

Political Spin and the Press: A Comparative Analysis of Spin in the U.K. and U.S. Media

Introduction

At the height of the information age, people all over the world are wired together in a web of technology, as news is transmitted instantaneously from every corner of the globe. Few obstacles stand in the way of the modern information-seeker's daily dose of news, from a national daily newspaper's in-depth analysis to debates on a political blog. The ease of getting information would suggest that people should be more knowledgeable participants in governance than ever before. However, the opposite seems to be true. As information has become more accessible, interest in voting has spiraled downward. This research project proposes that a component in the gap between knowledge and information availability is "spin." The research tests whether spin exacerbates the inverse relationship between accessibility to information and participation in governance as indicated by voting behavior. Spin, in this research, is the deliberate manipulation of language and fact to deliver catchy, partly accurate phrases on an issue that stick in the public's mind and substitute for information essential for decision making.

The purpose of this research project is to examine the degree to which the media maintain their independence from government efforts at control. This research project focuses on U.S. presidential press secretaries' use of spin and that of counterparts in the United Kingdom, where I will intern in spring 2006 with a Labour Party member of the U.K. House of Commons. In addition to monitoring U.S. and U.K. press conferences, I will analyze content of press conference reports in major television newscasts and newspapers. The main goal of the analysis will be to detect the degree to which journalists adopt spin language crafted by the nations' leaders and their spokesmen to gain political advantage.

For those subscribing to democratic theory, participation in governance by an informed citizenry is crucial. How, then, does one deal with the fact that, in the United States, the world's

superpower and alleged bastion of democracy, the college-educated electorate is less informed on public affairs than the high-school-educated electorate of the 1950s (Patterson)? Data suggests that the voting public is not well-informed before going to the polls. In addition, many citizens do not make it to the voting booth in the first place. In 1960, 65 percent of adults eligible to vote participated in the presidential election. By 2004, only 42 percent of the population cast ballots in the presidential election; people between the ages of 18-24 had the lowest turnout of all age groups (Patterson).

The voting statistics indicate that political participation is plummeting despite the pervasiveness of news. The swell of political apathy and cynicism that has clouded the American public's psyche since the 1970s has been accompanied by the growth of spin, the slanting of news coverage by spin doctors—press secretaries, politicians, and even reporters themselves—to ensure that an issue is interpreted from a particular point of view¹. Although news networks make millions of dollars per year broadcasting on public airwaves, taxpayers' dollars are being spent to influence the media and electorate² and, in turn, the American people into supporting certain government policies.

Access to accurate and complete information is the fuel of a healthy democracy, according to the World Movement for Democracy. The government's attempt to influence the media with spin has weakened the public's trust and, therefore, weakened willingness to participate in the democratic process. Is American democracy spinning out of control?

The Bush administration has proven to be particularly effective at media relations. President Bush and his press secretaries, Ari Fleischer and Scott McClellan, under the direction of chief adviser

¹ For example, although not a medical term, partial-birth abortion is commonly used in public discussion of the procedure. The term appeared when the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 1995 was introduced in the House of Representative on June 14, 1995. That same year, however, Ohio enacted a law which referred to the procedure as dilation and extraction, which is its actual medical name (Tribe).

² A report from the Government Accountability Office in Oct. 2005 said Department of Education officials were engaging in "covert propaganda" when they used taxpayer money to pay conservative columnist Armstrong Williams to write pieces that supported the Bush administration's agenda.

Karl Rove, have become masters of spinning savory bits of information that are easily digestible for the press and the public alike. Bush's relations with the White House press corps are more contentious than their relations with any other president in recent years, with journalists believing to have been "frozen out when they ask questions that are out of bounds" because they may threaten national security (Rutenburg). Bush's press secretary is expected to stick to well-rehearsed policy talking points intended to be picked up by the mainstream media, rendering the questions he is asked by the press corps almost irrelevant (Rutenburg). Fleischer used a methodical system of calling on reporters that rewarded reporters who wrote stories in support of the administration's agenda with the opportunity to ask questions and leaving out more prominent journalists from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Washington Post*, who may have been more critical of the president's policies. At the same time, taxpayer money spent to advance the administration's policies is being questioned.

Because of their distrust of the American media reports leading up to the Iraq war, some news seekers switched to getting their news from British news sources, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation or *The Guardian* newspaper, believing the British media to provide more accurate, spin-free reporting (Parry)³. However, the Labour Party, headed by Prime Minister Tony Blair, runs a sophisticated media-management machine that has been accused in recent years of perpetuating heavy doses of spin (Stanyer). Concern over growing media manipulation by Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell, who has since resigned, has occurred simultaneously with growing dissatisfaction with political coverage and a significant decline in voter participation in the U.K.'s 2001 elections. According to the *Guardian*, a paper that often backs Blair and his Labour Party, "Too much of what the government is doing fails to make an impact because its words are dismissed as spin." Although the U.K. has been long seen as the beacon of a participatory democracy, with voters streaming to the polls on election day, contrasting dramatically with the American experience, it, too, has begun to suffer declining voter turnout. From 1945 to 1997, voter

³ Half the visitors to the Guardian online edition for the month of January 2003 were Americans, while U.S. online news sources saw a decline in traffic (Kahney).

turnout averaged more than 76 percent, reaching a high of 84 percent in 1950 and a low of 71 percent in 1997, but in 2001 turnout reach an all-time low of 59 percent (Clarke, et al). As participation spiraled downward, Blair resorted to a ramped-up version of spin—a more American spin. The prime minister began to hold U.S.-style televised press conferences so that he and other government ministers could be questioned on the record.

I will compare the amount and nature of spin disseminated in the mainstream media about the war in Iraq in the United States to that of the United Kingdom. Press conferences involving Prime Minister Blair, President Bush, and their press secretaries will be analyzed along with coverage in the major national newspapers to sift the spin from fact based on research and reporting.

Methodology

I have chosen both a time frame and media that will set the parameters for the content analysis. The research will focus on the war in Iraq. Time parameters will be dictated by my time spent studying in London, January to May 2006. I will analyze the more Labour-leaning newspaper, the *Guardian*, the only truly non-aligned newspaper the *Independent*, and the *Daily Telegraph*, a more Conservative paper. I will analyze the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Times* in the U.S. I will analyze transcripts from the prime minister's monthly press conferences, and press conferences held by President Bush. I will use an analysis scheme designed to detect terminology that could be defined as spin and will code media texts for emotionally charged but less than factual words that spin doctors hatch.

I will also compare techniques used by Blair, Bush, and their press secretaries to engage with their press corps and examine how the methods influence the kind of

information disseminated to reporters found in language and emphasis used in the press conferences.

A secondary analysis will entail determining whether a clear pattern occurs in the choice of reporters allowed to question the president and prime minister. A simple count of reporters called on for questions could be a telling detail of who is rewarded with being allowed primetime exposure, suggesting that the journalist or publication is favored. A third analysis will focus on the level of difficulty in the questions posed by these reporters.

The comparative analysis of the conferences and news stories from the U.K. and the U.S. will examine the similarities and differences in the nature and amount of spin in each country's media. This research project is essential to the fields of journalism and political science because it will provide evidence of the prevalence of spin and how that spin affects public opinion and the fact-based education of the electorate.

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