Boyd Neil writes that I have become something of a “bête noir” in the public relations industry since the initial broadcast of my “Spin Cycles” series in 2007. Actually, my experience has been quite the opposite. I have been both gratified and surprised by the enthusiasm and interest shown in the series by public relations professionals in Canada and elsewhere.

This leaves me to wonder: why have so many in PR embraced the series and Mr. Neil has not? Judging by the review presented above, I can offer one possible answer. They listened closely to what I was actually saying, and Mr. Neil did not. I am happy that Mr. Neil found some merit to the series, including his recommendation that parts of it should be required material for students of PR; but I am mystified by many of his criticisms. In almost all cases, the complaints he raises are already addressed by various voices within the series.

Take, for example, his defense of media training. He is correct that I lay out the standard journalistic complaint over people who are taught the fine art of message tracking, and Mr. Neil presents the standard PR defense of the practice. But in reading his review, you would never know that the prominent American PR practitioner Jim Lukaszewski has already advanced the same defense in the series. In a long and lively exchange in the second program, Lukaszewski criticizes my position using precisely the same arguments that Boyd Neil uses in his review.

Mr. Neil’s criticism of my use of the word “spin” suffers from a similar problem. He may object to the definition I use (“deliberate shading of news perception”), but the definition he prefers (“willful distortion of facts to create a more persuasive or one-sided story”) was offered up early in the first program by PR author Fraser Seitel, who goes on to say “it should be antithetical to people who care about the practice of PR, to engage in spin.” Readers of this review would never guess that the case for PR is expressed forcefully and prominently throughout this series by many of its leading practitioners. In other words, Mr. Neil is well within his rights to disagree with my take on “spin” (as he is with my assessment of media training)—but he is wrong to suggest that my series advances only a singular definition.

And then there is the infamous “incubator baby” story in the months preceding the first Gulf War in 1991. Mr. Neil’s company, Hill and Knowlton, working
on behalf of its client, “Citizens for a Free Kuwait,” brought forward a 15 year old girl who claimed to have witnessed Iraqi soldiers tossing Kuwaiti babies from their hospital incubators. The girl’s testimony in front of a Congressional committee helped turn U.S. public opinion in favour of war against Iraq. The problem was that the girl did not actually witness these atrocities, and she was in fact, the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to Washington, a fact that neither the committee nor H&K chose to reveal.

In his review, Mr. Neil dubs the story “apocryphal,” and appears to object to the fact that I refer to “Citizens for A Free Kuwait” as an “astroturf organization.” But the group was almost entirely bankrolled by the Kuwaiti government in order to influence American public opinion. The source of the funding was never revealed, a clear violation of every PR code of ethics that I’ve ever encountered, and a classic definition of an “astroturf” organization.

This leaves me utterly confused about what parts of this story Mr. Neil considers to be apocryphal. He might want to check out Susan B. Trento’s exhaustively researched book *The Power House* (St. Martin’s Press, 1992), which catalogues the ethical cesspool that H&K’s Washington office had become in the Reagan/Bush Sr. years under the leadership of its legendary lobbyist Robert Keith Gray.

Or, he might want to talk to his boss, Mike Coates, the president of Hill and Knowlton Canada. In an interview I did with Mr. Coates in 2003, he conceded that even within the PR industry, the firm’s conduct was widely viewed as unethical, and it resulted in H&K adopting a much tougher set of ethical guidelines in order that it could once again start recruiting top talent to the firm. Mr. Coates also acknowledged that revealing the girl’s true identity would have been the best course of action, but claimed they were requested not to do so by the committee chair.

That may be true, but by concealing her identity, by allowing people to believe the girl was a legitimate, neutral, eyewitness observer, H&K was a party to a fraud perpetrated against the American people. It chose to put its loyalty to its client over its larger obligation to the American public, and that was wrong.

And this was no inconsequential little white lie. There is a direct line between the bogus incubator baby story, the war fervour it generated, and the tragedy that has unfolded in Iraq over the past six years.

Mr. Neil writes that I believe his firm “caused” the Gulf War. I make no such claim in any of the Spin Cycles programs. So while he appears to be one of the few people still willing to support his firm’s past transgressions, he would be wiser to stop trying to defend the indefensible, acknowledge the errors that were made, and concentrate on how H&K and the whole PR industry has tried to ensure that those mistakes will not be repeated.

In the end, people hear what they want to hear, and I think Boyd Neil was expecting the worst when he heard that a CBC journalist was taking on the PR industry. And I suppose that I don’t blame him. The last CBC radio exploration of the industry in the 1980’s was called “The Sultans of Sleaze.”

But that was not my approach because I don’t think it gets any of us very far. For starters, it invests in PR much more power than it may legitimately deserve; but more to the point it assumes an industry operating unto itself. In fact, my own
take is made very clear in the first program, when I declare that “I no longer believe there are heroes and villains in this story, or that PR is pure evil and that journalism is all about telling it like it really is. And if we do live in an age of spin, both journalists and public relations people have to assume some responsibility for taking us there.”

Throughout the series, I tried to expose the flaws of both PR and journalism, and show how together, we are short-changing the public we purport to serve. Mr. Neil might want to have another listen, and this time keep a more open mind. He may well find himself surprised by how much he actually agrees with.