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Public Relations Professional Putting a “Spin” on the Spin

Has PR Become the Media’s Spin-Doctors?

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English 301

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The modern world is abounding in media influence. It is nearly more difficult to find refuge from media pull than it is to seek it. Due to emergence of the online universe, the world has become nearly one in its media sharing and scope. Incredibly, with the consistent uphill climb of media quantity, the residual trust in its content continues to decline. Unfortunately, one of the leading battalions of this battle for media trust is the Public Relations professionals. While their overarching purpose is to build bridges between their parent organization and the general public, it seems to have a reverse outcome when their fabrications are (inevitably) discovered. As skeletons in the media closet continue to emerge, one principle remains true for PR professionals when they are tempted to put a spin on the story: It is always best to tell the truth first, to tell it clearly, and to welcome the repercussions.

The term “spin” is fairly new in the context we now often see it used. Neil C. Manson, in his article, “Making Sense of Spin,” acknowledges that much of people’s opinions on spins are negative in nature, because they feel they are intended to deceive. He writes, “The term spin, and related terms like spin-doctor, have become firmly established as part of our vocabulary for talking about communication. Spin is everywhere. Not only do politicians and their press agents do it, but corporations, charities, lobbying groups, universities, celebrities and individuals do it. Public relations communication, in some eyes, involves little else. Spin, by and large, is viewed pejoratively. To accuse someone of spin – or worse, to label them a ‘spin-doctor’ – is to ascribe behavior that is less than honourable” (Manson 1). The irony of these attitudes toward spinning is that they are achieving entirely opposing outcomes to their intended purpose. The purpose of a spin is to lessen the severity of an incident, find a positive side to it, and present it in a neatly wrapped gift to the public. Why? The role of a PR professional boils down to controlling the public’s attitudes and beliefs toward the organization. If a crisis situation can be molded into something positive and uplifting for the company, surely, they would elect to spin the story in a way that leaves them in a good light. Ironically, spinning has resulted in the opposite; people find out the truth elsewhere and lose trust and confidence in the organization for misrepresenting the story.

Media spins of data can have a direct implication on lasting attitudes and beliefs. Even beyond the “spun” data, the overall themes and messages can be incredibly long-lasting. Laura Miller, writer for *U.S. – Japan’s Women’s Journal*, has tracked the implications of one particular media spin over the past 40 years in “Speculating on Spin: Media Models of Women.” She recalls, “We know that mass media has incredible power, yet we can never predict which of its products will take up long-term residence in the public mind. During the 1980s, the media asserted that Japanese women would only consider marriage when certain requirements had been met. These conditions were named … ‘the three Hs’: high salary, high education credentials, and high physical stature. The three Hs were actually the product of an in-house customer survey conducted by a marriage service (Jolivet 1997: 220), and therefore only reflected the ‘requirements’ demanded by women who were desperately interested in tying the know. Yet even today, we often write about the three Hs as a social fact true for virtually all young women of the era. An example like this reminds us that even seemingly trivial media scripts, narratives, images, and themes can have unforeseen fallout, spinning off into incarnations that shape our collective beliefs and memories” (Miller 3). The lasting influence of even one media spin supersedes its origins. These deceptions can influence public attitudes and opinion, even for those who have no personal connection or recollection of its source.

These deceptions can be as trivial as women’s dating attitudes and as significant as the medical system. Issues in the medical world have arisen due to the PR spin. The public now has their own concerns with third-party public relations professionals becoming involved in the commerce of medical prescriptions. The two worlds have become intertwined, increasing confusion and lack of involvement of the prescribing doctors, themselves. There are other concerns that have arisen as well, addressing the ethical conflict of “wining and dining” done by drug companies and public relations professionals to promote sales of drugs. Bob Burton, from the British Medical Journal, writes, “Increasingly, public relations companies are turning their attention to direct to consumer (DTC) marketing and patients’ group. ‘Consumers of prescription medicines in the past have usually taken the doctor’s advice as being gospel, but there are far more information sources for consumers now than ever before,’ Keiman said. Pharmaceutical companies can’t simply rely on the tried and trusted methods of advertising: sales force and direct mail’” (Burton 2). Every treatment, purchase of prescriptions, and even doctor’s recommendations can potentially boil down to business transactions between PR representatives and healthcare providers. There is possibility that the outcome of any doctor visit in the entirety of the United States has already been decided beforehand by “Spin-Doctors” and real doctors. The recommendations made by these providers are, in large part, influenced by the business spins they are fed.

Over the past few decades, the press has recently entered a new phase of media deception. Because of the “spins” put on the media coverage of the war, trust between media and consumers was negatively impacted. In fact, the trust relationship between readers and the media was permanently damaged from that point forward. Marc D. Felman, author of *The Military/Media Clash and the New Principle of War: Media Spin*, wrote, “Simply stated, media-spin refers to the way the media presents a given story: it is the media’s interpretation and presentation of a given event. While news media defenders usually insist that the news is reported objectively, this paper makes it quite clear that objectivity in reporting is a concept that is at best a worthy yet unobtainable ideal. It is largely because of this imperfection that the phenomenon of media spin exists. Obviously, one who controls media spin can influence a great deal more in the public arena than just military campaigns” (Felman 1). The implications of Felman’s claim are significant. Should PR representatives use media spin to convey personal agendas, certainly the consuming population would be subject to those views.

Even more recent world events have led to disdain with media war coverage. Philip Taylor, writer for *The World Today*, believes much of the disastrous aftermath of September 11 is due to the media’s coverage. His piece, “Spin Laden,” discusses the implications of September 11and the aftermath of the United States’ relation to the rest of the world. It became a wake-up-call, of sorts, to American attitudes and international relations. Much of the confusion at the time could be attributed to the media’s involvement and their desire to create a positive, often reinforcing spin on American culture and involvement with other countries. Some argue that the American perspective as self-deemed protagonists in all things global led to a very harsh realization with such an act of terror. “The perpetrators of the ingenious evil of September 11 understood fully the importance of media coverage… Media coverage is proportional to the perceived importance of the event, rather than to the amount there is to report” (Taylor 3). The issue of media spin’s involvement in the reports done on September 11 news is still pertinent today. Numerous US citizens have ascribed to a plethora of 911 conspiracy theories, largely in part due to the lack of trust in the media’s coverage.

America’s politics, however, are not alone in their media-spin issues. Canada has also shown similar implications due to their media involvement. With the rise of consistent media coverage, citizens are witnessing more and more underlying messages to interpret. “Image management and public persuasion techniques are found in all governments. Among the timeworn tactics in a public relations practitioner’s toolkit are surrounding oneself at a media event with people who represent ‘stereotypes for ideas’ (Bernays 1928, 962) and communicating information in a ‘condensed’ manner that is ‘absorbable in capsule form’” (Marland 3). Surely, the use of image management in government arenas is inevitable. No government wants to reveal all its weaknesses to the ever-waiting world. But it does seem that by in so shielding what they lack, the governments only reveal more weakness to their public in the form of “hidden agendas” and scandals.

Regardless of any assumed media spins, public relations professionals have arguably some of the most influential positions in modern society. In fact, it could be seen that an integral part of their career is to ensure they maintain an influence of sorts. If they do not, their position would become meaningless. The question is, then, at what point does the public relations world draw the line on being paid to influence? In *India International Centre Quarterly*, Beena Sarwar writes, “Ask anyone what they think are the major problems in society, and chances are that the media will figure somewhere in the answer. Ask about possible solutions and the answer again will include the media in some way. So is the media part of the solution or part of the problem? Or is it, as some think, the problem itself? Do journalists simply mirror society – reflecting the good and the bad – or do they actually shape perceptions and agendas” (Sarwar 2)? The media has shown great ability the control the public opinion over the years. This power can be channeled to influence for good. It seems that the modern consumer has heard “all the lies” they’ll need. The modern consumer is seeking pure, unadulterated truth. The role of a PR professional is to determine how freely the truth will be released to the public.

A large part of the general public’s disdain toward media spin can be attributed to a lack of effort on their part. By relying heavily on the opinions and research of others, one’s own opinions are likely to clash with the thoughts being fed to them. Gregg Hoffman, in correlation with A Review of General Semantics, ascribes to this point. Gregg argues that in order to become fairly versed in modern politics, much more is required of the American citizen than a simple black and white decision. Due to media coverage of politics, much more dissection is needed. There is a great deal of media spin on all sides of political issues and certainly on behalf of public political figures. Gregg writes, “So, to understand the spin and imagery of the political conventions, one really needs to become more media literate and understand that the media, especially TV, plays a big part in setting the agenda and determining tactics for the parties. If one really wants to be politically astute, one has to pursue other outlets on the internet, in print, perhaps on public TC or the Sunday political talk shows, to find out more about the issues that are not included in the primary spin” (Hoffman 3).

Interestingly, a convincing media spin can lead consumers to question their own experiences and opinions. While a personal attitude may be held, reading or watching a convincing spin from a trusted media source has the power to transform the consumer’s opinions to align in ways they would not have otherwise done. In “Spin (And Pitch) Doctors: Campaign Strategies in Televised Political Debates,” Michael Norton and George Goethals write of the power of public relations professions; “When positive feedback (a post-debate ‘spin’) was provided after a low pitch, participants did rate performance positively, but only when the spin was supplied by a credible media source. The same strategy when used by campaign strategists adversely impacted candidates, leading to lower ratings of debate performance and network coverage” (Norton 2). Regardless of the consumer’s initial interpretation of the story, the media’s review is what determined the public opinion. This is even after the true “story,” in this case has been released! The political debates had not been altered, yet the media chose how the consumers would feel about them by their personal reviews.

If the media-driven world has taught us anything over the last decade, it is that the truth will come to light sooner or later …and everyone wants to be on the right side when that happens. The temptation to spin a story may look enticing in the eyes of a public relations representative. At face value, they would control the story, mold the public’s perception, and essentially decide how much truth would be released. However, that is a dangerous game to play. Skirting around the truth and presenting fabrications in its place is igniting a ticking time bomb. The truth will come out, and the organization will have found themselves on the wrong side of the story. Media content creators hold more power than they may realize. They are shaping public opinion on politics, wars, culture, health, and even beliefs. The only way to ensure a long, successful, and certainly more *restful* career is to tell the truth first, to tell is clearly, and to welcome the repercussions. That way, when the inevitable skeletons are found in the closet, they will hardly be news at all.

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