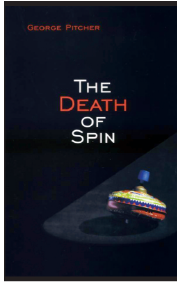

The Death of Spin. *By George Pitcher.* Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons Ltd. 2003. 258 pp. ISBN 0470850485.

The story of how spin became synonymous with sleaze is the subject of George Pitcher's *The Death of Spin*, published in 2003.

Spin is not new, as Pitcher points out, citing precedents that span from Saint John's gospel to Cardinal Wolsey's representations about Henry VIII to the Pope through to Edward Bernays' revolutionary tactics on behalf of American corporations such as the United Fruit Company. But the author argues that a turning point occurred about 20 years ago: a new communications era forged by spin industries that underpinned a spin culture. Spin culture was a Zeitgeist, rather than a politician's trick of light. Lest anyone conclude that the practitioners of these dark skills operated only in political arenas, Pitcher's book examines three bastions of what used to be called the "establishment" for traces of spin culture: the law, the monarchy, and the Church.

Spin doctors first appeared in the U.K. in the early 1980s—born, Pitcher asserts, of American parents. Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher decided "this lady's not for turning" with the help of her press secretary, a rough-hewn Yorkshire man named Bernard Ingham, who emerged as one of the most powerful people in the country and was later knighted, in part as a reward for his skill in exercising the lobby privilege. A vacuity at the heart of his government's policymaking machinery encouraged Tony Blair's New Labour government and its communications gurus, Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell, to embrace spin even more enthusiastically. Their peers included advisors to would-be kings as well as captains of industry.

Spin reflected a new credo of winning at all costs, a view espoused in much of the Western world. Practitioners no longer argued issues; they argued a position. Presentation was all. Style trumped substance. Public discourse no longer revolved around the subject, but rather around what the interlocutors thought about it. The process of delivering a message to an audience morphed into a preference for managing the audience itself. An explosive growth in qualitative and quantitative research was a natural consequence, as the spinners sought a better understanding of the audiences they were addressing. And as Pitcher notes, one person's audience management is another person's audience manipulation.

Spin culture dictated the shift in corporate communications from management of the distribution process to management of content. Spin doctors did not write speeches, they wrote sound bites. Pitcher suggests that the economic miracle that occurred in the U.S. in the late twentieth century was basically an act of spin, an observation that seems particularly prescient in the context of today's financial markets. And an economic retrenchment that had started in advance of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center the morning of September 11, 2001, was not allowed to deepen too sharply or too deeply for political reasons.

In spin culture, life imitates art and the other way around. A Hollywood film entitled *Wag the Dog* seems farcical, except in the context of the Falklands War.

Yet Pitcher argues that a decade after the term "spin" was introduced to Britain, the word had become a solid pejorative. The easiest and most damning denunciation in any discussion or debate was the debilitating descriptor, "It's all spin." If words are like currency, with values that fluctuate, then today spin—a communications artifact of the late twentieth century—is roughly at par with the Zimbabwean dollar.

The shift caught spin practitioners, the Blairites among them, off-guard. Pitcher states, "New Labour had galloped to power in 1997 on media stallions trampling John

Major's dead-beat PR into the turf—the spin culture mattered to Number 10. It followed that its demise would follow too" (p. 8).

Having identified "le problématique," Pitcher sets out a way forward for professional communicators and the institutions they advise: Do not just communicate a position; manage the issue. Citing the government's handling of the "Millennium Bug" (or "Y2K") as illustrative, Pitcher states that issues management must be considered a professional service in its own right, a management discipline that allows for the effective deployment of all communications functions as appropriate.

The Internet and its new media properties, which he describes as "communication unspun," (p. 232) are central to Pitcher's view of how issues management must evolve, forcing interlocutors to concentrate on dialectic engagement, rather than the spin-culture staples of assertion, image presentation, and obfuscation. Pitcher's new model means being brave enough to use communication as a means of action, not just of positioning—of joining the debate, not of evading it. Internet engagement, he argues, may prove to be the *coup-de-grace* for spin culture.

Should politics, business, and institutions return to the didacticism in which they should have been engaged all along, Pitcher predicts they will make one further discovery: It will be more fun. Pitcher states that he has written this book for the lay reader. While it is predicated on assumptions consistent with media effects research, there is no explicit reference to that tradition. Having worked both sides of Fleet Street, literally and figuratively, as the industrial editor of *The Observer* (London) and a communications consultant, Pitcher's is an insider's view. By way of reinforcing his insider status, the author focuses on the particular communications ecosystem that existed in Britain in the lead-up to the millennium. In methodological terms, he has confined his analysis of the media revolution to the print press, a framework that might strike North American readers who are accustomed to the revolving print pundits who pontificate on TV as curiously restrictive.

Pitcher ascribes the origins of the term "spin" to the game of baseball—specifically, to the ability of a pitcher (no pun intended) to alter the rotation and flight of the ball. Students of spin on this side of the Atlantic have argued that the term comes from tennis—that the player can apply top-spin or other spin to their ball and that the shot a player hits is dictated to some degree by the shot hit at them by an opponent. This notion of "working the ball" is central to the verbal "volley" that is a component of any public discussion or debate.

There are specific claims in the book that are cause for amusement, and there is a citation that defies belief. On the former front, the author cites a third party as crediting him with inventing litigious public relations, which is undoubtedly true, at least in terms of the U.K. And Pitcher's suggestion that British journalists were susceptible to manipulation from spin doctors because newspaper proprietors moved them out of their natural Fleet Street habitat to the isolation of technological palaces in Battersea or the Isle of Dogs stretches the notion of the divide-and-conquer theory. The citation that defies belief is a personal anecdote that suggests Pitcher let a story on potential insider trading involving John Major's government go unreported because he did not have a second source.

Pitcher is a compelling storyteller and a gifted writer, abilities that serve the lay reader well. He delivers on his promise of "a guided tour through the rat runs below and beside the corridors of media, industrial, and political power" (p. vii), with anecdotes and insights that will resonate with journalists and communication consultants alike. Those looking for a theoretical framework or analysis of public relations or of the phenomenon of spin, however, will have to look elsewhere.

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