Atlantic has joined financiers and politicians at the hip. It followed that to separate a multinational corporation's political communications from its financial communications was to misunderstand late-twentieth-century capital markets. The two arenas are mutually dependent in their need to maintain voter and investor confidence to ensure global stability.

When financial PR met political communication

During the 1980s, Tim Bell was one of the first operators to recognise the opportunity of leveraging corporate and financial PR into the political arena. Recognising the margins and growth potential of PR over advertising, Tim Bell abandoned his Saatchi & Saatchi roots, bought out the PR sections of Lowe Howard-Spink Bell and formed Lowe Bell Communications (later Bell Pottinger). He was assisted in this endeavour by his proximity to Prime Minister Thatcher, and her intuitive obsession with business, fostered by husband Denis.

Through his financial PR consultancy, Bell had access to British industry at the highest levels. In turn, he could provide British industry with access to the PM. He also demonstrated to the PR world how you could take the fee twice – once in the City and once in Westminster.

Less theatrical, but every bit as commercial in bridging the mid-town between the City and Westminster, was Dewe Rogerson. The company was born of a partnership between Roddy Dewe and Nico Rogerson, the latter departing for New York relatively early, leaving Dewe the PR master of all he surveyed in the City. At Dewe Rogerson, the urbane Tony Carlisle was given the job of selling the Government's privatisation of the public utilities, including British Gas and British Telecom. He was to promote the privatisation principle, as well as sell the shares, to the electorate.

Carlisle came up with the strategy of 'perception of scarcity' to persuade British investors they needed to compete to buy shares in industrial assets that they had previously owned as taxpayers. 'Tell Sid' was the catchline of a populist television campaign that persuaded the public that it must oversubscribe to British Gas shares or miss a wealth-creation bonanza. The programme was formidable, made the firm and its shareholders rich and drove sections of the Government Information Service up the wall.

Like Bell's efforts in Downing Street, the process heralded the transfer of the new communications from the financial into the parliamentary and political arenas.

Don't tell Sid

Behind the scenes – which of course Sid was not told – public assets were being peddled as if by gangsters in a black-market stitch-up. And the stitch-up was not always competent. The Government's handling and communication of the privatisation process was at best arrogant, and at worst cack-handedly incompetent. The privatisation charabanc was probably kept on the road by the GIS. They may have been frustrated and infuriated at the intervention of private-sector PR operators, but there can be little doubt that the slick sales techniques of the privatisation shop Dewe Rogerson and the patch-up ministrations of Tim Bell kept the exchequer receipts coming, which in turn subsidised the income-tax cuts on which much of Thatcher's tenure depended.

City PR has much to answer for in the shaping of the modern spin-doctor. It gave birth to the trading of information as a commodity, rather as Max Clifford has formalised celebrity information into a commodities market.

The largesse that was extended by City PRs to financial journalists during the economic boom of the 1980s, and the proximity and mutual interest that this generated, began to make some financial journalists look not unlike fashion writers in their lickspittle

relationships with sources of information and their access to them.

Other than Dewe Rogerson and Bell, all this was done without the serried ranks of spin-doctors that the New Labour Government was to employ more than a decade later. Politicians, such as Lord Wakeham, who masterminded the break-up of the British electricity industry into private parts while retaining Government control over the nuclear power industry, and who later as a non-executive director, became embroiled in the Enron collapse, largely spun themselves, with a little assistance from the civil-service machine.

Privatisation drove the spin-culture as vast state-owned corporations found that they had to justify their existence in the private sector. This is the point at which financial PR and political communication conjoined and begat the spin culture we know today. The art of privatisation was to sell the public what it already owned as taxpayers and citizens. It is only one short step from selling the public what it already owns to telling the public that things can only get better under socialists with Tory policies.

3. Political communication

With hindsight, we can say that spin-culture was in rude health for the first three years after the great victory of 1997. The PM's personal ratings were higher than any of the opposition, either in Parliament or from within his own party. Former tabloid political journalist Alastair Campbell, now press secretary, applied the classic personnel management technique of fear and favour at lobby briefings with parliamentary correspondents. This, combined with an early review of the civil service information system, helped establish Number 10's communications machine as a paradigm of the new spin-culture.

The central driving force of the Blairite vision has been modernisation. That included modernisation of government, the tax system, financial markets, the law, welfare and industry, and also of communication. Policy-making and policy-selling became a circular

process, in which communication through the media, and feedback via focus groups, played an important part.

This very modern approach is usually attributed to the complementary abilities of key individuals who had all worked within the media industry. Alastair Campbell brought the mastery of the news agenda and a genius for populist phrase-making; former television producer Peter Mandelson was the master communications strategist; while advertising executive-turned-pollster Philip Gould provided a running commentary on how The Project was playing out.

These three have already been widely credited with the communications mastery which made New Labour a formidable election-winning machine. But the emergence of New Labour in the specific form that it took, and its association with spin as a defining characteristic, can also partly be attributed to the changing political environment in the preceding decades.

Parliament versus television

Parliament was first televised in the early 1980s. Its effect was to bring the spectacle of power to the people. Prime Minister's questions presented the opportunity to play to a new public gallery of millions. The squirming background players, previously jostling for position

at Budget speeches, were all now in public-broadcast ownership. The fact that television took us ring-side in the political arena was the major contribution in communications to the development of spin-politics and its allied spin-culture.

Paradoxically, an effect of this mass access to the floor of the House was that it helped to weaken the position of Parliament itself. In one respect, televising Parliament created a familiarity which bred, if not quite contempt, at least a decline in deference towards its status. A new generation of politicians was seen to be using this media-orientated arena as a place to play out populist issues to their advantage.

In another respect, the House became wallpaper television. Great slabs of it were broadcast off-peak, with only dramatic sound-bites making the peak-time news. However sophisticated the media exercise, the parliamentary process was packaged in tit-bits for evening news viewing over tea-time. Their advisers reacted by no longer just writing speeches for politicians on the House floor, but by writing speeches of sound-bites.

By condensing Prime Minister's Questions in the House to one session a week, Blair's relatively infrequent appearances in the Chamber strengthened the feeling that parliamentary business was simply a formality for his government. Its propensity to communicate

policy through the media compounded this annexing of the House. This shift is not surprising: if a political arena had developed which reached beyond the cosy confines of Westminster and Whitehall, then why not develop strategies for managing it?

Nothing illustrates this shift in Parliament's role better than the way in which recalls of the House to debate 'key' issues are now part of a broader communications process, and used as opportunities to take part in that wider debate. Parliament has become the place to stage set piece events once the communication strategy is in place, not necessarily to debate the issues.

Political lobbying and public affairs

As Harold Macmillan immortalised, the most difficult aspect of being Prime Minister is 'Events, dear boy – events'. In communications terms, compared with the events for which today's politicians have to plan, Macmillan had a relatively easy time. While the need to account to Parliament may have waned, accountability to the demands of 24-hour media, with a degree of access that would have been vulgarly intrusive to our political predecessors, means that 'events' are an infinitely greater problem to the modern politician.

In business, the great corporate communications

consultancies that grew out of the US – notably Burson-Marsteller and Hill & Knowlton – offered long-term corporate reputation management as a way of dealing with ‘events’ which had an impact on their clients. At the same time, political lobbyists were developing parliamentary and public affairs practices which related events to the workings of government.

Whether it was the management of a privatisation share-issue, a contested take-over bid, a general election campaign, or a reference to the competition regulator, strategic communications meant the management of complex events.

Given this complexity, it became increasingly inappropriate to demarcate communications specialisms in the information management process: political and corporate communications became entwined. In other words, the process of message delivery via separate channels to fixed audiences became the management of the audience itself, in ways which often spanned the different arenas in which the issues were debated.

At one level, this is perhaps the most significant contribution of professional communications to spin-culture. One person’s management of an audience is another’s manipulation. Done in a heavy-handed manner, voters or shareholders will resent such prescription of thought and action.

Message delivery depended on information passing through relevant media to an identified audience of choice. This process involved 'setting the communication objective', 'crafting of the message', 'identifying the target audience', and then sitting back and hoping for the best. In a less complicated world with less information and fewer channels of communication this might still be the right model.

But in an age dominated by network media, where the issues themselves are resistant to simplification and can often take on a life of their own, it is the issue itself that now has to be managed.

Politicians have been slow to catch on to this. Towards the end of their 18-year spell in office, the Tories were fond of mumbling that they 'weren't getting the message across'. The Tories may not have been getting their own specific message across, but voters were still *getting* the message. It was being delivered by the media, particularly television, which was adept at homing in on the essence of an issue, and concentrated people's minds on the exhaustion, division and apparent 'sleaziness' of the government.

The ability of television to focus perceptions in this way meant a new form of political manipulation was needed to deal with the medium *and* the message.

Spin and New Labour in opposition

What New Labour did in opposition can be understood broadly as the integration of its ability to communicate, focusing its capacity on strategic objectives and becoming capable of operating coherently across the whole political landscape. In that process, with a media already sick and tired of the John Major story, they discovered the ability to set and shape the news agenda in ways which favoured their own strengths and priorities.

But it is important to recognise that some key qualities of this highly successful operation sowed the seeds of trouble in the transition from opposition to government. The first was the implicit assumption that an 'event' was an act of communication, and therefore that Labour itself could cause and manage events by making announcements in particular ways. This could only be completely true of an opposition party, since they did not have much else to do except announce their intentions and attack the incumbents.

Second, the centralisation of control which was essential for turning the tide against the Conservatives, also implied that the communication of positions had to be built within the confines of a centralised framework. This also could only be done in opposition, when Labour did not have to deal with the detail.

Labour's transition into government began a process by which the issues, the audiences and the reality became impossible to coordinate centrally. As a result, the Government's efforts to impose coherence on the changing environment helped fuel the growing perception that its spin had become fundamentally divorced from reality.

Nonetheless, New Labour had developed an unparalleled capacity for integrated strategic communications in opposition – and it carried that capacity into government. It used a number of key techniques or tactics to define the terrain in which it could operate. They included:

Rapid rebuttal

One of the few media communications techniques learned from the States, it meant prompt and comprehensive response to negative media coverage, which often meant greater coverage of the rebuttal than of the original story.

'Bullying' or setting the news agenda

Campbell's role in relation to the press is often misinterpreted, particularly by those who have not been a part of the press corps themselves. As a former tabloid political commentator he knows intuitively how

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newsrooms work, both internally and in relation to their sources of information. Those who complain about bullying and favouritism towards journalists should realise that this is how stories get written, and not something invented by New Labour, far less by Campbell himself.

Centralising communications

New Labour was used to being centralised. In opposition, the importance of discipline and presenting a coherent set of messages made it a necessity. But the old habits did not so much die hard in government as infect the body politic. All conduits of communication had to be run by Number 10. Government had never run like that, and it put relations between the political operatives and civil service under immense strain.

Spinning in government

The spin-culture that developed at the heart of government is a direct result of the attenuation of Parliament and the consequent rationalisation of the communications resources under New Labour.

Early in the first week of the new Labour Government in 1997, departmental heads of information were called for a briefing with Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson – one of very few collective meetings that

would be held between either man and the government communication machine.

There would be no departmental communications fiefdoms. Departments were to deliver to a centralised Number 10 agenda, as indeed New Labour had delivered to its centralised new leader's agenda in opposition. Civil servants have latterly said they felt patronised by Campbell's suggestion that they should 'raise their game', but they also admitted there was a lot of dead wood at that time and they supported the urge to modernise.

Prior to Labour's fierce centralisation of communications, which had some roots even in the Thatcher years, government information was like a factory process, supplying detailed information on the activities in Parliament of a range of discrete and highly autonomous government departments. The old GIS, which had managed to escape Thatcher's civil-service cull, was soon regarded as an anachronism.

The corridors of power would subsequently run red with the spilled blood of GICS operatives who couldn't stand the pace of change, who had run-ins with the new regime or who simply threw in the towel.

It was ill-luck or poor management that this rationalisation should coincide with the growing reputation of Tony Blair's press secretary as a lobby pugilist. The

breaking of the will of the press and the growth of chattering-class cosy commentary made Campbell an easy target for resentment in those quarters of the media that had enjoyed an easy life and thought that they had a right to one.

Shortly after Robin Mountfield's review of government communications, Campbell abolished the old Lobby conceit that the prime minister's press secretary is never attributed – only 'Downing Street sources' and weaselly variants had previously appeared in the press. Campbell became 'the prime minister's official spokesman'.

This seemingly innocuous piece of glasnost had an important effect, and can be seen now as an early step in the attempt to create a post-spin politics. The shadowy spinners were wrong-footed by Campbell's attributable presence, as Charlie Whelan, Gordon Brown's spin-doctor, discovered.

Campbell was deft enough to realise that the media was already wising up to the new spin-culture. The fearsome New Labour machine was producing reciprocal responses from those with whom it had to deal directly. When the spin war escalated, it started to attract public attention – the spinners were to become the story.

Labour spin = Tory sleaze

The spin culture that developed during the 1990s had served Labour well. Rapid rebuttal, the undermining of political opponents, focus groups and the addressing of critical issues at the right time and in the right places were all weapons that had served Labour's renaissance in opposition. The problem was that it was insufficient as a means of government.

In a sense New Labour became a victim of its own success. By systematically smashing the Conservative opposition's ability to score points on actual policy issues, the story began to turn quickly towards their own defining characteristics. The Tories saw an opportunity to liken spin to sleaze, as a corrupting force at the heart of government. On this they found themselves at one with the media, which found the gap between spin and substance to be a useful proxy measure of government performance. This created a climate in which it was relatively easy to undermine the Government's credibility by being cynical about truth and veracity in politics – in other words, 'it's all spin'.

This line of argument was made easier by the ideological character of New Labour as a progressive project born out of a post-ideological *mélange*. A defining characteristic of the Third Way in general, and Tony

Blair in particular, was the ability to find middle paths and reconcile apparently irreconcilable differences – in rhetoric at least.

This tendency was exacerbated by New Labour's own key weaknesses – naivety and insecurity. The first was born out of inevitable inexperience of government and the second something closer to a psychological flaw. With the opposition unable to land a substantive punch and a media that was increasingly restless and hostile, the accusation of spin became a useful stick with which to beat the Government.

4. Spinning out of control

In July 2002, Tony Blair managed to state the obvious in a way that gave a startling insight into New Labour's transition from an opposition communications project to a maturing government. 'For Government, the announcement is merely the intention – the reality is that you have to deliver on the ground,' he said.

This was not a new realisation for him or many others. The fact that he said it at the first session of a newly instituted committee session, designed to show Labour's twin commitment to parliamentary accountability and public transparency, made it a defining moment. To understand its significance, we need to trace the way in which spin spun out of control between 1997 and 2001.

Numerous urban myths have circulated since 1997 about the newly minted Cabinet's fresh-faced approach

to governance. Naivety was probably inevitable for a government which, almost to a man and woman, had no direct ministerial experience.

From the electorate's perspective, this was not necessarily a bad thing. In its early years, New Labour benefited from simply not being the Tories, and Labour's presentation strategy sought to emphasise the distinction. But in the absence of a unifying idea or policy platform, or of widespread progress in delivery, the active symptoms of a spin-culture seemed to become defining features of politics during Blair's first term. This was not because substance was entirely absent. It was because behavioural characteristics were the most visible and identifiable aspects of the approach. These symptoms appeared as the result of a core condition of New Labour: insecurity.

This insecurity stemmed primarily from the long years in opposition, when most voters believed that the Tories really were the natural party of government. The venom directed towards Neil Kinnock by the media has never been forgotten by the generation of Labour ministers whose careers were forged in the 1980s. It was reinforced by the extent to which New Labour in government had to be an exercise in improvisation; there had not been the time, even if there had been the inclination, to work out a detailed modus

operandi for governing between Blair's unexpected election as leader in 1994 and the first great victory.

Transferred to Downing Street it is little wonder that this psychology, nourished by governmental power, should manifest itself in the centralisation of communications. Among the dispossessed of Whitehall, and the media that they fed, this was quickly characterised as 'control-freakery'.

Devolution, or losing control?

The concept of staying 'on message', coupled with symbolic use of pagers to relay updates of the Millbank line to MPs, was the subject of satire even before the election. But over time a series of badly concealed political manoeuvres gave substance to the allegation.

In Wales, the need to find a prospective Assembly leader after Ron Davies resigned led to the imposition from London of Alun Michael, against the wishes of party activists, who favoured the symbolically anti-establishment Rhodri Morgan. Morgan's attacks on spin-doctors, or 'masters of rotational medicine' as he called them, revealed a genuine abhorrence at the vacuum he perceived within the New Labour project.

In the act of devolution Downing Street had ironically made itself an establishment against which the new institutions could define themselves. Opposition

to Michael grew so strong in Wales that within a year he was forced to resign as First Secretary, to be replaced by Morgan.

Equally embarrassing was the emergence of Ken Livingstone as a highly electable London mayoral candidate. To the astonishment of ministers and MPs, the party machine ruled out a one-member, one-vote ballot in favour of an electoral college of members, trade unions, MPs, MEPs and London assembly candidates. Livingstone's victory was not just over Blair's favoured candidate Frank Dobson, or even over the process which had conspired against him, but over the controlling instinct still being nurtured by Number 10.

Devolution – a loss of control which the New Labour high command had willingly undertaken – was becoming New Labour's Achilles heel. In Scotland, there were allegations that the parliamentary elections had been manipulated to keep left-wing candidates out. The same allegation was levelled during the 1999 European elections.

Given the weakness of the Conservative opposition faced by New Labour, the real question is why Labour's corporate centre bothered at all. One answer is that Labour was battling itself. The Blair project was not just a struggle against Blair's catch-all target enemy, the 'forces of conservatism', but also within Labour

itself. While its grasp was comprehensive, New Labour's roots were shallow. Its fear of 'events' may have been well founded.

The mood was caught in a leaked memo by Philip Gould, the focus-group guru, to the prime minister's office just ahead of the May 2000 local elections. Extracts convey the sense of panic:

Our current situation is serious. There is absolutely no room for complacency . . . There is currently now a chance that our majority will fall dramatically, following the pattern of 1945 and 1964 . . . we are suffering from disconnection; we have been assailed for spin and broken promises . . . Perhaps worst of all . . . the New Labour brand has been badly contaminated.

From coming into power, intense scrutiny over whether the Government could deliver, coupled with an unrivalled majority, led to simultaneous attacks from all sides – something to which centralised organisations are notoriously vulnerable. Although New Labour was also learning rapidly about how to stay one step ahead of the media, as Campbell's adjustments to the lobby reporting system showed, an underlying question remained about how they tackled the substance.

As we have seen, however, dependence on spin in the early years of government was a characteristic of the age. One extreme manifestation among many was the boom and bust of the dot.coms. It shows how spin-culture was by no means confined to politics, even though politicians were directly touched by it.

Spinning the dot.com bubble

If by the 1990s privatisation had brought the equity of huge state-owned corporations to the people, by 2000 the internet was making a mockery of shareholding democracy. This was bad news for the communications industry. The mega-privatisations of the 1980s had required major companies to communicate with diverse stakeholder constituencies. Dot-commery turned spin into a demon in the financial markets, undoing much of the advance in communications skills of the previous decade.

This mattered because, while there was a Nasdaq-led raging bull market inside the dot.com bubble, there was a bear market developing outside it, some two years before the bear market proper arrived. For the first time in the equities markets, there was no fundamental asset value in valuations – it really *was* ‘all spin’.

The dot.com fiasco of the first half of 2000 went a

long way towards equating spin-culture with vacuity and lack of substance. But it also helped to show how all kinds of institution were getting carried away with the idea that the only condition of success was the creation of the right impression.

The wages of spin

Religion would, at first sight, seem to be beyond the reach of marketing, with its brand management and sales gimmicks. If only. Spin-culture knows no bounds and turns up as often in religion as it does in politics and finance. This was illustrated in the banality of an Easter campaign by the Churches Advertising Network showing a poster of Christ in a pastiche of the iconic Che Guevara photograph. The crown of thorns replaced the beret, and the catchline read: 'Meek. Mild. As if. Discover the real Jesus. Church. April 4.'

Predictably enough, the treatment led to howls of protest. Christians claimed it was unfair to Christ who, as God incarnate, is somewhat above politics.

Was this an advertising or a public relations campaign? If it was the former, then it was about a sales effort – bums on pews – and experience shows that it was a failure. If it was a PR issue, then it was, or should have been, about managing a Christian issue, which is

a theological aim. On this count it would have failed too, because it focused attention on the outrage of the image, rather than the revolutionary content of its message. The campaign didn't appear to know what it was doing beyond making a noise; a characteristic failure of spin-culture.

It is not as if there are not serious issues which needed to be addressed. Churches around the world have had to face up to how to communicate moral clarity as waves of uncertainty lapped at their own institutions. Paedophile priests, the ordination of women, abortion, embryo research, the justness of war and campaigns against global injustice were all issues which churches are struggling to engage. Flipping between a restatement of tradition and crass marketing gimmicks is hardly a satisfactory approach, but like many organisations, churches were caught up in spin-culture.

This is not to say that deploying spin techniques has not helped some organisations become better at communication. After the communications fiasco in the wake of Princess Diana's death – during which, it was no coincidence, Blair and his men spun a blinder – Buckingham Palace woke up to the need to raise its public relations game. By the time the Jubilee arrived, what had been widely predicted as a disaster started to

look truly golden. All the spin fundamentals, of providing good images and a story-a-day, had been well learned and contributed significantly to the success of the celebrations.

Spin: the enemy within

By 2001, spin was no longer just a casual insult to be thrown at New Labour from the outside. It had been identified as the enemy within. Maybe it was the communications centralisation of the first term. Maybe it was perceptions of bullying by a prime minister's unelected press secretary. Maybe it was, as Mandelson himself later identified, a case of continuing to behave in government as they did in opposition.

Yet these factors on their own cannot have generated the opprobrium and contempt in which the Government's communications function was held within a year of the 2001 election. In the event, it was nothing even vaguely Machiavellian that signalled the beginning-of-the-end of the political spin-culture with which New Labour had become associated. As so often in politics, it was the banal and the bungling that tipped the balance: one event which heralded Labour's post-spin revelation involved Campbell directly, the other did not.

Stephen Byers conceded at his resignation that

‘with hindsight’ it would have been better to have ended Jo Moore’s tenure as soon as she sent her fateful email. Had he done so, he would not have become such a media target and might even have survived.

Why did Moore survive 11th September? It has been suggested that Blair, who said that Moore shouldn’t have to go for ‘one mistake’, was anxious that she shouldn’t be hounded from her post by the media. Number 10 has long been committed to resisting such resignations in case they set a precedent. More important, though, may have been the fear of setting another precedent – that burying bad news, in the shadow of greater world events, would have to become a sackable offence. Governments do that all the time.

The Government’s mistake was to allow this unedifying, but necessary, practice to be seen in the light of day, and to allow the affair to develop into a spat between Moore and Martin Sixsmith. When older hands in the civil service murmured ‘it would never have happened in the old days’, they didn’t mean that the practice of slipping out bad news during public holidays, alongside Budgets, on royal event days – indeed, when any other major event is dominating the news – would never have happened. They just meant they wouldn’t have been caught.

It is, perhaps, ill luck that Labour should have been

the one to be associated with such a long-standing practice. But Labour brought that on itself by bringing into its service people who were untutored in government news management. The fact that it was jumped on with such alacrity by media and opposition is also significant, because focusing on the accusation that ‘it’s all spin’ was more or less the only line of attack that looked as if it might bear any fruit at all. This focus was to prove particularly important in understanding how Number 10 got drawn into one of the spin turning points of 2002: the row over the Queen Mother’s funeral.

Without rehearsing the sequence of events which led to ‘lying-in-state-gate’, the funeral arrangements for the Queen Mother dragged into the daylight a nasty culture clash between New Labour modernists and Palace of Westminster traditionalists. The story had all the elements: the right-wing press, youthful Downing Street organisers, Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, royalty and, of course, lashings of spin. Most importantly, however, it showed how key individuals within the media itself were taking on an implicit role in orchestrating and amplifying opposition to New Labour. Downing Street was dragged into a dispute that, as far as politicians’ standing with the voters was concerned, they could not win.

Making the allegation stick, that the Prime Minister might really have tried to improve his visibility at the funeral, was only possible in an environment where spin was seen as the new sleaze. The event was significant because it marked the moment at which Downing Street seemed to acknowledge that it could only lose by prolonging such disputes. Withdrawal marked a recognition that the Government prized other goals above beating the press at its own game. The prominence of the story alone provides clear illustration of the way the Government had allowed itself to be defined by spin.

It is unclear how much damage these running stories have caused. The likelihood is that many voters will understand them as diversions from the real issues, but equally they were not events which inspire confidence or trust in politics. For a government desperate to be judged on its record, this is a problem. These two spin stories and the received wisdom about the Government which gave them legs, go a long way to explaining Tony Blair's decision to appear in front of a select committee for prime ministerial review. He was the first PM to do so in over 60 years.

5. Networking: how to manage the big issues

As society continues to change, we should understand that audiences are not separate islands to be reached by linear channels, but wholly integrated elements of the culture in which we live.

Before the internet, communications techniques, particularly advertising, were concerned with reaching socio-demographic target groups in a fixed geographical environment. This was achieved through ownership or rent of the means of publishing or broadcasting.

People haven't changed, but the ways of reaching them have. The networked nature of the digital age massively extends the scope and range of human communication by reducing the constraints of geography, audience-reach, time and resources. Multiple communication paths link people together in a network which enables two-way dialogue, but makes it hard to

categorise the participants according to any criteria, other than their involvement at any given moment in a particular communicative action. This is partly a function of anonymity, but more importantly relates to the multiple channels of communication which enable people to present different facets of themselves.

Media have developed to match these divergent communications models. Direct sources of information are enabling audiences to cut out the media middle-man, a process known as 'disintermediation'. The bad news is that much of the press is being remorselessly disintermediated: the financial markets now primarily take their information on-line from Bloomberg, Reuters and Dow Jones. The same is true of the way people consume political news and information, although the trend may be slower.

This creates the need for communications people to deal in information in real-time, with no breaks for lunch. The really bad news for traditional PR is that on-line information services empower not only the consumers of information, but also the sources of it.

The internet is driving the replacement of traditional corporate structures with a looser global regime of interconnected peer groups and individuals, many of whom can for the first time exploit their own intellectual property independently. Corporations and

governments still contribute a cascade of information into the communications pool from above, but there are many other tributaries which create swirling tides and currents.

The result is that institutions needing to communicate (which is most of them) are learning a new set of rules; principles which are emerging from the chaos of a newly interactive, always on, information culture. Political communication in this environment is no longer simply an issue of 'getting our message across effectively'. It no longer works to argue that political messages are something static, domestic and presentational, and all that is needed is a slick presenter. Voters are now part of a much larger arena. In politics today, it's not so much a question of getting the message across to the people, as of getting the people across to the message.

The central idea to have emerged from the business world about how to deal with this new set of challenges stems from the problems that major companies have had in demonstrating their legitimacy and responsibility in the face of highly organised and imaginative NGO and anti-capitalist campaigning. Rather than managing the audience in such circumstances, you have to manage the issues and let the audience take care of themselves.

The rise of issues management

The radical idea of issues management as a unifying discipline for communications emerged in the early 1990s. It was radical because it implied that all other communications functions could be subordinated to the identification and analysis of those issues which could enhance or undermine corporate or political reputation and prosperity. This model requires real understanding of the issues affecting target audiences and the ability to bring appropriate communications solutions to bear on them.

For companies, this means understanding how corporate communications mattered in the non-corporate world, rather than simply struggling for competitive advantage against similar kinds of organisation. In politics, it means communication should not be seen as delivering a voter-friendly message more slickly than the opposition party, but recognising that there is a switched off, even anti-political audience to be engaged, who are interested in issues and not politicians.

In the 1980s, the need to manage audiences directly over time generated explosive growth in quantitative and qualitative research, as communicators sought more to understand the audiences they were addressing. The emergence of the focus group as an ongoing

source of information illustrates the same reversal of the communications flow; the dual carriageway of issues management, compared with the historical one-way street of message delivery.

This shift carries even more radical implications if we look to where its further evolution points: the idea that the process will not ultimately be between communicator and audience, but between the audience and the constituent parts of the issue itself. In this model, the communicator – whether corporate client or political party – stands outside the matrix of communications flows and achieves strategic aims by managing the issue itself.

Labour's ability to co-evolve with the shifting parameters of its communications environment is one of the qualities which has helped it keep the Conservative party in the doldrums. During 2002, almost simultaneously with the farce of the Queen Mother's funeral, Tony Blair was sending signals that a new approach to communicating on core policy issues was about to emerge, in which achieving short-term competitive advantage was not necessarily the dominant consideration.

He told the select committee for prime ministerial review:

I think there are three issues . . . on which I think there is a lot of long-term thinking . . . One is transport, one is pensions, one is housing. I think in all three of these areas it would be better if we were able to have some cross-party consensus that would survive individual governments in dealing with them because they are really tough long-term issues.

The cynic might take this as a politician's plea for more time to deliver, but the statement can just as easily be interpreted as an acknowledgement that some issues simply cannot be spun. What kind of approach to strategic communication might emerge in such a context? To answer that, we should look at two of the biggest, most difficult issues facing New Labour and the UK.

The big issue 1: Europe

The creation of a single European market, of which London is a major centre whether Britain remains outside or inside the Euro-zone, has ensured that UK politicians have to talk about an issue with huge political and economic implications. The pro-Europe business lobby has signalled its intention to play political hardball on the issue. The Conservative government tore itself apart over Europe. As with privatisation, the

Government has recognised that it has to talk to both the markets and the public.

Business communications are likely to heavily influence the debate. If Britain stays out of the Euro-zone, major American and other global companies will move their headquarters and investment to a country that is in it. This means that Britain's entry into a European monetary system will be decided by business and the prices that their consumers have to pay, not by politicians. Voters are concerned about costs, wealth and sense of well-being, and corporations have the most effective lines of communications on these issues.

Business people and Government alike know that corporations have communicational power and influence of which politicians can only dream. Prices, not sovereignty, or Brussels, or stories of EC-regulated straight bananas, will decide Britain's Euro-fate.

This government recognised early the need to take a long-term, strategic approach to communicating on the subject. Gordon Brown has played bad cop to the PM's good cop on Euro-policy. The strategy has been that Brown's apparent euro-scepticism will be all the more powerful in its conversion, when he eventually deems that the time is right for endorsement. Brown's seemingly statesmanlike u-turn could, when it comes, put as much as 10 per cent on the 'Yes' vote and will,

naturally, coincide with an announcement that the Treasury's five economic tests have been satisfied. Blair and Brown have realised that arguing a position is not enough. They have had to stage-manage a genuine public debate on the issue.

From the Government's perspective, an important issue has been that the British public becomes inured to the Euro. The process of softening up voters started in earnest in the New Year of 2002, and British consumers were bored rigid by the currency within the month: serving the purpose of its supporters within government and industry. The best way to manage the Euro issue was to make sure that it wasn't an issue, beyond a general feeling of isolation and a sense of nuisance that we seemed to be the only people on holiday who had to change our cash.

The strategy is the same as that developed by pro-Euro campaign Britain In Europe. It has been one of deliberately delaying engagement with the issue on a public basis: it is far better for the electorate to be bored by the subject, to be familiar with the Euro, for it to become part of the fabric of European life, for people to witness that those who have adopted it have not relinquished their sovereignty. Europhobes recognised this strategy early on, dubbing it 'Eurocreep', or adoption of a single currency by stealth.

It would be quite another matter for the British electorate to be bored by the arguments in favour of the Euro. Euro-supporters saw the mistake that the Tories made during their last term when they banged on about the Euro's solar-destructive properties until voters were bored to tears – and the Tories paid on polling day.

Despite the effectiveness of 'Eurocreep', the issue cannot be left to drift entirely. Unless its component parts are managed, and unless a semi-detached public genuinely becomes better educated about the ins and outs of the Euro, a successful outcome is far from assured. The task is to handle British industry's desires in relation to the real concerns of British people. What Britain's eventual entry into Europe's single currency will demonstrate is the potency of addressing the issue itself, compared with the relative futility of conveying political messages about it.

The big issue 2: war

Today's politicians are fond of referring to a 'period of unprecedented peace in Europe', but British prime ministers in the past 20 years have fought more war than they should have expected. Thatcher had the Falklands invasion, Major had the Gulf war, Blair has had Kosovo and terrorism.

In domestic politics, what made all these wars entirely different from previous British engagements was television. From the first, faltering coverage of marines yomping, and the Galahad burning in 1982, to the full real-time, living-room experience of the Gulf War nearly a decade later, the conduct of war was brought to the electorate by electronic media, like a ghastly true-life war video game.

The psychological effect of television war reporting has been a major communicative contribution to politics and its allied spin-culture over the past two decades. Wars, our own and other people's, provided the most dramatic example of the process through which the electorate started to take direct ownership of momentous events.

War is becoming one of Blair's defining characteristics as Prime Minister, from presiding over the fall of Milosevic to marshalling a global coalition – including of public opinion – for military action in Iraq.

This is a clear example of managing an issue in real-time rather than communicating a position. A clear position does not even exist, as Blair himself was keen to suggest at his September 2002 Sedgefield press conference. The UK's position was emerging out of a process of 'constant dialogue', he said. The development of Britain's role in relation to US policy, which is

also developing in a dynamic way and in a tone of voice very different to Blair's, means that a public debate over the moral purpose of war cannot be avoided.

Blair's people already have more experience of this process than most governments, thanks to the pivotal role played by Campbell during the bombing of Kosovo. The Serbs were dictating the communications game simply because they started the day 10 hours before Washington. As a counter-measure, Campbell was parachuted into Nato headquarters to act as wingman for official spokesman Jamie Shea. His involvement prompted the following testimonial from the supreme allied commander, Wesley Clark:

'Alastair Campbell's intervention was completely crucial in getting ourselves organised at Nato. What we discovered with the modern media is that you cannot afford to wait around.'²

Similarly, Campbell 'managed' the other members of the war against terrorism coalition, which toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan, by ensuring that the West's response and rebuttal was in real-time. Campbell can do this because he has greater direct media experience, as well as greater authority invested in him by his national leader, than any equivalent role to be found in the US. In other words, he can afford to be assertive.

Managing conflict

Blair's approach to the issue of Iraq demonstrates global issues management in practice, as he has sought to connect audiences and constituencies in different parts of the world and move the debate itself on in a way which creates a supportive context for his favoured action. He has used empirical research to influence both the strategy adopted and the perceptions of key stakeholders, and has co-ordinated disparate processes of conflict and communication to the point where a military intervention in Iraq could, he hopes, prove legitimate in the eyes of public opinion.

This issue is as complex as any other in the world today, and its management requires a communications strategy which treats the different interests within the global audience as constituent parts of the issue itself. The extent to which these approaches lead to genuine progress depends on several things, including who is engaged, how well informed the management is by intelligence and evidence, and how far the debate really influences the positions eventually taken up by leaders.

But taking an ongoing, evolutionary approach to such questions, and treating different constituencies as parts of the issue itself, at least offers the hope that the positions adopted and actions taken can genuinely

reflect the complexity or diversity of the audiences they are trying to manage. The rubric is simple – treat the people with whom you are communicating as participants in an ongoing deliberative process. The discipline of aligning what you say with what you do means that the potential for convincing those with whom you wish to communicate will be massively enhanced.

6. The new communications: truth and reconciliation

The opinion-forming trades of politics, law, journalism, advertising, PR and communications face a crisis of confidence among those they serve at a time when their self-confidence is high, because spin-culture has undermined the credibility of communications professionals. The truth is that they are not believed.

Those influencers have only themselves to blame. Our children thirst for media-studies courses, because the business of promoting image and attitude is attractive but we have made the content of major, life-affecting issues boring. Politics and business have been covered with the tarmac of a spin-culture and we wonder why the grass isn't growing.

The challenge of achieving a transformation in our approach to corporate and political communications is mammoth. The psychology of promoting one's own interests, whatever the wider consequences for the

market in which one operates, is deeply entrenched.

The game has been played for so long in a manner that encourages competitive advantage as the benchmark of success, that it is almost impossible to envisage the players recognising the diminishing returns from this game. This is as true of politics as it is of the corporate world. But in both sectors, growing numbers of practitioners are beginning to realise that the perceived separation of communication from underlying reality is damaging the whole context in which they seek to operate, as people's cynicism and mistrust of institutions continues to grow.

The good news is that people are bored by the spin-culture and want out. The Government recognized this around the 2001 election and has made various efforts to distance itself. In just one instance, in June 2002, the minister for Europe, Peter Hain, acknowledged that there was a 'trust problem' for the government that would need to be addressed before a referendum on the euro.

This said, a government with a substantial majority has an obligation – one might even say a mandate – to act in ways which reduce the damage of communicational conflicts. The issue is not just whether Labour can stay one step ahead in the communications game, but whether it can develop an approach to

communication which genuinely enhances the accuracy and depth with which people can understand the issues. A substantial majority demands substance.

There is time to win that trust back. You cannot trust someone who is not honest with you. Honesty does not have a moral genesis in this context – it is a practical demand. In the same way that a company will need to be honest if it is to prosper in an environment increasingly influenced by the NGOs, government can adopt honesty as a vote winner. For a politician, this means going beyond the assertion that he or she is a ‘pretty straight kind of guy’ to acknowledging that many complex issues cannot be reduced to a firm position and a couple of snappy one-liners, whether you feel ‘the hand of history’ on you or not.

Rebuilding trust and confidence in institutions – whether they are a government, a church, a corporation or a newspaper – requires only that they be believed as a first step, rather than necessarily believed in. The way to that trust and confidence is through the sort of vibrant, honest and rational debate that has been stifled by spin-culture.

For government, the priority must be in aligning its overall management of political communication with four priorities outlined by Mike Granatt, the GICS

head of profession, early in 2002. They are consistency, clarity, transparency and accountability.

Achieving them requires long-term investment, not only in staff and training but also in communicational relationships. The key here is understanding that government should and will communicate directly with a plethora of audiences, both directly and through the prisms of the media. But as the boundaries between different audiences continue to collapse and communications become increasingly interactive and continuous, government has to be able to enter a public dialogue with a combination of openness and authority which enables new events and information to be incorporated into the debate in real-time.

In these circumstances the role of politicians is more like teacher than preacher. Where they are perceived to be controlling or manipulating the terms of debate or the flow of information for narrow political purposes, their credibility in the wider scene will be damaged accordingly.

The goal should be to invest systematically in creating a context for informed and intelligent debate by making relevant information as accessible as possible, rather than using the control of access to information as the basis of authority. This should also shed light on the role of special advisers, who are crucial players in

bringing together the communication of political goals with the provision of factual and contextual information. In particular, where special advisers have direct contact with the media or a public profile, they should be seen as supporting the objectives of ministers in *persuading* the public of a particular position, something which remains the politicians' primary task.

The role of a Government Information and Communications Service (GICS) which is able to maintain clearly laid out standards, both internally and externally, is crucial. For ministers and the rest of Whitehall, GICS should provide confidence that it will be responsive and deliver sophisticated and cost-effective advice and action within the rules. Those outside the Government must have confidence that GICS will deliver the facts in an honest, timely and cost-effective manner within the same set of rules. Overall, a commitment to more transparent government through freedom of information should play a crucial role here. Government should be making explicit connections between its commitment to introduce such freedom in the future and its evolving approach to communication and transparency.

Politicians regularly call for a 'mature debate', often to avoid an uncomfortable line of questioning. Many

are frustrated by the way that the media appear to simplify and distort the meanings they try to get across. But their credibility in advocating a more intelligent approach depends in large part on their willingness to participate in more open forms of scrutiny and dialogue. In other words, like it or not, politicians need to be seen to listen and respond if they want anyone to believe that a more considered debate on an issue is worth investing in.

Deepening the use of public forums and experimenting with new ways of structuring them should therefore be a priority. While the role of parliament as the primary forum may need to be further reasserted, this does not mean that its deliberations can only be conducted in traditional ways. The Puttnam committee of MPs and peers which scrutinised the recent communications bill offered a refreshingly new context for discussion and a way of clarifying highly complex issues into questions which could be debated in public.

How much do we want to change?

Richard Addis, a former editor of the *Express*, has just returned from editing the *Globe & Mail* in Toronto to a job at the *Financial Times* in London. He remarks that there is now a marked difference between the cultures

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of debate in the UK and North America. In Britain, he suggests, it is usually sufficient to state a clever-clever position gleaned from the media. Across the Atlantic, this is likely to be listened to politely before you are asked: ‘Yes, but what do *you* believe?’

In the long run, broadening and deepening a culture of deliberation can only be a good thing. This does not have to make politics more ponderous or more deferential, but it does rely on collective commitment to the public sphere. In the end, making structural adjustments to the way institutions communicate formally will only take us so far. While government has a responsibility to lead, there is little that it can do while acting alone about a culture that it didn’t create, and of which it became a part. It is for the mass of people to alter the culture in which they live, in all walks of life.

In particular, this raises a nagging question about the power and responsibilities of the media itself, which, while struggling with the same pressures and demands faced by all other communicators, has nonetheless managed to avoid a widespread debate about the effects of its own behaviour.

While we can already observe the green shoots of post-spin communications emerging, their ability to flourish depends on a much wider debate which is

really only beginning. Ultimately, the priorities I have outlined should not only return politicians to the deliberation in which they should be engaged, but will also make politics more fun. That fun has largely departed in recent years, with journalists and spin-doctors complaining about each other in increasingly tedious ways. They and we should be having arguments and enjoying them.

References

1 *The Spectator*, 29 June 2002.

2 *The Observer*, 25 July 2002.