Spin Cycles: A Series About Spin, the Spinners and the Spun. [Radio series.].

Award-winning journalist, broadcaster, and university lecturer Ira Basen has become something of a bête noire to the public relations business. His award-winning CBC series Spin Cycles: A Series About Spin, the Spinners and the Spun, which aired in early 2007, continues to be a reference point for industry angst in part because it sheds some light on the darker side of the communications arts.

Mr. Basen joined CBC Radio in 1984 and has produced or launched a number of stellar radio programs, including Quirks and Quarks, The Inside Track (1985), This Morning (1997), and Workology (2001). His Spin Cycles series is intended to be a critical look at the history and current practice of public relations, or what Mr. Basen characterizes as the “spin” industry. In researching the series, Basen interviews an impressive cast of well-known PR practitioners, journalists, academics, and other industry observers. The series’ scope is admirably sweeping, spanning the original ideas of Edward Bernays, who merged concepts from crowd psychology and psychoanalysis to create an early theory of public relations, to the Bush government’s flagrant manipulation of public opinion in creating the myth of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Certainly much of the history (especially a look at the early history of public relations as practised by Bernays and Ivy Lee), many of the interviews, and certain parts of the analysis should become staples of introductory public relations programs at the undergraduate level. Taking PR agencies to task for astroturfing (a paid public relations campaign which seeks to create the impression it is a grassroots movement) is justified, for example, as is outing the naughty use of video news releases by broadcast journalists who do not reveal that the material has been packaged by a PR firm on behalf of a company or organization. Dissecting the tricks for “earning” media used by marketers is fair game.

Of greatest value in the series is the focus on political “spin.” (In the field of politics at least, the term “spin” is apt.) Basen and his interviewees argue that a contracting news cycle, all-news channels with plenty of dead air to fill, shrink-
ing newsrooms, and writing for the front page rather than for accuracy have changed the relationship between reporters and political spinners.

As former BBC journalist, Nicholas Jones, says in one of the episodes, journalists are no longer “judged on reliability nor on judgment but on the ability to deliver exclusive stories” . . . and, I would add, to deliver those stories quickly and certainly before their rivals, whether corporate or professional. This new Zeitgeist is fertile ground for political spinners who believe—in the peerless words of one who fits the description of “spin master”—what they do is “arrange facts in a certain order so that you are more inclined to believe my version of the truth than my opponent’s.” It is a feeling among journalists that being first is rewarded before being right or shrewd, an ethos in which the “source” is often the politician or party who has “favoured” the reporter with a leaked revelation.

This focus on the media, however, speaks to a central weakness of the series—the assumption that the core business of public relations is the art of stage-managing the media, the conflation at work in conceptualizing “spin” and “messaging” as the same, and the faulty reasoning in assuming that telling a company’s side of the story, if done ethically and transparently, is ipso facto iniquitous.

Stage-managing the media is not what preoccupies public relations professionals today. In fact, it has become increasingly irrelevant what journalists and PR professionals think of each other, because the media institutions have lost what New York University professor Clay Shirky in Here Comes Everybody (2008) calls the institutional and journalistic prerogative to define what is “news.” There are more effective avenues for engaging audiences in conversations about ideas, points of view, or issues than hoping a journalist gets the story right—social networks, for example; or dialogue panels; or co-creative developmental approaches to tackling tough community issues or decisions.

The series also implies that public relations is synonymous with “spin” or “an alternative to outright lies.” My definition of spin is more inclusive of other actors in the tragicomedy of supposed rational public argument: Spin is the wilful distortion of facts and the manipulation of half-truths to create a more persuasive or one-sided story. Looking at spin from this perspective, one is justified in asking who the real spin masters are today. Could they as easily be journalists who select facts to make a more compelling story or advocacy groups (some NGOs among them) who use selective science to defend a case?

Here is an example of spin directly from the series itself: Mr. Basen’s claims that “truth is a word that makes many people in PR uncomfortable.” Is that because we are more comfortable with lying? Who are these “many” anyway? And listen to some of the words used in recounting the apocryphal story of how my company (Hill & Knowlton) apparently caused the Kuwaiti war in the early 1990s: “following standard operating procedure”; “an astroturf organization with fake grassroots”; “secretly paid”; “selling war”; “the whole campaign was a fabrication.”

Public relations practitioners create messages and stories for their companies or clients. “Messaging” is not “spin,” but it is a process of truth telling. Messaging is making a point of view apparent, with simplicity, clarity, and force. It is an element of rhetoric and is the foundation of ordinary discourse. Using it
on behalf of a client to explain—truthfully and openly—a point of view is much less manipulative than juxtaposing a terrifying image with an alarmist headline, a common practice in mainstream news. (Of course, when messages are treated as dogma they cannot help but sound like spin.)

Another example of Spin Cycles spin is a segment on media training. What bothers journalists about media training, according to Basen, is that people are trained not to answer questions but to respond to them, and in the responding bridge to an idea or fact which—at least to the reporter—is not the intent of the question. The sanctity of the reporter’s question, and his or her right to ask it, are of course in the reporter’s (and Basen’s) mind never in doubt. Not answering a question, again in the reporter’s (and Basen’s) mind, makes a response therefore indistinguishable from evasion.

But let’s look at it another way. Reporters write stories. Stories are narratives that provide accounts of events, usually using literary devices to draw out their inherent drama or conflict. The success of a story is not in getting it right but in making it interesting and attracting an audience or readers. This suggests that a journalist’s questions are not without intent. They are meant to compel conflict, to force confession even though guilt may not have been proven, and to contrast points of view, preferably if one side is willing—or caught—expressing it salaciously, combatively, or in absolutes (the approach favoured by many advocacy groups).

In this context, then, what exactly is wrong with someone preparing to tell his or her side of the story? What is wrong with being taught the behaviours used by reporters to coerce someone into saying something damaging, even though the facts might speak otherwise if properly reported? If we accept that most journalism today is not about representing the public interest but about publishing or broadcasting a compelling, even persuasive (yes, reporters have points of view) story, then tutoring someone in how to make known his or her side of a story is nothing more than common sense, even collaboration, but certainly not spin.

In the final episode, Spin Cycles comes close to redeeming itself with a few smart concluding themes. The first is the need for public relations professionals, and many companies, to do some soul-searching about efforts to deny, or support the denial of, the impact of carbon emissions on climate. Basen claims, “Audiences were led to believe there was a meaningful debate (over carbon emissions and climate change) within the scientific community long after there ceased to be one.” Evidence now suggests he is right (see the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, U.K., and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.)

The second is the new place social media holds as a potential replacement for retreating journalistic integrity and independence. I would argue that the legitimate, intelligent, curious, and investigative bloggers may now become the “estate” for asking questions of power. George Pitcher, the author of The Death of Spin (2003) and a central figure in Basen’s series, says to escape spin we need a more vigorous public sphere: Social media may be that sphere.

Despite its strengths, on balance the Spin Cycles series is weaker than it needs to be. It allows prejudice about public relations to get in the way of explor-
ing the complexities of transparency and truth in the information-sharing industries. It assumes a fundamental moral superiority to broadcast and newspaper journalism—supposedly now corrupted by political and business spin—and a basic bankruptcy to the whole concept of public relations as now simply more slick and manipulative. And it looks at the nature of the new online “demos” and the Internet’s “cacophony of participation” with the same unfortunate cynical, even dismissive, tone that it uses in approaching many of the major questions about communication in our age.

Mr. Basen unfortunately missed a remarkable opportunity to rise above prejudice and commonplaces about public relations and dive deeply into its success and failures. As a producer with a broad mandate, sufficient airtime, and one can guess a reasonable budget, Mr. Basen had the scope, critical intelligence, and contacts to produce a series that could have made a thoughtful contribution to the assessment of the dynamics of public communications. Instead, what we have on balance is an over-simplistic mugging of a complex and necessary art.

Editors’ Note

1. John R. MacArthur is the first to have levelled accusations regarding Hill & Knowlton’s (H&K) role in building support for the Gulf War. In his book, Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the 1991 Gulf War (1993), MacArthur claims that H&K rigged testimony in front of the U.S. Congress from a young woman who reportedly witnessed invading Iraqi troops removing newborn Kuwaiti babies from hospital incubators, leaving them to die. The book makes a case that the accusations and “objectivity” of the eyewitness testimony are questionable. MacArthur’s book has been cited more than 120 times, and the case has obtained a mythic status in studies on PR. Although Basen may be guilty of uncritically reproducing the book’s central claims in the Spin Cycles series, it is important to clarify that he is not the source of the accusations himself.

References


