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# Government Media Relations: A 'Spin' Through the Literature

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## **1. Introduction and approach**

Government media relations is deserving of serious study because it sits at the interface between the executive and journalism, two of the fundamental institutions in a modern democratic society. That line of communication is central crucial if citizens are to be kept informed of the workings of government and the machinations of the political system. The Australian High Court underscored its importance in the 1990s when it introduced an 'implied constitutional freedom of communication on matters of politics and government' through a series of decisions (2007, pp. 35-38). It is a communication channel where truth and transparency should be institutionalised. Truthful, accurate and transparent government communications are crucial to an informed citizenry via an effective news media. Walter Lippman identified how important the media were in shaping public opinion (1961). Information access is crucial to the democratic process. Pioneering researcher in the field, Judy VanSlyke Turk, summed it up this way: 'Who has access to information and to what sources of information they have access, seems an important determinant of whose opinion and participation has the potential for influencing organisational life.' (1986, p. 1).

This literature review aims to background and map key themes within the research to date in the field of government media relations (sometimes pejoratively known as 'spin') for the benefit of fellow researchers and to identify opportunities for research to take knowledge beyond that existing body of material. The project received \$4000 in funding from Bond University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences which was used predominantly to pay for research assistance.

A systematic search was conducted across academic databases throughout the humanities and social sciences as well as full-text newspaper databases. Search terms included combinations of the terms media, journalism\*, public relations, PR, persuasion\*, influence, media relations, communication\*, government, politics\*, advertising, publicity, budget, spending, and spin. Secondary sourcing of material was undertaken via the reference lists of sourced articles, offering a longitudinal document search spanning more than four decades.

The review has been divided into the three broad categories of scale, techniques and impact. We begin, though, by introducing some of the most important studies of the field to date. Each will also be referenced later in the review in the relevant sections.

### **1.1 Major studies of government media relations**

The media relations 'industry' within Australian government and politics is a large but under-researched field. Ward has chronicled the growth of the government media relations sector over recent decades and the mechanics of Labor and Coalition government media units and publicity machines. While no certain figure has been put on it, as Ward (2007 pp 8 - 17) and Tiffen (1989) showed, it is a major strategic element of modern government and politics, costing taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars each year. There has been some important research into particular aspects of government media relations in Australia, including Tiffen and Ward as well as Butler (1998) and Ester (2007). There has also been a large amount of commentary and analysis including (Burton, 2007; Hamilton & Maddison, 2007; Tuchman, 1978; Ian Ward, 2002; Ian Ward, 2003) and several substantial overseas studies (Franklin, 2004; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999; VanSlyke Turk, 1986). But no recent research project has been undertaken to discover and theorise upon empirical data on the interface between government and the media in Australia.

While many studies both in Australia and overseas have addressed elements of the relationship between news organisations and government media relations operatives, no single study has covered the topic comprehensively. (Ian Ward, 2003) suggested 'there are few Australian studies that shed any light on an Australian PR state' beyond Terrill (2000) and Tiffen (1999). Nevertheless, Ward observed (p. 38):

... the broad contours of the Australian PR state seem clear enough. At the national level, these include media advisers hired to assist ministers; those working in media units serving the overall government; and then the public affairs sections of public service departments,

whose activities are coordinated by instruments imposing a whole-of-government integration of information disclosure activities. Yet, even though its broad features are apparent, we nonetheless know surprisingly little about the detailed operation of the PR state. As a consequence, there remains a sizeable gap in our understanding of political communication in Australia.

The question of who influences the media in their daily news agenda was the subject of the Australian Broadcasting Authority's Sources of News and Current Affairs study in 2001 (ABA, 2001). While that study canvassed the views of media personnel and audiences on the question of influence and regulatory definitions of 'influence', its terms precluded the study of generic news sources such as emergency services, press releases, political contacts, parliament etc. The study was more concerned with the level of influence of the various media outlets upon each other (p. 77).

Herman and Chomsky (1994) identified journalists' reliance on government sources for a steady, reliable, cost-effective and credible flow of news. They explained: 'The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest'. Media organisations concentrated their resources where there was greater certainty of finding a story: the government, whose news was inexpensive to obtain and credible. Yet the authors cautioned that this particular practice of news-gathering undermined the notions of free press, objectivity and Fourth Estate ideals as it was a means by which government propaganda was effectively disseminated to the public. Numerous others noted political influence on the news agenda including Butler (1998), Fallows (1997), Ward (1995), Fishman (1988), Golding et. al. (1986), Phillipps (2002) and Tuchman (1978).

Researchers from disciplines including sociology, history, politics, communication, media studies and cultural studies have studied government media relations and political communication. They have been influenced by a range of theoretical perspectives, including postmodernist, theories of public sphere, and political economy [see Watts (1997, pp. 24-25) for a useful survey of such approaches]. Others noted political influence on the news agenda (B. Butler, 1998; Fallows, 1997; Fishman, 1988; Golding et al., 1986; Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Tuchman, 1978; Ian Ward, 1995). Ward's (1995) seminal text, *Politics of the Media*, devoted a chapter to 'public relations, politics and the news', citing Australian empirical data from Wilson (1989), a Queensland Government Electoral and Administrative Review Commission report (EARC, 1993), and Tiffen's (1989) landmark *News and Power*. Although he did not set out to measure of government media relations, Tiffen's (1989) interviews with 223 journalists combined with a small content analysis and an analysis of news stories in a 'comparative case study' approach, formed the basis of Australia's first significant research project on the relationship between news and politics.

Many studies both in Australia and overseas have addressed elements of the relationship between news organisations and government media relations staff, including Van Slyke Turk (1986), Butler (1998), Phillipps (2002) and Zawawi (1994), no single study has tackled the topic comprehensively. It is important area for study to ensure that key stakeholders – including the public, journalists, parliamentarians and public relations practitioners – have empirical evidence by which they can compare and discuss this phenomenon and take appropriate decisions.

The most comprehensive and systematic single research project examining government media relations was that conducted by Judy VanSlyke Turk and published in *Journalism Monographs* in December 1986 (Number 100), titled: 'Information Subsidies and Media Content: A Study of Public Relations Influence on the News'. The title suggested this was a broader study than media relations in government, but VanSlyke Turk's project concentrated on the newspaper-related activities of state government public information officers (PIOs) in the US state of Louisiana in 1984. The research team tracked both newspaper content and the content of so-called 'information subsidies' provided by PIOs in six government agencies over an eight week period. Eight daily newspapers from three of the state's largest cities were monitored for the study (p. 5). The study had both qualitative and quantitative elements, with content analyses of the newspaper articles and the 'information subsidies' as well as reflective interviews with reporters and PIOs about their actions. The 'information subsidies' included news releases, copies of agency reports or documents,

internal memoranda and memoranda from PIOs to reporters as well as telephone calls between PIOs and reporters, in-person conversations, press conferences and background briefings. Information logs were kept by the highest ranking PIO in each agency over the two months (p. 10).

The six agencies disseminated 444 information subsidies to the eight newspapers over the eight week period (p. 12). Almost half (215) were news releases, followed by agency-initiated telephone calls (92), journalist-initiated phone calls (71), agency documents (53), press conferences (8) and five instances of in-person contact (p. 13). The newspapers were more likely to use than discard the public relations information provided. They used 225 of the 444 information subsidies (51%) received. Journalists gave 'newsworthiness' as the reason for acceptance or rejection of the material in 81 per cent of cases (p. 23).

The researchers also found the agenda of issues in newspaper stories using information from state agency PIOs reflected the issue agenda and priorities of the agency information subsidies. 'Therefore, it can be concluded that agencies generally are successful in transmitting issue salience as well as raw information when they are successful in gaining use of their subsidies by journalists,' VanSlyke Turk reported (p. 24). They also found agencies for which persuasive models of PR were dominant were less successful than those using non-persuasive tactics in getting their stories published. They used the word 'spin' in making this point.

... There is at least a strong suggestion that straightforward presentation of information – with no organisational 'spin' on it – may be better received by the media than information intended to persuade either media or public to 'buy' an organisation's point of view (p. 24).

They suggested PR practitioners should adopt a public information or 'two-way model of public relations behaviour rather than the self-serving, persuasive press agency/publicity model' for greater effectiveness and that news releases would be more successful if they met journalists' criteria of newsworthiness (p. 25). They found it was the reporters themselves who were the key decision-makers on whether to use the material provided and that those decisions were mainly made on newsworthiness grounds. Editors and publishers were not substantially involved in such decisions (pp. 25-26). While PIOs and journalists agreed on values of newsworthiness, PIOs were sometimes moved to disseminate non-newsworthy information through a motivation of advocacy for their agencies (p. 26)

Journalists still preferred non-PR-generated material. More than half (52 per cent) of the stories they wrote depended on non-PR sources or the journalists' own attendance at an event (p. 27).

It could be that some of the information provided by the public information officers was not used simply because it wasn't reporter-generated information or because it came from a 'flack' perceived as biased, with the newsworthiness of the information actually a secondary consideration (p. 27).

The researchers also drew some conclusions about the media's agenda-setting function and the role of public relations in that function. Almost half of the stories about the agencies contained information from a PR source.

If the public indeed 'learns' not only cognitions but also priorities from the agenda presented by the mass media, as the literature suggests, then it appears that at least some – in this study almost half – of those priorities are being 'set' by public relations sources of information (p. 27).

The rest of the time it could also be sources helping set the agenda, though not the agency PR officers, and the researchers suggested further research into this possibility (p. 28).

*Packaging Politics* (Franklin, 2004) considered the rise of government media relations in British politics. Bob Franklin argued that packaging politics had potentially troublesome implications for the political process in a democracy. He started with government spin doctor Jo Moore's suggestion about September 11, 2001 that 'it's a very good day to bury bad news' to highlight the impact of the news agenda on political decision-making and the public's perceptions of governments and politics. Franklin used interviews with journalists and politicians and drew upon academic research and political marketing data to track the changes in the politics-media dynamic over the course of the post-1997 New Labour government.

In Australia, Barbara-Ann Butler (1998) covered much more than government media relations, but included substantial sections dealing with it. She recorded the four evening free-to-air news bulletins in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne during the second week of November 1991 during parliamentary sittings and again during the second last week of the 1993 federal election campaign. She also gathered metropolitan daily newspapers from the same three cities and the national daily *The Australian* for the same two weeks. The main aim was to identify the production origins of the television news stories. Other sources included media releases and bulletin rundowns. Butler found that during the parliamentary sitting period (1991) journalists gained most of their material from official proceedings and press releases, followed by press conferences and other staged events. However, during the campaign period (1993) the prime source of news was other staged events, followed by press releases and press conferences.

She also analysed the categories of the initiators of the political material across federal, state and local government and opposition sources (p. 36). Like VanSlyke Turk (1986), she found journalists themselves had 'enormous power to influence individual perceptions of the significance of particular issues'. Butler's study was a broader study of news agendas and ownership policies and developed an argument that concentration of media ownership risked skewing public information about politics (p. 41). She found public relations practitioners inside and outside government were the primary gatherers of political news for television organisations in Australia, 'information subsidies that offset the high costs of news production' (p. 41).

Richard Phillipps' unpublished PhD thesis in 2002, 'Media Advisers: shadow players in political communication', explored the role of ministers' media advisers and their opposition counterparts, and the back-room staff often labelled spin-doctors or minders. Surveys and 65 qualitative interviews in Brisbane, Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth looked at all aspects of their work, including their relationships with their political bosses and the media; how they promoted good news and contained bad news; perceptions of the media and of journalists' influence on political conflict; the ethics of media packaging, plus ethical dilemmas media advisers faced, and the largely unwritten rules under which they operated. The thesis also examined cases where the advisers' media strategies appeared to work and others where they backfired badly. Phillipps looked at controversies where advisers lost their jobs, even if the main fault was not necessarily theirs. Phillipps contended that rather than improving their policies and practices to earn a better reputation, governments had been accused of emulating large corporations in using large numbers of public relations tacticians to counter any negative public perceptions. The advisers admitted to withholding information that did not suit their purposes, especially where it was unlikely that the damaging information would surface later on. If it did come to light the spin doctors hoped to be able to release the bad news at a time when other important news was breaking on the world or local scene, so the story would be 'buried' (R. Phillipps, 2002).

Several authors have undertaken commentary and analysis on government media relations as part of a larger study of either politics (Hamilton & Maddison, 2007) or the public relations industry (Burton, 2007), while some, such as Errington and Miragliotta (2007) have discussed it as part of a textbook introduction to the media and politics. Each of these is an Australian book and each is an important contribution to the field of commentary, analysis and interpretation, but again none has taken on the methodological challenges of quantifying and describing the government media relations enterprise in a comprehensive empirical, research-based sense.

Burton's *Inside Spin* (2007) featured chapters titled 'Governing with Spin', detailing the multi-million dollar enterprise of government media relations, and 'It Takes Two to Tango', exposing the close relationship between PR operatives and journalists. Burton's critique of government media relations was all the more disturbing because he demonstrated the spin assault was not isolated to a particular political party or level of government. He detailed one of the most recent government PR devices – the tactic of commissioning reality television programming that portrayed the particular state or federal entity in a positive light, like the Customs Service's collaboration with the '*Border Security*' series. He also traced the Howard Government's attempts to handle controversial issues over recent years, including the offering tenders to PR companies to sell the dumping of nuclear

waste and genetic engineering through to the management of a former governor-general's failure to show compassion for a sexual assault victim. Burton emphasised the high dependence of journalists on press releases, video news releases and staged media events, and showed how they swallowed the line of covert media campaigns through insufficient inquiry. These are issues of government media relations technique taken up later in this review.

Hamilton and Maddison's *Silencing Dissent* was much more political in its ambit and tone. The chapter dealing with the media was written by Queensland academic and journalist Helen Ester. She used the example of Federal Police raids on the offices of the *National Indigenous Times* newspaper in 2004 to argue that the Australian government had worked actively to restrict the flow of information to the media. Ester's research showed the Howard Government's tough measures on clamping down on public service leaks had the desired effect: bureaucrats were intimidated and the information flow to political reporters slowed to a trickle. She noted that in 2005 the government had spent more than \$200,000 chasing leaks within the federal public service. The result was that off-the-record briefings had become rare and the leakage of government documents had dried up. Senior political journalists expressed their concern to Ester in one-on-one interviews. 'Their perspectives show that the last decade has seen an increased focus on strategies to block and control access to information flows from the gaze and analysis of the critical expertise of journalists in the parliamentary round,' she concluded. The chapter has high merit as a case study of how one government implemented a successful media management strategy to the ultimate detriment of core democratic values. It might have paid more attention to the fact that in the modern era governments of all political persuasions engaged in such techniques as has been seen in the earliest months of the Rudd Labor government.

The latest and most up-to-date investigation into the state of free speech in Australia is contained in the *Report of the Independent Audit into the State of Free Speech in Australia* (2007). This report was prepared by a group headed by former New South Wales ombudsman Irene Moss for the media consortium pressure group *Australia's Right to Know*. The detailed report was released at the end of October, 2007, three weeks before election day, in an obvious attempt to make free speech an election issue. The report said free speech and media freedom in Australia was being whittled away by 'gradual and sometimes almost imperceptible degrees' (covering letter accompanying Moss, 2007). The report identified 500 different pieces of state and federal legislation with specific secrecy provisions blocking public access to information (Bennett, 2007). The 316-page, nine chapter report covered the state of free speech in Australia, access to information, protecting whistleblowers and the need for improved shield laws, freedom of information (FoI) shortcomings, the relatively-new terrorism and sedition regulations, problems with the justice system [1000 suppression orders in place at the time the report was written] (Bennett, 2007), and issues surrounding privacy and defamation. The report contained many instances of how the Howard government controlled the release of political information and the actions of the government's 'spin doctors'. The report was a combination of literature review and solicited interviews and further highlighted the need for a systematic collection of information and theory-building on the issue.

Further detail is contained under **2.1 Government policy in controlling media** below.

## **1.2 Scale of government media relations**

It can be safely assumed that Australian governments at all levels spend millions of dollars annually trying to manage media coverage of their activities. Errington and Miragliotta have claimed that more than 4000 journalists worked for Australia's state and federal governments (2007, p. 81). This was far more than the number working for the largest media employer in Australia – the ABC – with just 700 journalists (ABC, 2005). At an average salary of, say, \$60,000 per annum, that amounted to \$240 million in government expenditure on media relations salaries alone. As it noted later, many senior spin doctors earned much more. But the figure of 4000 government journalists was itself just speculative. It was an estimate earlier used by Ward (2003) and attributed to an article by a newspaper reporter (Chulov, 2002), who in turn was relying on a guesstimate of a union official. Some quasi-governmental research into the area has been undertaken, looking at numbers

of staffers, rather than volume of output or uptake of media relations material (EARC, 1993). Nevertheless, Ward (2007, p. 18) lamented the lack of such research in Young (2007). There is so little data on the issue in Australia that academics have grasped at almost anything. For example, Zawawi (1994) traced the public relations sources of articles published in metropolitan newspapers, and her work was cited widely as an 'unpublished PhD thesis', yet the thesis had neither been completed nor examined.

Given the paucity of data, a broad view of the 'scale' of government media relations has been adopted in the examination of the literature. The term 'scale' is taken to apply to basic reference points required of anyone studying the topic, including: definitional material; historical perspectives; attempts at quantifying the government media relations enterprise both in its own right and in comparison with the broader public relations sector and other government functions; and descriptive material on the identities and roles of practitioners in the field.

### **1.3 Media relations in communication theory**

Academic theorists about media relations included Robin Brown from the University of Leeds who developed a theory of political spin in a conference paper (2003). He argued spin needed to be understood as a form of interaction between press officers and journalists governed by a set of mutually accepted rules and a proactive approach to political relations that seeks to maximise favourable coverage (2003, p. 2). He suggested it could be characterised by a number of techniques (discussed in Section 2 of this literature review) and the organisational forms necessary to implement them. At its most basic it involved the supply of information calculated to place the supplying organisation in the most positive light and their opponent in the most negative possible. He also pointed to the systematic deployment of positive (privileged access to information) and negative sanctions (denial of access, bullying, systematic complaints) to encourage positive coverage (p. 3).

Louw (2005, pp. 76-77) invoked 'Spiral of Silence' theory to explain how spin doctors operate, proposing was a 'sensible centre' into which most stories fell. People and ideas threatening to the 'sensible centre' were either not reported, or reported with a sneer so audiences were aware that these ideas were extreme and unacceptable. So commercial media steered the public to the so-called 'sensible centre' and what became popular stories with journalists deciding what will be popular. The theory would have it that journalists effectively constructed 'public opinion' by eliminating views and sources deemed to be out of step with their definition of what the average reader, listener or viewer wanted (pp. 76-77). From the spin doctors' view, once they identified the 'sensible centre' for a particular news organisation or the media in general, they could 'spin' stories to fit the story-lines used by a particular organisation. 'For competent spin doctors, journalists (and their preferred news frames) should be transparent, and hence easy to exploit', he wrote (p. 77).

The activities of spin doctors led to the creation of a new concept of political communication theory called 'metacommunication', expounded by Esser, Reinemann and Fan in their seminal paper on spin doctors in the US, Great Britain and Germany (2001). They said the term 'describes a new, third stage in election coverage after issue and strategy coverage; reflects the mass media's new role as a political institution in the third age of political communication; and can be seen as the news media's response to a new, third force in news making: professional political PR' (2001, p. 16). They defined it as the news media's self-referential reflections on the interplay between political public relations and political journalism; in other words, the media's reporting on their own involvement in politics. Esser later teamed with Paul D'Angelo to compare metacoverage in the 2000 US Presidential, 2001 British general and 2002 German general elections (2006). They identified trends in what they called 'mediatisation' of politics in which 'candidates are chosen on the basis of their telegenic appeal, media professionals are hired to produce campaign materials and to manage how the media portray their candidates, and the mass media are moving towards centre stage in campaigns' (p. 45). The latter comment referred to the fact that more and more stories were being written about the mass media and their role in the campaigns. A clue to the extent of spin doctoring in the US was shown by the comparative statistics cited by Esser and D'Angelo that a



total of 26 consultant firms worked for the Bush campaign and 21 for the Gore campaigns, while the German campaigns of Stoiber and Schroeder and the British campaigns of Hague and Blair employed a maximum of three external agencies for advertising, polling and media relations (p. 48). The same imbalance was shown in the respective advertising budgets of the various candidates (p. 49). Their comparative survey found, as would be expected, there was more metacoverage in the US than in either Germany or Great Britain.

An earlier study of meta-coverage was research by Kevin Keenan in the mid-1990s which looked at the coverage of public relations in the evening news bulletins of the three major American TV networks over a 16-year period from 1980 (1996). He found 79 stories – 77 mentioning ‘public relations’ and two using the term ‘PR’ as an abbreviation for public relations (1996, p. 219). (An apparent shortcoming of the study was the fact that Keenan only searched for these terms, not other expressions like ‘media relations’ or ‘spin’, the latter of which was gaining currency over that period.) A total of 67 of the stories dealt with the ‘practice’ of public relations involving a strategy, tactic or outcome on the part of the particular user. Relevant to this study was the fact that the most common users of public relations in these US network stories were foreign governments (17) and US politicians (16) (Keenan, 1996, p. 220). In the 1980s there were only 16 stories mentioning PR, whereas the other 63 stories occurred in the last third of the survey period – from 1990. Two of the years (1991 and 1993) saw 15 references each, almost as many as the entire previous decade (p. 220). Of the 67 stories dealing with PR practice, almost half (31) were designed to generate positive media coverage or offset negative coverage (p. 224). Keenan coded the stories as seven with a positive tone, 29 negative (giving a negative to positive ratio of about four to one) and 43 neutral (p. 225).

In Australia, metacoverage seemed to be limited to certain aspects of government media relations. While the literature demonstrated an academic fascination with the cost and extent of government ‘spin’, most Australian newspapers only took their respective state governments (and sometimes the federal government) to task from time to time about the activities of their media advisers (Das, 2005; Free people must be allowed a free press - editorial," 2007; Higgins, 2007; Johnstone, 2003; Maclean, 2004; Penberthy, 2003; Raymond, 2005; Smithson, 2005; Sally Young, 2007). But in most cases it was more a lament on the activities of the ‘spin doctors’ in limiting, and in some cases preventing, the press from gaining the information they wanted rather than a serious and detailed attempt to come to terms with the activities and cost of spin in the Australian political landscape.

#### **1.4 Definitional material**

Much of the work this century has used the sometimes emotive term ‘spin’ to describe government media relations, with quite a variety of interpretations. Andrews (2006) argued the term had lost meaning in political communication through overuse (p. 31), while Stanton (2007), in a key text on the topic of media relations, dismissed the word ‘spin-doctor’ as simply ‘an interesting name for a public relations practitioner’ (p. 4). Others have been more critical in their definitions of ‘spin’. Brown (2003) positioned spin in the political context by describing it as ‘a systematic and proactive approach to political media relations that seeks to maximise favourable coverage’ (p. 2). Further, he suggested it could be best understood as ‘an approach to politics that defines presentation as a central element of political life’ (p.3). Gaber (2000) quoted the jaded view of the former director of communications with the British Labour Party, Joy Johnson:

Political spin can be characterised as either (a) malign and dealing in deceit or (b) benign by throwing morsels to the lobby. It was born with the end of ideas. Politicians hold the belief that what happens in the political world does not matter – only perceptions matter. They behave as if politics were not about objective reality but virtual reality and therefore not surprisingly they rely on the doctors of spin.

Veteran political journalist Michelle Grattan (1998) described ‘spin’ as ‘the highly professional selling of the political message that involves maximum management and manipulation of the media’ (p. 34). Andrews (2006) also suggested the term ‘has become a euphemism for deceit and

manipulation' (p. 32) and has even been generalised to be a synonym for propaganda. Jaensch (2005) saw spin as an attempt to convert a political negative into a positive.

While the term 'spin' has given headline writers the world over plenty of material to work with, American journalism academics Randy Sumpter and James Tankard cited William Safire writing in *The New York Times* in 1986 as suggesting the term 'spin' derived from the slang of the verb 'to spin' meaning to deceive or 'spin a yarn'. Safire and others drew the obvious connection with sporting terminology, in the American context of putting a spin on a billiard ball, a tennis ball or a baseball to make it go in a certain direction (cited in Sumpter & Tankard, 1994, p. 20). Another writing in the *NYT* six years later, Michael Specter, built on the sports analogy in true David Beckham style when he suggested that spin in the political arena was 'the blatant art of bending the truth' (cited in Sumpter & Tankard, 1994, p. 20). The rich history of spin in Australia's favourite summer sport, cricket, and the dominance in the Nineties and early part of this century of Shane Warne gave South Australian opposition politician Terry Stephens too good an opportunity to miss in early 2007 (just after Warne had retired from international cricket) when he declared that the Rann State Government 'flew in Shane Warne to spin this one' referring to a long-awaited mental health report (Shepherd, 2007).

Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary Online defined 'spin' as a noun as 'said of information, a news report, etc, especially that of a political nature: a favourable bias'. As a verb it went further and defines it as 'to tell (lies) • *spun a complex web of lies*' (Chambers, 1996).

Andrews (2006) suggested the emergence of the word 'spin' captured a mood in culture and politics (p. 32) which was first used in Saul Bellow's 1977 Jefferson lecture where he spoke of the presidency being captured 'with the aid of spin doctors' (p. 33). However, he traced its broader usage to 1984 in the *New York Times* and then in the UK from 1988. He cited several academic and newspaper accounts to support his claim. The meaning of the term had broadened from a very specific usage in the late 1980s where political operatives emerged after an event such as a debate to attempt to put a positive gloss on their candidate's performance (p. 34). By the 1992 US presidential campaign 'spin' had become institutionalised, Andrews (2006, p. 34) suggested. In fact, by the new millennium media relations had become so integral a part of the process that it could no longer be separated from policymaking (Esser et al., 2001).

Louw (2005) described a 'spin industry' as consisting of 'spin-doctors, minders, plus specialists in crafting visual-media appearances and advertising' (p. 145). Researchers have devoted considerable energy to defining the terms used to describe some of the key personnel involved in government media relations and to describing the role each plays in the process. (Stanton, 2007) distinguished the functions of politics and government and the different roles of media relations practitioners in the processes: 'Within politics they are called campaign directors. Within government, they become media and policy advisers (p. 140).'

Andrews (2006) even identified instances where government community service advertising campaigns on drink-driving and Royal Navy recruitment advertising were described as 'spin', demonstrating the breadth of usage in some circles.

Kinsley (2007) suggested that while spin was often associated with falsehood, more accurately it was indifference to the truth. A politician engaged in spin is saying what he or she wishes were true, and sometimes, by coincidence, it is. Kinsley took it further and suggested that spin sometimes broke down in the form of a 'gaffe'. This was 'when a politician tells the truth – or more precisely, when he or she accidentally reveals something truthful about what is going on in his or her head.'

Franklin (2004, p. 3) described the phenomenon as 'the packaging of politics'.

Louw (2005) resorted to the 'spin' word in his definition of the broader term 'political PR' when he stated it 'involves a multi-pronged set of strategies and tactics geared towards putting a positive spin on the politician one works for and a negative spin on the opposition.' (p. 163).

Former journalism educator and more recently Welsh politician, Leighton Andrews, maintained that in the 1990s and the first part of this century, 'spin' had come to define both the process of political communication and the practice of public relations itself. Where once it was simply one tactic in an election campaign, he maintained it had evolved to embrace the whole process of

political communication, not only between election campaigners and the media, but also between the government and the people, or between a public relations professional in any field, and his or her target publics (Andrews, 2006, p. 31). He said spin had become a euphemism for deceit, manipulation and propaganda and quoted Pitcher who described it as ‘anything of which one disapproves’ (cited in Andrews, 2006, p. 32).

Terms associated with media relations in government have also been defined in the literature. Former senior European Union bureaucrat and Hungarian newspaper editor, Bart Edes, listed among the official titles given to government media relations employees: government information officers, spokespersons, press officers, press attaches, public affairs officers and public information officers (2000, p. 455). Phillipps added more descriptions to the media adviser lexicon – variously calling them media or press secretaries, government spokespersons, flacks, minders and gatekeepers (2002). Noting that more than half the 71 media advisers interviewed in his research had come from journalism, he added: ‘now as gamekeepers they were willing to concede a few birds to the opposition’ (2002, p. 220). They saw their role as promoting good news and containing the bad and Phillipps drew on a number of Australian examples to illustrate his point (2002, pp. 118-128). Louw cast the net even wider, adding to those involved in what he called the ‘spin industry’ (and not already mentioned): advertising consultants, public opinion pollsters, make up artists and speechwriters (2005, p. 298). The breadth of the definition was at serious risk of losing meaning.

Government media practitioners were drawn from different backgrounds, according to the literature. Some were seconded from government departments where they were permanent employees, while others came from the corporate public relations sphere or, as noted, from journalism. According to Stanton, they all operated at a number of levels within politics and government. Within the corporate sphere they were usually referred to as corporate communicators or public affairs managers. Within politics they were called campaign managers, and within government they became media and policy advisers (Stanton, 2007, p. 140). Within government their role was to build and maintain a relationship with specific reporters, journalists and editors and to field calls from the media at all hours of the day and night (p. 144).

In the United States, their role within government was becoming increasingly important. Povich found in the mid-1990s that while previously the press secretary (as they were known then) usually ranked fifth behind other staff in the *Congressional Staff Directory*, the 1996 *Directory* showed many ranked number two or three in the office. Among Senators’ staff, 33 ranked that high, with another 17 ranked at number four. Among Congress members, many were ranked second in the office and in some cases also carried the title of Administrative Assistant, meaning they were the number one members of the Congress person’s staff (Povich, 1996, p. 43).

In Australia, ‘press secretary’ as the political job description has long been replaced by the term ‘media adviser’ in recognition that broadcast media (radio and TV, and lately the internet and sites like MySpace and YouTube) had become the major channels of political communication and to flag the fact that they required a different set of skills from the press secretaries of yesteryear. While in the past they routinely prepared news releases, dealt with inquiries from journalists, planned doorstep interviews and other ‘media events’ as well as monitored media coverage, with the rising importance of the broadcast media, advisers were being increasingly drawn into providing strategic advice on how to ‘manage’ political news (Ian Ward, 2003, p. 29). Australian media advisers now occupied a key role between ministers, government departments and the media and in many cases had ‘overall responsibility for portraying the government and its actions in the best possible light’ (Ian Ward, p. 30).

Chambers’ *21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary Online* defined ‘spin doctor’ as ‘someone, especially in politics, who tries to influence public opinion by putting a favourable bias on information when it is presented to the public or to the media’ (Chambers, 1996). Esser, Reinemann and Fan (2001) traced the etymology of ‘spin-doctoring’ and describe it as follows:

Spin-doctoring is an unscientific neologism coined by journalists to describe the complex process of intensifying political PR and political marketing. Spin doctoring is neither a neutral scientific concept (such as communication) or the self-labelling of a branch (such as public

relations); rather, it is a biased and negatively rated neologism of journalists to discredit the work of political PR experts [eg., as media manipulators] (p. 26).

They proceeded to address the context in which the term was used, which they called a one-sided and problematic sense whenever it served to discredit the legitimate interest of politicians, parties and governments in asserting themselves against an autonomous and powerful journalism that pursued an agenda of its own and whose mechanisms and motives were not always exclusively oriented towards the public welfare (p. 26). Esser et al also (2001) pointed out that the media themselves pursued self-interests and that political PR operatives provided information essential to the media performing their public task.

Esser et al (2001) explained that the term 'spin-doctor' had shifted from being used to describe top political advisers to being used indiscriminately to apply to the gamut of PR officials and campaign staff (p. 27). For their own study they gave three broad groupings of the occupational types covered by the term spin-doctor:

- professional political consultants as they are now paramount in the United States;
- media and PR experts who are hired for their media marketing knowledge but do not have a political background; and
- experienced party politicians who have built up a special knowledge of campaigning.

The term 'spin doctor' is emotionally charged and subject to debate. Most public relations practitioners would distance themselves from the activities of the political 'spin doctors'. One of the 'fathers' of public relations in the US, Edward Bernays, criticised political operatives and lobbyists as not really practising public relations (cited in Sumpter & Tankard, 1994, p. 23). Sumpter and Tankard said the spin doctor or 'spin control model' differed in a number of areas from the traditional public relations model, 'including goals, media used, typical clients, common tools, communication techniques, orientations to the public, breadth of appeal, approaches to ethics, and concern with self-image' (p. 23).

Esser et. al. defined a spin doctor as a 'manipulator', 'conspirator', and 'propagandist' (2000, p. 213). A few paragraphs later they gave German definitions of the role, roughly translated as 'string-puller', 'insinuator', 'reality-maker', 'wonder doctor' and 'election campaign magician' (p. 214). They also added a variation to the term, noting that a big danger for spin doctors was 'over spin', giving journalists cause to reflect critically on any exaggerated attempts of spin doctors to control the release of information on an issue or event (p. 217). In another article published a year later, the same authors noted that the term spin doctor was no longer confined to a few top advisers, but was increasingly being used to represent any kind of campaign operative (2001, p. 27).

Corner and Pels defined spin doctors as the 'equivalent of PR people in film and record companies, managing the image of, and access to, their stars (2003, p. 92). *New York Times* reporter Michael Specter had a less than flattering description of spin doctors, calling them 'political henchmen, the minders and puppeteers who make their living by calling the Titanic the Love Boat' (cited in Sumpter & Tankard, 1994, p. 22).

So who are the political spin doctors? Phillipps found that more than half those surveyed in his PhD research in Australia had previously been journalists (R. Phillipps, 2002, p. 32). While it is a rapidly growing occupation, Phillipps decided it remained an unusual one, without a professional entry path or clearly defined career structure. While duties may vary widely, the only common theme was the obligation to look after the media relations of their politician (R. Phillipps, 2002, p. 31). He also found that although the great majority found the work rewarding, there was a very high turnover, particularly for ministerial media advisers. When the Minister lost power, so did they, and, despite the rewards, many found the work exhausting and said it interfered too much with family and personal life (R. Phillipps, 2002, pp. 31-32). Adelaide-based political journalist Craig Bildstien said their creed was simply to 'promote and protect your minister' (Bildstien, 2005).

PR academic Richard Stanton labelled the role as being to 'develop campaigns and strategies for candidates to influence and persuade two primary stakeholders: the media and constituent voters'

(2007, p. 139). He said a ministerial media adviser's job was to build and maintain a relationship with specific reporters, journalists and editors and to field calls from the media at all hours of the day and night.

In chapter 3 of his PhD thesis, partially titled 'A Janus-faced job', Phillipps noted media advisers had to look both ways in their role as ministers' offsideers – outwards to the media and inwards to their employers, the government, the minister and political leader – but also to their immediate entourage, plus their counterparts in the public service, the departmental public relations and liaison officers (2002, p. 82).

Retired army officer and former Australian of the year, Major-General Alan Stretton, told a parliamentary inquiry in Canberra in 2003 that he believed political staff had gone beyond their original role of giving advice and personal assistance to ministers and they would support their minister 'at all costs, including probably, the cost of truth' (cited by James, 2003). Stretton quoted then Clerk of the Australian Senate, Harry Evans, as saying the spin doctors 'make decisions purportedly on behalf of ministers, give directions to departments, control access to their ministers, determine what information reaches their minister, including information from the minister's own department, and they manage the media' (cited in James, 2003).

Former press secretary from the Bjelke Peterson era in Queensland, John Phelan, said the role is to 'accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative' (cited in Grundy, 1993, p. 292).

Robin Brown from the University of Leeds saw two of the basic tasks of the spin doctor as media monitoring – what was said – and rebuttal – why our opponents were wrong (2003, p. 9). Brown also identified a paradox in the rise of spin or media management – it became more essential as it became harder to make it work (2003, p. 8).

It is important to make the distinction between media relations practitioners in the public service – working for government departments - and those who are political appointees. The role of the former was to inform the public, through the media and other channels, of 'how' government policy was being introduced, not 'why'. The latter aimed at keeping his or her political master in power or, if in opposition, helping them to gain power. Nevertheless, like many aspects of the Westminster system, such distinctions have become blurred in recent years as incumbent governments seek to politicise the media message of their respective departments, a phenomenon backgrounded further later. Bert Edes gives a useful background on the traditional role of government information officers (GIOs) in Europe, identifying among their roles as monitoring media coverage, briefing and advising political officials, managing media relations, informing the public directly, sharing information across the administration, formulating communication strategies and campaigns and researching and assessing public opinion (2000).

In a special spin section in issue 47 of the *Walkley Magazine*, academic Anne Tiernan suggested the system of advice and support for Australian ministers had been reshaped by the demands of the 24-hour news cycle (2007). On the one hand was the permanent and supposedly impartial public service and on the other the minister's non-permanent and explicitly partisan personal staff. In theory, Tiernan noted a 'concern that the media-conscious, politically focused advice offered by staff, who work in close proximity to ministers, has supplanted the more policy focused advice of departmental officials' (2007). She asked whether, while much was made of politicians' obsession with spin and media control, shouldn't journalists and media organisations share some of the blame for the nature of the media / politics interface?

There was a gender imbalance among the ranks of Australian ministerial minders from at least the mid-1990s. Phillipps' PhD notes that in Paul Keating's 1995 government, the numbers of male and female advisers were roughly equal (53.3 per cent to 46.7 per cent respectively), but in the following three Howard Governments males dominated (R. Phillipps, 2002, p. 284). In the first Howard government males only outnumbered their female counterparts two to one, but in the following two Howard governments it averaged three to one. At a state level, in the Labor Carr (NSW) and Liberal Kennett (Victorian) governments, ministerial media advisers reflected a similar trend, with male advisers in New South Wales outnumbering females two to one, and in Victoria three to one (R. Phillipps, 2002, p. 285).

## 1.5 History of government media relations

### 1.5.1 General and US

Media relations is generally accepted as a sub-category of the broader field of public relations, so it is important to consider, albeit briefly, its parentage. *PR: A Social History of Spin* (Ewen, 1996) presented a useful history of the development of public relations through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Stuart Ewen, we live in an age of ‘virtual factuality,’ an Age of Public Relations in which the construction of ‘reality’ has become a diagnostic feature of life. Examining the evolution of public relations and the relentless filtration of our mental environment, he asked the bedevilling question: ‘Is there any reality any more, save the reality of public relations?’ A useful introduction telling of the author’s encounter with the so-called ‘father’ of PR, Edward L. Bernays, can be found at <http://home.bway.net/drstu/chapter.html>

To follow the public relations lineage, particularly in the government context, it is important to note that Bernays himself outlined many of his own views on public persuasion and the use of psychology in his 1928 book *Propaganda* (Bernays & Miller, 2005). There, he coined the term ‘public relations’ to replace the existing expression ‘propaganda’, to broaden its usage beyond purely government manipulation of public opinion, mainly in a wartime atmosphere. Bernays wrote the prophetic words:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country (p. 37).

Bernays’ words underscore the importance of the study of government media relations as a direct descendant of propaganda (and sometimes barely distinguishable from it) which carried a negative meaning after its use by the likes of Joseph Goebbels in the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s, but as Mark Crispin Miller noted in his introduction to the reprint of Bernays’ *Propaganda* in 2005, the book itself was Bernays’ ‘effort to redeem the word’ as early as 1928 (p. 15). In the US, laws dating back to 1913 precluded spending taxpayers’ money ‘to pay a publicity expert’. In addition, appropriation bills include warnings against unauthorised spending for ‘publicity or propaganda purposes’. But as Greve has noted, there is no government or judicial agency that either monitors it or enforces the prohibition (2005, p. 12) or, as VanSlyke Turk and Burton suggest, media relations activities are conducted ‘under some guise or disguise so that they’re not labelled as such’ (Van Slyke Turk & Franklin, 1987, p. 31).

Both Miller (Bernays & Miller, 2005, pp. 9-12) and Bernays himself (pp. 48-50) traced the etymology of the word, and Bernays provided the genetic link between the two in this telling paragraph:

New activities call for new nomenclature. The propagandist who specialises in interpreting enterprises and ideas to the public, and in interpreting the public to promulgators of new enterprises and ideas, has come to be known by the name of ‘public relations counsel’ (p. 63).

As there was a lineage from propaganda to public relations, there was also a 1980s transformation to the phenomenon known as ‘spin’ and defined in section 1.4 above. Eric Louw claimed the term ‘spin doctor’ was born in the US with reference to Ronald Reagan’s media team in a *New York Times* editorial on October 21, 1984 (2005, p. 297). He put the rise of the ‘spin doctor’ (he called it the ‘PR-isation’ of the political process) down to several factors: power shifting away from party bosses and hacks towards consultants and media advisers; political leaders requiring different attributes to be selected as candidates; and public relations consultants learning how to systematically mobilise popular culture to reach voters. He noted, though, that PR-isation had made politics a very expensive business because of the cost of the spin industry.

Howard Kurtz (1998) linked the terms ‘propaganda’ and ‘spin’ in the title of his book exposing the media relations operations of the Clinton administration: *Spin Cycle. Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine*, although he appeared to use the terms interchangeably because the word

propaganda did not rate an entry in his index (p. 321). Kurtz did, however, provide an excellent potted summary of post-Depression US presidents and their media relations strategies, including:

- Franklin D. Roosevelt who won over reporters at his first news conference in 1933 with a system of ‘backgrounding’ and ‘off-the-record’ information, so much so that for the 12 and a half years of his presidency none of them told their audiences he was wheelchair-bound;
- John F. Kennedy who pioneered the practice of live televised press conferences;
- Lyndon Johnson who hosted key publishers and anchors to intimate dinners at his Texas ranch; and
- Richard Nixon who targeted certain journalists for wire taps and tax audits as combat strategies against the media (pp. xx – xxi).

William Rivers, writing in 1971, noted that the US Government spent about \$US400 million on public relations and public information at that time (1971, p. 49). But he also detailed some of the ‘hard sell’ of previous U.S. administrations, like the ‘War on Poverty’ campaign of the Johnson Administration (pp. 50-51), the battle cry of ‘Full disclosure with Minimum delay’ that was later characterised as ‘minimum disclosure with maximum delay’ (pp. 54-55), and Vietnam War examples of misinformation (pp. 60-61).

Louw said Bill Clinton was the ‘model telegenic celebrity politician because of his gift for television performances and ability to follow spin-doctored scripts in crisis situations’ but there was also an impressive PR machine supporting him (2005, p. 161). Among the techniques they employed were twice-daily ‘war room’ meetings; a ‘rapid response strategy’; all involved in the Executive branch were to project a coordinated public profile; Clinton would not appear on TV until his team had negotiated with producers on which topics would be discussed and which disallowed; the use of targeted local media releases; the use of video news packages distributed by satellite; using the Internet to allow people to contact the White House by email; and keeping the PR team on a ‘permanent campaign footing’ (2005, p. 162). Louw said PR-ised politics came of age during Clinton’s term of office with both sides playing the same game: trying to put a positive spin on their own activities and a negative spin on the opposition; trying to undermine the opposition with ‘dirty tricks’ and using spin techniques to undo the damage wrought by dirty tricks directed at them (2005, p. 162).

So successful has the spin machine been in the US in recent times that the London *Guardian*’s Matthew Engel lamented in early 2003 that ‘the press have now become the president’s men’ (2003). This was, of course, post September 11, during the War against Terror and with the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq and before Hurricane Katrina. He cited Watergate hero Bob Woodward who, while still on the staff of the *Washington Post*, ‘functions as a semi-official court stenographer to the Bush White House’ (Engel, 2003). He saved his most biting criticism of the media (and obvious grudging praise of the White House) when he commented: ‘The supposedly liberal American press has become a dog that never bites, hardly barks but really loves rolling over and having its tummy tickled’ (2003). He said reporters in Washington at the time were kept in line with the well used political adviser’s threat of ‘annoy us, and your stories dry up’.

More recently, a senior contributor to *American Journalism Review*, Sherry Ricchiardi, took a critical look at how the media was covering the Bush Administration’s attacks on Iran after what was seen as its lap-dog approach in the run-up to the Iraq conflict. It should be mentioned here, though, that the American media, in particular the broadcast outlets, was given credit by none other than the BBC for its aggressive approach to the Bush Administration after the debacle of the government’s reaction to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Wells, 2005). But in her *AJR* article, Ricchiardi noted that only a handful of media organisations, most notably Knight Ridder, consistently challenged the conventional wisdom that was pushing America to war in 2003 (2008). What were seen as shortcomings on the part of the American media were no doubt accepted with glee by the Bush Administration’s media office. She quoted one correspondent as saying that stories on Iran were being treated with far more care in 2008 than was the case with stories about pre-war Iraq (Ricchiardi, 2008).

A more serious critique of the media management of the George W. Bush Administration was given by David Dudge from the International Press Institute, in *Casualty of War: The Bush Administration's assault of a free press*. He documented a number of disturbing incidents post 9/11 of attempted press censorship and chronicled the rising tension between the U.S. government and journalists (2004).

### 1.5.2 UK and Europe

As Franklin (2004, p. iii) insinuated, by featuring an extended quote from John Stuart Mill in the frontispiece to his book *Packaging Politics*, the phenomenon of 'puffing' dated back at least the early 19<sup>th</sup> century:

... these are the inevitable fruits of immense competition; of a state of society where any voice not pitched in an exaggerated key is lost in the hubbub ... mere marketable qualities become the object instead of substantial ones, and a man's labour and capital are expended less in doing anything than in persuading other people that he has done it. Our own age seems to have brought this evil to its consummation. For the first time, arts for attracting public attention form a necessary part of the qualifications even of the deserving; and skill in these goes farther than any quality towards ensuring success (Mill, 1836).

Professor of Communications at Westminster University, Steven Barnett, noted that 'every now and then a word or phrase appears which, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, seems to capture a mood' (cited in Andrews, 2006, p. 33). Barnett was referring to the expression 'dumbing down', but the same could be said 'spin'. As has been noted earlier, Andrews said spin had become a euphemism for deceit and manipulation (2006, p. 32). In the British context Andrews said the first journalistic use of the phrase 'spin doctor' was believed to be in 1987 by *The Guardian's* Michael White and Alex Brummer (2006, p. 33).

Former ABC senior journalist and at the time director of public affairs TV programs for the national broadcaster, Derek White, noted in 1978 that the earliest British information services back in the 1930s were negative, rather than positive. In the style that became the norm in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, staff were appointed mainly to deal with press inquiries, to save the time of Ministers and senior administrators and to defend them from the 'unwelcome attention of journalists' (White, 1978, p. 22). They were seen as a barricade between their masters and the public – or their representatives, the newspapers.

Curran noted that the British Foreign Office established their first peacetime government press office in 1919, but it was restructured in the 1930s to make the Prime Minister the centre of news management, and restrict journalists' access to other departments of state (2002, p. 36). Fast forward 50 years and the British government's publicity machine was growing rapidly, involving a huge expansion not only in the number of press officers, but also those concerned with polling, focus groups and advertising designed to promote what Curran called 'effective state communication' and what we might call news management or 'spin' (2002, p. 37). News management had evolved from an ad hoc system into a modern system employing large numbers of people with different skills.

Margaret Thatcher used Sir Tim Bell, advertising agency managing director, to help propel her to power in 1979 and keep her there during the 1980s. Bell later told industry trade publication *PR Week*: 'I would rather be called a spin-doctor than a hidden persuader. Actually I rather like the term. After all, doctors are qualified professionals, and putting the right spin on things is exactly what we do' (cited in R. Phillipps, 2002, p. 4). The Iron Lady's press secretary, Sir Bernard Ingham, said during his tenure press officers were in the business of 'managing relations with a highly volatile, usually hostile, frequently mischievous and seemingly proliferating media mob' (Ingham, 2003, p. 67). According to Ingham, the best spin doctors are those with 'the highest strike rate in preventing inaccurate stories from appearing' (2003, pp. 69 - 70). Ingham titled his memoir *The Wages on Spin* and maintained the 'wages of spin are disrepute and decay' (2003, p. 247).

In his article in the *Journal of Public Affairs* in 2006, Leighton Andrews looked at the recent history of spin and traced its early history as an election tactic into wider use by political parties in



and out of government. He concluded that by the time New Labour assumed government in the 1990s, the cult of the spin doctor was firmly established in the UK and their problem was that the tabloid, popular focus on spin and process had come to dominate all discussion of government communication (Andrews, 2006, pp. 40-41). Andrews said there were three main elements that further contributed to New Labour's reputation for 'spin': 'the modernisation of the Government media machine; the attempts to re-shape the Government's own communications strategy at different stages of its life; and specific examples of spin – the so-called 'spincidents' (2006, p. 41). While the name of Alastair Campbell is always mentioned in the same breath as 'Blair' and 'spin', his predecessor, former TV journalist Peter Mandelson, who was taken on as Labour's campaign and communication's director in 1985, directed the party's publicity effort in the 1987 general election and helped Tony Blair win the leadership in 1994 (Esser et al., 2000, p. 220) is the 'real' father of modern spin doctoring in the UK. He was later described as 'the greatest spin doctor since Goebbels' and the 'second most powerful man in the country' (cited in Esser et al., 2000, p. 220). It had been Mandelson who transformed the Labour Party away from its working class roots (which alienated it from non-working class voters) towards a centre-left social democrat image inclusive of other classes (Louw, 2005, p. 159). Under Mandelson, image became everything, with opinion polling and marketing considerations taking precedence over political principle. Writing in the mid-1990s, BBC political correspondent Nicholas Jones said Mandelson 'came to be mentioned with awe among Labour politicians' (1995, p. 122).

As the years went by he was to become increasingly proficient at what for a spin doctor amounted to sheer artistry: the ability to determine which journalists were likely to be of most use to him and could therefore achieve the greatest impact in return for the information he had to offer (N. Jones, p. 125).

A few years later, Jones penned another critique of the influence of Mandelson and Campbell on the workings of the Blair government (1999) under the emotive title, *Sultans of Spin*. Campbell became Blair's chief spin doctor in 1994. He was a former political editor of the left-wing tabloid *Daily Mirror* and long-time friend of both Blair and Mandelson. He became the face of government spin in the United Kingdom in the Nineties and early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Campbell found when New Labour came to power that the advice to newly installed Ministers from their departments was not a patch on the back-up that had been provided by the party. The new government doubled the number of special advisers who were appointed by Ministers from within the Labour Party but whose salaries were paid by the state (N Jones, 1999, pp. 66 - 67). Campbell was one of six political appointees in the 10 Downing Street press office who, in addition to a team of government information officers drawn from the civil service, were all assigned to deal with the news media on Blair's behalf (N Jones, p. 68). Campbell was at the centre of the news in his own right during the debate surrounding the Blair Government's decision to join the Coalition of the Willing in the second Iraq War in 2003, and the infamous and controversial 'sexed-up' document justifying British involvement. Disgraced BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan alleged that Campbell had used dubious intelligence information to 'sex-up' the case for war against Iraq. It was a tragic episode, with the source of the allegations, former weapons inspector and British defence scientist David Kelly, taking his own life (Hirst & Patching, 2007, p. 135). A subsequent government inquiry, headed by Lord Hutton, cleared the Blair Government of any wrongdoing over the death of Dr Kelly. The *Independent* newspaper called the report 'A Whitewash' on a white, otherwise blank front page (Hirst & Patching, 2007, p. 136). Campbell resigned, largely to take the pressure off his prime minister, but the 'sexed-up' document affair revealed a number of points about spin doctoring – PR must be opaque in order to work (spin doctors must not get caught actually practising spin); spin doctors are actually disliked by journalists; the spin doctor's focus is on building and maintaining a 'positive' profile for the politicians that employ them; and the media's response to the affair and the Hutton Inquiry revealed that some journalists had difficulty accepting their own complicity in the symbiotic relationship between the media and the spin doctors (Louw, 2005, pp. 160-161).

In a speech to the inaugural meeting of the Media Correspondents Association in 2002 titled 'It's time to bury spin', Campbell admitted that the Government spin machine was 'over-controlling, manipulative' and the public had stopped trusting what they had to say (Campbell, 2002). He said they had underestimated the extent to which the relationship between the spin doctors and the media would itself become an issue and a story. Campbell highlighted the problems in media – Blair government relations at the time as 'a hostile and cynical media, a more demanding public living in a culture of immediacy, and less trust in established institutions'. He even conceded: 'For if the public comes to believe all (political) communication is spin, no matter how much we may want to blame the media, it is ultimately our problem, a problem of our political culture' (Campbell, 2002). It was Campbell who maintained that journalists were the world's best spin doctors (cited in Ingham, 2003, p. 68).

Twenty-year veteran of public relations in the UK, David Michie, surveyed the British PR scene of the late 1990s in *The Invisible Persuaders* (1998). He cited British PR luminary Quentin Bell as estimating that 40 to 50 per cent of general news as having been produced or directly influenced by PR practitioners. Bell accused the media of double standards: 'They are highly dependent on us, but they won't admit to the influence of PR' (cited in Michie, 1998, p. 2). The author was equally damning:

It doesn't benefit spin doctors' relationships with journalists to have the extent to which they lead the media by the nose revealed. Nor is it in the client's interests for the whole world to know that that glowing write-up in *The Times* was the work of an intensive PR exercise rather than the free expression of a challenging articulate reporter (p. 4).

Of particular interest in this context is the final section of the book (pp. 233 - 313). It discussed lobbying (the Westminster warriors), the notorious 'cash for questions' scandal which led to the downfall of one of the biggest political public relations operatives in the country, Ian Greer, and also gave Michie's views on the spin doctors in the Blair era under the heading 'New Labour: made in America' (pp. 281 - 313).

Tony Blair left no-one in any doubt about his take on media relations in a speech about a fortnight before he stepped down as British Prime Minister in June, 2007, when he described the British media as being like a 'feral beast' that tears people and reputations to shreds. Known for his slick and obsessive media management, Blair accused the media of sensationalising facts, breeding cynicism and attacking public figures ("Blair attacks 'feral' media," 2007). The Editor of the *New Statesman*, John Kampfner, reacting to Blair's comments and Campbell's published diaries, noted that both argued that 'hyperbole has replaced hard-headed assessment' (2007). He took his colleagues to task under the headline 'Less stenography and more reporting, please' asking why the major British papers did not challenge the claims in the infamous dossier: 'The 45-minute claim? Why did newspapers instantaneously plaster their front pages with something so sensitive, far-fetched and unproven?' (Kampfner, 2007). He noted that the hardest form of journalism was investigative, and that both the economies and the culture of contemporary media mitigated against it.

Esser, Reinemann and Fan (2000) compared the relatively new concept of 'spin doctoring' in the 1997 British and 1998 German general elections and characterised the UK experience as 'spin doctoring high gear' and Germany as 'spin doctoring low gear' (2000, p. 209). While British journalists covered the efforts of the political spin doctors extensively and critically because of their often aggressive methods used against the media, German journalists were found to be less likely to report on spin doctoring (2000, pp. 209 - 210). This was explained by the fact that while 'spin' was a way of political life in Britain, it was still developing in Germany and the local journalists were less interested in it as a facet of political campaigning.

### **1.5.3 Australia**

There is a large body of research examining the role the media have played in the political system. In Australia, Henry Mayer (1964) devoted a chapter to 'Parliament Versus Press' in his seminal work, *The Press in Australia*. It is a short yet compelling account of the often rocky

relationship between politicians and the media to that point in Australian history. The key works in the field in the 1980s and 1990s were Rod Tiffen's *News and Power* (1989), described at 1.1 above, and Ian Ward's *Politics of the Media* (1995), which takes a social scientist's approach to the role of the media in the Australian political system and power structure. There have been studies of the Canberra press gallery, such as those by Kingston and Simons (Kingston, 1999; Simons, 1999). Numerous scholars have devoted journal articles and books to special aspects of the junction between the media and politics, as detailed in the section on 'Politics' in Dobinson's Australian Journalism Research Index (2001-2002).

Although the employment of press secretaries and prime ministerial and government media relations officers can be traced back to 1918, historian, prolific author and journalism academic Clem Lloyd said that by the early 1930s it had become the 'established practice that prime ministers should recruit a senior journalist as a press secretary in their private office' (Lloyd 1992 cited in Ian Ward, 2003, p 29). Prime ministers from the 1930s started having former journalists as press secretaries. The term went by many names, including 'media adviser' to placate the 'other arms' of the media – broadcast and now online.

As Greg Terrill noted in an important survey of government openness 'From Menzies to Whitlam and Beyond', publicity had not been an important function of federal governments prior to World War 11 (2000, p. 129). Government deliberations were removed from the population, and there was little intention on the part of governments to inform the voters about the administration of the country. But the need for censorship and propaganda during the war changed that. Government employment of journalists on a large scale, on the other hand, was a World War 2 development, beginning with the Commonwealth Department of Information (White, 1978). In 1945 there were 29 journalists employed by government departments, with an additional 72 in the Department of Information (Terrill, 2000, p. 136). There were three information units within the federal government by 1950, five in 1961, nine in 1970 and 17 in 1972. From the Whitlam era, every department had an information unit (Terrill, 2000, p. 129). Whitlam told Parliament in 1973 that the number of staff fulfilling 'public relations or public information service activities' in the federal government was 658 (Terrill, 2000, p. 137).

In this section we are particularly interested in the development of separate groups, funded by taxpayers, that have, over the past 35 years, 'morphed' into party-political spin machines. Both sides of politics in Australia at both federal and state levels (and overseas, notably the United Kingdom under Blair, and the United States under successive presidents) have used such groups to massage and put a positive spin on their media messages to the public.

An interesting snapshot of the state of government media relations and attitudes to that process was offered in the Fourth Summer School of Professional Journalism (*Communication - key to good government*, 1968). 'It is possible to have good government without communication, but it is far less likely,' Prime minister John Gorton said in his opening address (1968, p. 5). He proceeded to explain the hallmark of a totalitarian government was its tight control of communication (p. 5) but also spoke against 'uncontrolled communications', preferring the term 'free communication' (p. 6). He went on to discuss the role of government information officers (GIOs) attached to ministers or government departments, which he said was not to protect 'by stopping the dissemination of information for which is Minister or his Department can be criticised, but rather to protect him ... by going along and saying ... "These are the facts. These facts ought to be made public" ... and so protect him in that way' (p. 7). He also spoke against the notion of public servants speaking their minds about government policy: 'It is better that they should follow the course of not entering into public controversy and therefore not being able to be held responsible and attacked in public,' he said (p. 8). He ended with a call for political parties to air and consider all opinions:

It is easy enough for a political party ... to argue to a brief, to put forward only the good points in favour of some course, and to ignore the bad, not mention them or try and pretend they don't exist. I hope that this will not grow in the political field (p. 11).

*Sydney Morning Herald* state political correspondent John O'Hara described the routine newsgathering problems of the political journalist of the day, facing 'the slipperiness and

evasiveness of politicians, the iron curtain of public relations officers erected against ready access by the Press to the decision-makers in government, and the cabalism of the vast and labyrinthine Public Service' (1968, p. 54). Even in 1968 O'Hara noted the fact that most policy and administration announcements from the government came in handout form:

And, as they proliferate, too often they cannot be investigated because of the time factor. Lack of time, lack of staff, place you increasingly at the mercy of the handout and of the propagandist who may be behind it. (p. 58)

He said journalistic resource pressure also meant reporters tended to go 'where the good copy is easiest to get quickly' (p. 59). NSW Electricity Commission information officer, K.L. Murchison, outlined the typical work of a journalist employed within a government agency (1968, p. 63). It included preparation of press statements, articles, speeches, liaising with media, producing publications in a range of styles, taking photographs, commissioning advertising, designing and producing annual reports, and develop educational and training materials. He suggested the rare times a government journalist could show 'critical examination of public issues' were in 'suggesting that where facts are unpalatable the facts themselves should be changed, not the reports of them' and in 'carefully weighing arguments that may be used in available means of communication to explain and interpret policy' (p. 66). Former managing editor of the *Financial Review* and *The Australian*, Maxwell Newton, told the gathering the tactics of government media relations demanded well informed journalists.

The art of the public relations man and the propagandist is to confuse and muddy public discussion. My own experiences from time to time looking from the other side of the fence suggest that it is depressingly easy for the propagandist to win this little battle (Newton, 1968, p. 68).

The well informed journalist could sometimes penetrate the machinery of government, Newton contended, but to do so must almost make himself part of that machinery to understand its workings thoroughly (p. 68). Even though his outlet might only have a tiny circulation, 'his writings will have a strange power to infuriate officials and Ministers who may then be driven to the most extraordinary acts to prevent publication of accurate information of the kind,' Newton argued (p. 69). He also offered some insight into the thinking of whistleblowers, who were sometimes civil servants with growing power, who 'want to enlist the help of public media to further their own policy lines' (p. 69). Chief of staff of the Sunday Mail in Brisbane, Bob Macdonald, offered some insights into the growing PR side to local government (Macdonald, 1968) which he described as 'the creeping curse of every form of Government – the channelling and management of news' (p. 74). This took the form of minimising the number of people permitted to speak to the media. Macdonald even conducted his own mini-research project for the seminar, reporting the salaries of the Brisbane City Council's PR officers (5,000 and 7,000 dollars per year) and that 88 of the 110 'handouts' in the previous year had been attributed to the Lord Mayor, Clem Jones (p. 75).

Most trace the modern day explosion in the numbers of media minders or 'spin doctors' in the federal government to the Whitlam era (1972-75). Soon after his election, and realising that dealing with the media involved a three-pronged approach (print, radio and television), Whitlam increased the number of press secretaries available to ministers to a record high of 27 (Barns, 2005, p 21). As former state and federal government adviser Greg Barns noted: 'This expanded communications network meant that, in effect, there were 27 different spokespeople for the Whitlam government, with no central coordination of the message. Problems were inevitable' (2005, p 21). It took a disastrous election result in Queensland in late 1974 for the federal government to focus on how to improve its image.

The first government propaganda unit, the Australian Government Liaison Service, was established in the last months of the Whitlam era in early 1975. Commonly referred to as AGLS, or 'Aggles', it was charged with distributing government information speedily and efficiently, giving feedback on where the 'message' was not getting through, where there were 'knowledge gaps' in the community or media and where further explanation was needed (Greg Terrill cited in Barns,

2005, p 21). The AGLS assumed an overtly political role, one that its Labor successor, the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS), would perfect.

Successive governments have complained how their predecessors used public money and staff to 'spin' their case, whether it was by flooding the market with the message, or discrediting their opponents. But, whatever changes were made when a new administration gained power, each abused the system (Grattan, 1998, p 41).

Prime minister Malcolm Fraser, elected to office in the wake of the Whitlam dismissal of 1975, was also acutely aware of the ongoing importance of communicating the government's messages in a co-ordinated and controlled fashion to a media that had mushroomed in size since the conservatives were last in power. In 1978 he established the Government Information Unit (GIU) a specialised group to communicate the government's decisions and activities (Barns, 2005, p 24). It was modest by Whitlam government standards, numbering only eight – two journalists in Canberra, and one in each state capital. The GIU was responsible for monitoring the media, information distribution, and during election campaigns, political advice on managing the news media – building on the overtly political role begun under Whitlam. Both the AGLS and the GIU gave the government in power the opportunity to 'massage' and 'spin' the way issues were presented to the media (Barns, 2005, p 27). In April 1981, the Fraser Government's GIU was involved in controversy that intensified the debate over whether what was essentially a political organisation should be funded by the taxpayer. It would be the first major public debate over the role of government communications where the party in opposition attacked the government for using its publicly funded communication unit for party political purposes. The Opposition's leader in the Senate at the time, John Button, summed up the case by saying that through the GIU 'taxpayers' money had been siphoned off to the Liberal Party' (cited in Barns, 2005, p 29).

Politicians have long been familiar with the news gathering practices of journalists. Butler (1998) noted that former Queensland premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen was fond of using the metaphor 'feeding the chooks', while former prime minister Paul Keating preferred 'the drip' metaphor to describe the process of government dissemination of information to the press.

While in opposition, Bob Hawke's predecessor as Labor leader, Bill Hayden, promised to dismantle the GIU. Labor was true to its promise (Terrill, 2000, p. 175), but in its place it established the NMLS, a more powerful and more effective propaganda machine. One of the doyens of the Canberra press gallery, *The Age's* Michelle Grattan said the 'aNiMaLS' was notorious (Grattan, 1998, p 41). Everything said by the Coalition was monitored around the country. Government representatives provided a constant stream of transcripts to the press gallery. The staff of NMLS were never more than political operatives (Barns, 2005, p 35). But it was not the only communications unit established by the Hawke Government. A month before its election to office in 1983, it established the Ministerial Media Group (MMG) which employed 12 journalists to work as press secretaries for ministers. Within two years they were under the mantle of the NMLS and costing taxpayers about \$700,000 a year (Barns, 2005, p 35). The NMLS was a prolific 'spin' machine, churning out government material, spending time talking directly to journalists, arranging briefings for the favoured few and ensuring that the government's positives were contrasted to the opposition's negatives (Barns, 2005, p 42). By the latter stages of the Keating era, the aNiMaLS numbered 23 and were costing taxpayers about \$1.5 million a year (Barns, 2005, p 43). In the wake of a Commonwealth auditor-general's report early in 1995 suggesting that the NMLS should be accountable (the Keating government has blocked attempts to audit the NMLS), *The Age* commented dryly that one 'of the curious things about the National Media Liaison Service is that every syllable in its name is misleading. It is not national, at least in the sense that it exists for the benefit of the nation, and it provides little or nothing by way of liaison or service to the media' (cited in Barns, 2005, p 43).

The Howard Government created its own version of the party-political propaganda machine by appointing additional media advisers to the staff of most junior ministers in each state. These additional media advisers worked closely with the prime minister's office, routinely supplying Howard's office with transcripts of media interviews given by Labor politicians where they could

be used to give the government a political advantage. The group was dubbed the 'baby animals' by the Canberra press gallery in acknowledgment that they fulfilled the same role as Labor's aNiMaLS (Ian Ward, 2003, p 32). In similar vein, 'Animals 2' was suggested as an appropriate name for a second group established in April 1996 as the Government Members Secretariat (GMS). The role of the GMS included training government parliamentarians in dealing with the media, preparing newsletters and political pamphlets, all of which critics regarded as partisan activities not properly the function of taxpayer-funded staff (Ian Ward, 2003, p 32). The activities of the GMS were as blatantly party political as its predecessors under Fraser, Hawke and Keating. As an example, the GMS was implicated in the attacks on the character of the former Labor leader, Mark Latham, prior to the 2004 election, leading the opposition leader to label the group a 'dirt unit' (Barns, 2005, p 10). It became an effective tool of the Howard government, leading to the same criticism common to groups set up by both political persuasions: that they used taxpayers' money for blatantly partisan publications (Barns, 2005, p 12).

Both groups established under the Howard government continued the practice of monitoring the media and feeding them material damaging to the Labor opposition, a public relations tool which is now seen as an indispensable feature of the Australian political landscape. With the defeat of the Howard government in the November 2007 federal election, more is likely to emerge about the activities of both the 'baby animals' and 'Animals 2' as insiders reflect on the Howard years.

The Rudd government had barely taken office when they followed in the footsteps of previous governments of both political persuasions in trying to control their media message. The CSIRO, the Australian Institute of Marine Science, the Australian Research Council and even the Questacon science museum were among about a dozen statutory agencies directed by the Prime Minister's office to refer 'all strategic media relations which relate to the Government's key messages' must be submitted to the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research for forwarding on to the Minister's office (Coorey, 2007). The federal Opposition, through former Health Minister Tony Abbott, was immediately on the attack ("Rudd 'a control freak'," 2007).

The first six months of the Rudd government were littered with further examples of what appeared to both the media and the Opposition as the Prime Minister and his spin doctors trying to control the media. Mr Rudd refused to answer questions from *The Australian* during a 75-minute visit to open the new *Fairfax* headquarters in Sydney in May, his office deciding the event was a 'photo opportunity only' (Lyons, 2008c). This was probably not surprising since the day before the same paper was suggesting that the first Rudd federal budget, due to be handed down the following week, would be 'tightly spun' (Kerr, 2008b). Three weeks later and the Rudd media machine was in damage control again when leaked documents suggested Cabinet had ignored the advice of public servants when approving a scheme aimed at helping motorists find a cheapest fuel. The Prime Minister called in the Federal Police to investigate the damaging leaks ("Rudd expects damaging leaks to spark an opinion poll pasting," 2008). The leak is a common method for politicians in government or opposition to get their message out, but this time the Prime Minister was none-too-amused when the leak came from within the public service. On the last day of the 2007-08 financial year he would be facing another embarrassing leak, this one concerning the New South Wales state government threatening to pull out of the centrepiece of the Rudd government's so-called education revolution (the computers-in-schools scheme) unless they got additional funding (Berkovic & Walters, 2008).

A few days before, *The Weekend Australian* devoted three broadsheet pages in their Inquirer feature section, and the front page lead, to criticism of the Prime Minister and his minders. It was a prime example of media coverage of spin – the so-called 'meta-communication' discussed in **1.3 Media Relations in Communication Theory** above. One story by senior writer John Lyons was an analysis of the PM's minders headed 'Hostile approach to the media' with the added introductory line: 'Aggression and bullying tactics have become the hallmarks of Kevin Rudd's office and women have particular cause for complaint' (Lyons, 2008a). On the front page of the *Inquirer* section, the *Weekend Australian* fired another broadside at the Prime Minister's office under the heading 'Inner Circle' with the added line: 'John Lyons reveals the workings of Kevin Rudd's

office and asks: Is the PM becoming Captain Chaos?' (2008b). Of interest to this discussion was another full broadsheet-page feature titled 'Politics of style over substance' which compared the political approaches of the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson with writer George Megalogenis suggesting the country had entered an era of perpetual political campaign where 'their handlers have convinced them that if they miss a single news bulletin the public will soon forget them' (2008).

Presenter of the ABC's *7.30 Report*, journalist and former Whitlam era media minder, Kerry O'Brien, characterised the evolution of government media relations thus: 'This is the age of slick, media-trained polly-speak, of candour when it suits, and obfuscation or avoidance behind a wall of rhetoric or media manipulation when it's deemed necessary' (cited in Cokley, 2005) The activities of all these taxpayer-funded units, from Whitlam to Howard, and in the early days of the Rudd government, were clearly party political.

## **1.6 Quantifying government expenditure on media relations**

While this review is primarily interested in the size of the political public relations sector, it is worth noting that the overall PR sector has been growing rapidly. Davis charted the rise of the non-government public relations sector in the United Kingdom, which derived its income from work in the corporate sector (2000). He found the sector grew at annual rates of 25-30 per cent for most of the 1980s and, after a slowdown caused by the recession of the late 1980s, was again undergoing impressive expansion at the time of his writing (2000, p. 41). He cited the industry newspaper, *PR Week*, as reporting in 1997 that the top 150 consultancies had reported during 1995-1996 fee income increases of 21 per cent and staff numbers increased by 11.5 per cent (p. 41). Fee income of Public Relations Consultancy Association members rose from 18 million pounds (about \$A 45 million) in 1983 to a whopping 252 million pounds sterling (about \$A630 million at the time) in 1997, an increase of more than 1300 per cent in 14 years (pp. 41 - 42).

Also interesting in this context was the range of organisations outside of government and the corporate sector using public relations methods and practices. Davis reported that schools, hospitals, universities, trade unions, professional associations and pressure groups had invested in public relations departments to achieve what were clearly political (and economic) objectives, like influencing government policy, raising public/consumer awareness and defending themselves against threatened funding cuts (p. 42).

Equally, the PR industry in Australia has been described by Craig as being 'massive' (2004, p. 135). He cited a newspaper report from 2001 that estimated the industry was growing at about 20 per cent annually, had a turnover of \$1 billion per year, and about 7000 practitioners (Cadzow cited in Craig, 2004, p. 135). On a broad PR industry scale, Daniels (2002) estimated the sector was responsible for more than \$1 billion turnover in 2002, but gave no indication of what proportion was private versus government expenditure.

### **1.6.1 Internationally**

Rarely is the cost of media relations ('spin'), either that involving public servants or outsourced, released to the public. As has been noted earlier in another context, Andrews quoted the *Daily Mirror* as saying the British Home Office had spent 27 million pounds sterling (at the time about \$A77 million) on campaigns like persuading motorists not to drink and drive, but in the eyes of the London tabloid it was all 'spin' (2006, p. 31).

Government advertising figures in most countries are easier to access than public relations expenditure, partly because of legislative requirements for their disclosure. An indication of what the British government spent on advertising was given in the expenditure of the government's communications arm, the Central Office of Information (COI). In its first year of operation after World War 2 its budget was four million sterling (about \$A10 million). In 2004-2005, its expenditure reached a record 333.6 pound sterling [about \$835 million] (Tiltman, 2006). Davis noted that during the 1980s the UK government had become largest buyer of advertising in that country (2000, pp. 47 - 48), and although only of peripheral interest in the context of this discussion

because we are not including advertising in our definition of media relations, it does give a clue as to the size and scope of the British government's media campaigns. The British Government's advertising bill in 2001 was 295 million pounds sterling (about \$A738 million at the time), again qualifying it as the largest purchaser of advertising in the country (Franklin, 2004, p. 6). It was also estimated that the political parties in the UK spent about one tenth of that figure on the 2001 national election campaign (Franklin, 2004, p. 8). Davis also noted that in some government institutions, the number of 'information officers' had increased between 1979 and 1995, in one case by 917 per cent from 6 to 61 (Metropolitan police) and in another by 600 per cent from 5 to 35 [the BBC] (2000, p. 48). By the mid 1990s, metropolitan local government authorities had come to appreciate the political mileage in employing in-house public relations departments and were employing about 2000 between them, costing 250 million sterling [about \$A625 million] (A. Davis, 2000, p. 48).

As would be expected from the above account, the cost of government spin increased markedly when Tony Blair entered number 10 Downing Street in 1997. Chief political correspondent for *The Independent*, Marie Woolf, wrote in early 2004 that the communications budget for administration's Government's Communications and Information Service (GICS), covering Whitehall press officers and ministers' communications advisers, had jumped from 575,000 pounds (about \$A1.2 million) to 2.4 million pounds in that year (about \$A4.9 million) (Woolf, 2004). At the time the Liberal Democrat's environment spokesman, Norman Baker, said: 'Government spin that spin is dead has been shown to be spin itself' (Woolf, 2004).

Across the Irish Sea, the cost of spin was concerning the media, too. Spin doctors for the Irish Prime Minister and Deputy in 2005 were reported to be costing the taxpayers more than 2.5 million Euros (about \$A4 million) a year with the total for all government departments put at more than 6 million Euros [about \$A9.8 million] ("Government spin doctors' bill hits £6m," 2005) The spotlight was focussed on the cost of spin in the United States in 2005 when *USA Today* broke the story of the Department of Education's \$240,000 pay-for-play deal with an African-American commentator to promote the President's education initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act (cited in Greve, 2005, p. 11). Leaving aside the ethical debate of America's equivalent of the 'Cash for Comment' controversy, it highlighted the whole area of the cost of 'contracted out' spin. As mentioned earlier, the US was spending about \$400 million (\$A430 on the exchange rate in early 2008) in the early 1970s, and a mere \$75 million immediately after the World War 2 (Morse, 2006, pp. 852 - 853). That pales compared with recent administrations. In 1971, Rivers noted that the executive branch of government in the US spent more on publicity, news, views publications and 'special pleadings' than was spent to operate the entire legislative and judicial branches (1971, pp. 49 - 50). He wrote:

All together, federal expenditure on telling and showing the taxpayers are more often double the combined costs of newsgathering by the two major United States news services, the three major television networks, and the ten largest American newspapers (Rivers, 1971, p. 50).

Another *USA Today* investigation cited by Greve said the Clinton Administration spent \$128 million (about \$A136 million on early 2008 conversion) on outsourced public relations in its first term, compared with \$250 million (about \$A266 million) in President Bush's first term (2005, p. 12). The Congressional Research Service, which counted advertising as part of its total figure, put Bush's PR spend in his first term at \$1 billion (\$A1.07 billion), but did not have a comparative figure for the Clinton Administration (Greve, 2005, p. 12). Williamson wrote in early 2006 that Bush Administration's total expenditure on advertising and public relations in the previous two-and-a-half-years topped \$1.6 billion [about \$A1.7 billion] (Williamson, 2006). The number of public relations personnel in the US government at the time was put at 4703, but the figure did not include political appointees, and the task of coming up with a figure is made more difficult because of what is called the 'iceberg effect', a phenomenon coined by Patching and Pearson (2007), referring to the fact that many government media relations appointees are employed under ambiguous titles and job descriptions and are thus hard to identify and quantify. Greve cited the example of the Environment Protection Agency which officially had 11 public relations appointees,



but a recently retired career public affairs official estimated the actual number at closer to 50 (2005, p. 12). Louw cited an estimate that political spin practitioners in the US outnumbered journalists in 2001 by approximately 150,000 to 130,000 (2005, p. 164).

### **1.6.2 Australia**

Little quantifying of government expenditure on media relations has been undertaken other than spending on advertising, which falls outside the bounds of this study. That is not to say advertising is not sometimes politically self-serving for governments, but it at least has formalised accounting mechanisms in place. Nethercote (May 21, 2007) estimated total Howard government advertising spending to 2007 at \$1.655 billion, while (M. Davis, 2007) reported the Federal Government had budgeted \$111.2 million for advertising in 2007. Craig (2004) observed that in 2000 the federal government was the nation's biggest advertiser, with its \$145 million outlay more than big corporates like Telstra, Coles Myer, Toyota and McDonald's (p. 148). Government advertising expenditure is not a new phenomenon. Barns (2005) detailed a 2004 research report from the Australian Parliamentary Library giving several examples of governments outlaying tens of millions on advertising in the lead-up to federal elections in 1993, 1996, 1998 and 2001 (at p. 72).

There are also figures showing how much governments have spent on particular public information campaigns – including both advertising and non-advertising expenditure. Ward (2003) listed total expenditure on several government information campaigns in 2000-2001, including defence force recruitment (\$33.5 million), new tax system (\$33.5 million) and new apprenticeship system [\$10.8 million] (p. 36).

However, spending on non-advertising media relations by governments, a key focus of this study, is harder to gauge, and few have managed more than guesstimates and there have been no comprehensive academic studies in the area. Ward (2003) observed the difficulties – both definitional and accounting - in costing government expenditure on media relations (p. 34). Nevertheless, there have been some random insights into the amount spent by governments at the two main levels – federal and state. Martin Chulov (2002) quoted the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance president Chris Warren estimating about 4000 journalists worked in government public relations in Australia. Even in the mid 1970s, as Barns said (2005, p. 23) the Australian public service employed more than 800 people in information departments at a cost of more than \$50 million. By the early 1990s this had blown out to more than \$200 million according to Orr (1994, p. 112). Some have conducted one-off analysis of particular governments' media personnel. Ward (2003), for instance, noted that the Howard Government was served by about 36 'media advisers', representing about 10 per cent of ministerial staff. Three of the prime minister's 18 staff were media minds (p. 29). Ward (2003) distinguished between ministerial media staff and staff employed by departmental public affairs sections, although he pointed to the fact that governments harness their departmental and agency resources. He offered an example of a public affairs section of a government department in 2001 – that of Environment Australia, which had 12 professional staff assigned to that section and a budget of \$1.828 million (p. 33). He also cited a newspaper report claiming the Howard Government's combined ministers and departments had spent almost \$2.5 million on electronic media transcripts and clippings services in its first year of office (1996-1997). In 2001, the *Courier-Mail* reported that Defence public affairs cost taxpayers about \$11.6 million per year, including \$3.8 million in salaries for 105 staff ("Reith gags PR machine," 2001). A couple of years later, senior News Limited journalist Ian McPhedran asked in the context of the deployment in the Solomon Islands, 'Which government organisation spends 20 million taxpayer dollars a year to keep taxpayers in the dark?' (2003). The big spender was again Defence public relations.

With the 2007 federal election looming, then Opposition spokeswoman on accountability, Penny Wong, claimed prime minister Howard had accumulated what she called a 'taxpayer-funded army of political foot-soldiers' ("Federal politics funded by taxpayers: PM's 73 spin doctors," 2007). The *Adelaide Advertiser* has run more stories about the cost of government and ministerial spin and gone deeper into the issue than any other media outlet. The paper has published stories about the

financial cost of the spin doctors in the state's Rann Government for at least five years. As early as 2003 the paper was drawing attention to pay rises granted to media advisers and ministerial staff of 20 per cent compared to public servants who at the time had been offered only 3 per cent (T. Richardson, 2003). Media unit manager Paul Flanagan's wage was put at almost \$120,000, about 50 per cent more than the standard media adviser's salary of a little over \$80,000 (T. Richardson, 2003). With the SA state election in 2006 approaching, the *Advertiser's* Craig Bildstien reported Labor's 108 ministerial advisers were costing the state's taxpayers \$8.6 million annually, and giving the incumbent government 'an extra \$8 million in campaign firepower' (Bildstien, 2006). The following year, the *Advertiser* reported that the State Government had increased the number of minders, spin doctors and other ministerial staff by 44 per cent in five years (Owen, 2007b). Michael Owen obtained the confidential Ministers' Directory which detailed 275 ministerial staff as of November, 2006, compared with 191 in January 2002 under the former Liberal Government (2007a). A couple of months later Owen used the South Australian Government Gazette of July 5, 2007, to source the annual pay rises for the Rann Government's key policy and media advisers (2007b). He pointed out at least five of Mr Rann's personal staff had received significant pay rises. The top wage went to former chief of staff Peter Chataway, promoted to a newly-created position of principal adviser, government relations. He was gazetted to be paid \$180,090 a year, a rise of 16.8 per cent, or \$25,923. Jill Bottrall, as deputy chief of staff and principal media adviser, received a rise of \$11,647 for an annual wage of \$141,833 (Owen, 2007b). The gazetted wage rises sparked anger from nurses and other public servants involved in bitter wage disputes with the South Australian government. According to the daily e-publication, *Crikey*, the premier's principal media adviser took exception to everyone knowing the size of her wage packet and threatened the *Advertiser* with an 'email questions only policy' of contact with their journalists until deputy editor Paul Starick threatened to write that story, and she backed down (Parie, 2007). *Crikey* reported a week later that Michael Owen had been escorted from a function with the premier (himself a former spin doctor) by 'the constabulary' ("The *Tiser* v The Premier: Round 11," 2007)

Other instances of media reporting criticism of governments' spending money on spin include when the NSW Opposition, for instance, accused the state government of spending \$42 million on ministerial advisers and staffers ("Govt accused of wasting funds on 'spin doctors'," 2005) and when their opposite numbers in Queensland accused the Beattie government of similar wastage two years later ("Water Commission budget spent on spin doctors: Seeney," 2007). This figure was not surprising, since academic John Harrison had pointed out earlier that the Beattie government employed more journalists than the *Courier Mail* (Harrison, 2005). Other dated figures are available. Queensland's Electoral and Administrative Review Commission (EARC) established that the Queensland government's total expenditure on public relations and other promotional information programs in 1991-92 was \$36.6 million (cited in Grundy, 1993). Put another way, the EARC report found that the Queensland government was the biggest employer of journalists in the state with 191 media and policy advisers and 273 support personnel (cited in Orr, 1994, p. 107). In Western Australia, the Carpenter government's spin machine was estimated to have cost taxpayers \$29 million in wages in 2006, with another \$400,000 chewed up in media monitoring costs (Mason, 2007).

The other form of expenditure was in preventing information making its way to the public via the media. The Howard government was strident in pursuing public servants who leaked material to the media. In a parliamentary debate in 2005, Opposition Senate leader Kim Carr said nearly \$200,000 had been spent tracking down federal whistleblowers (cited in Ester, 2007, p. 105). In an answer to a question in the Senate in October, 2006, then Justice Minister, Senator Chris Ellison, reported there had been 38 cases of unauthorised disclosures (leaks) referred to the Australian Federal Police by various government departments and agencies in the four years 2003 – 2006. Investigation costs totalled \$2,160,000 and expended 20,980 staff hours. Of interest was the rapidly declining number of cases – from 13 in 2003, to 12 in 2004, 10 in 2005 and 3 in 2006 (Ellison, October 9, 2006).

While there is some data on government expenditure on media relations within the public service, there is scant information on how much is outsourced to private firms.

Nick Butterly (2006) cited Labor Party figures in 2006 showing the Federal Government spent \$309 million on consultants in 2004-5 and \$2.7 billion over the preceding decade, but gave no indication of the breakdown or the proportion of PR consultants among them. He did, however, cite an example of the Defence Department spending \$104,804 to a PR firm for 'communications services' and the Remuneration Tribunal paying \$150,000 to PR firm Morris Walker for media services. There was also a report based on FOI searches that the federal Science department had paid an Adelaide public relations company for media training for experts on nuclear waste management (Clarke, 2004).

## **2. Techniques**

At section 1.4 we considered the general role of media relations personnel. This section reports upon the actual techniques and processes of government media relations mentioned in the literature, but first contextualises it with a consideration of broader government policies of media management, information censorship via stemmed leaks and refusals of Freedom of Information requests, specific methods used by PR operatives, special techniques used in an election context, and finally counter-strategies mentioned in the literature on the way journalists deal with government media relations.

### **2.1 Government policy in controlling media**

The history of Australian governments' organisational mechanisms for managing media relations have been covered at 1.5.3 above. This section is concerned with strategic measures of such units.

The most extensive and recent report into the policies and procedures Australian governments (particularly the former Howard government) used to control the media came in the *Report of the Independent Audit into the State of Free Speech in Australia* by a group chaired by former New South Wales ombudsman Irene Moss for the media coalition group, Australia's Right to Know (Moss, 2007). As one of the doyens of the Canberra press gallery, Michelle Grattan, noted at the time of the release of the report, media companies are usually reluctant to forget their competitive differences and co-operate. 'But such have been their frustrations at government secrecy that last May newspaper, television, radio and other interests formed Australia's Right to Know to lobby both sides of politics,' she wrote (Grattan, 2007). The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Freedom of Information editor, Matthew Moore, called the report a 'depressing read' (2007), while *The Australian's* Cameron Stewart described it as 'chilling' (2007). There may have been an element of self interest in publishing stories on the report, but there were wider issues at stake, like the right of the public to be informed on government actions. The report quoted the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders 2007 media freedom ranking of Australia as 28<sup>th</sup> out of 169 countries, and even more alarming the Washington-based Freedom House placing Australia at 39<sup>th</sup> out of 195 countries in 2007, behind such countries as Costa Rica and Taiwan (Moss, 2007, p. 9).

The report was laced with many examples of the Howard government centralising and controlling the release of information (in many cases blatantly preventing it). Of special interest to this research was the fact that the report devoted considerable attention to journalists' specific accounts of the way public relations staff 'spun' government information and organised the release or withholding of information to avoid serious scrutiny. Journalists talked about government PR staff all too often trying to block or frustrate, rather than facilitate their inquiries. Common features of submissions from political journalists were spin doctors' techniques of directing all inquiries through ministers' offices, restricting the number of government employees with authority to speak to the media, demanding that all questions be submitted in writing, taking a long time to respond to questions, offering answers of little value and completely ignoring certain questions (Moss, 2007, p. ii). The press gallery also complained news conferences were short and did not allow free-ranging questions. They were organised at short notice, giving journalists little time to research and prepare questions. Canberra-based journalists complained of the trend by then prime minister John Howard

to use talkback radio to release information without the scrutiny of close questioning (Moss, 2007, p. ii).

There were accounts in the press of such actions beyond that comprehensive report. For example, Kerry-Anne Walshe from the *Sun-Herald* described the centralised control of media relations under Howard as an 'octopus-like' network of media control extending from the prime minister's office to ministerial press secretaries, departmental press officers and electorate media officers (cited in Hamilton & Maddison, 2007). *The Australian's* Ean Higgins lamented in July 2007 a 'clear pattern developing among media flacks in government and public agencies: even though their salaries are paid by taxpayers, they perceive their job not as giving information out but trying to keep it in' (2007).

In a journal article querying whether Australia qualified for the label a 'PR State' (like the United Kingdom under then prime minister Tony Blair), academic Ian Ward (2003, p. 36) noted the Howard administration developed a 'whole of government' co-ordination of its PR effort with the 'intention to exercise a political control over the Commonwealth government's wider publicity activities' to ensure that the prime minister's office had political oversight over all government publicity activities. As Errington and Miragliotta noted, governments at all levels, through their extensive communication resources, had the whip hand in their dealings with the media. They suggested the 'PR State' strategy of controlling the information flow was 'not simply about influencing what is reported, how and when, but also aims to bypass journalists altogether' (2007, p. 82).

Prior to it joining the Right to Know alliance, the journalists' union, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance released its own assessment of the state of press freedom in Australia, titled *Official Spin: Censorship and Control of the Australian Press* (MEAA, 2007b). It detailed threats in existing legislation and how their provisions were played out in the courts in such areas as criminal code amendments, anti-terror legislation, uniform defamation laws, whistleblowers, freedom of information and privacy (pp. 4-11). The report also looked at what it saw as government actions that restricted media freedom, like media ownership provisions, the regulation of content, censorship and the continuing attacks on the ABC (pp. 13-18).

State governments, often of a different political persuasion than their federal counterparts, have been no less astute at developing media strategies. Former NSW Premier Neville Wran was regarded as the first politician to recognise the power of television for relaying a political message, as noted at 2.2.4 below. In Queensland, the Fitzgerald Inquiry into corruption in 1989 found that while it was 'legitimate and necessary' for government ministers, departments and instrumentalities to employ staff to help ensure the public was informed, they could be used to control and manipulate information given to the media. Commissioner Tony Fitzgerald ruled that government minders in the Bjelke-Peterson era 'adopted an adversarial style, criticising, denying access and even bad-mouthing those journalists who reported negatively on the government' (cited in Orr, 1994, pp. 99-100). It is worth noting Commissioner Tony Fitzgerald's words of caution about media units and press secretaries in full:

It is legitimate and necessary for Government Ministers, departments and instrumentalities to employ staff to help ensure the public is kept informed.

Media units can also be used, however, to control and manipulate the information obtained by the media and disseminated to the public.

Although most Government-generated publicity will unavoidably and necessarily be politically advantageous, there is no legitimate justification for taxpayers' money to be spent on politically motivated propaganda.

The only justification for press secretaries and media units is that they lead to a community better informed about Government and departmental activities. If they fail to do this then their existence is a misuse of public funds, and likely to help misconduct to flourish.

It may be that some guidelines to prevent the misuse of public resources by Government media units should be introduced. Consideration should be given to establishing an all-party

parliamentary committee to monitor the cost and workings of Ministerial and departmental media activities, including press secretaries, media units and paid advertising. This committee could analyze whether the money is being spent on informing the public, or distributing propaganda for political gain. It could also bring to the attention of Parliament any misrepresentation or misinformation emanating from the administration (Fitzgerald, 1989, p. 142).

Another state government with a poor public relations record in more recent years has been that in Western Australia.

Wars bring out propaganda strategies of governments, yet few have explored whether there are semantic differences between 'propaganda' and 'spin'. Former prime minister Bob Hawke complained to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation about its coverage of the first Gulf War in 1991, particularly the use of Dr Robert Springborg, whom Hawke considered hostile to the western view of the conflict (Schultz, 1998, p. 88). Like the attack on the BBC more than a decade later (see 2.1.1 below), both attempts to manage the news became matters of considerable public debate, as did the Howard Government's attack on the ABC, led by then communications minister, Senator Richard Alston over the allegedly biased reporting on the Iraq war by the national broadcaster's flagship radio current affairs program, AM (Hirst & Patching, 2007, p. 127).

### **2.1.1 UK government strategies**

The so-called 'The King of Spin', Alastair Campbell, was British Prime Minister Tony Blair's chief media adviser between 1994 and 2003. While the London *Sun* conferred 'royal' status on Campbell on his departure from 10 Downing Street in late August, 2003, the *Mirror* headlined him 'The Most Powerful Man in Britain' (cited in Franklin, 2004, p. 4). On the release of his 794-page diary titled *The Blair Years*, four years later, one reviewer said Campbell had transformed the image of government PR operatives in the United Kingdom from nameless hacks to people who should be regarded with horror ("Close-up: Alastair Campbell Diaries," 2007). Julian Glover, writing in *The Guardian*, said the huge tome could be boiled down to one sentence: 'How me and Tony stuffed the media and changed the world' (cited in "Close-up: Alastair Campbell Diaries," 2007). But how did he manage such control of the release of government information? Geoffrey Craig dated the successful media management (as far as the modern British Labour Party was concerned) back to the 1980s when the party formed a communications and campaigns directorate that brought all the party's media, marketing, advertising and public relations activities under one management unit (Craig, 2004, p. 143). James Curran agreed, noting it was in the 1980s that news management was 'transformed from ad hoc patronage into a modern, technicised system employing large numbers of people with different skills' (Curran, 2002, p. 37). Franklin (2004, pp. 27-30) traced what he called the 'clear line of descent' where 'successive Conservative administrations laid the foundations for such centralised controls on which subsequent labour governments have built a robust and aggressive news management structure' (p. 27).

It is easy to see where the centralised control of the Blair years had their genesis. Campbell admitted the Blair government's spin doctors 'appeared, and perhaps we were, over-controlling, manipulative' (Campbell, 2002, p. 19). So much so that their relationship with the media, and how they got their message across, would become an issue and a story itself in the mould of the 'metacommunication' researched by Esser et. al. (2001) and explained at 1.3 above. Tony Blair's wife, Cherie, gave a rare insight into the working of the Blair Government spin machine in excerpts from her autobiography, published in May 2008. She told how news of her 2002 miscarriage was used to stave off speculation of an early invasion of Iraq ("Cherie's grief was used for Iraq spin," 2008). She recounted how as she lay in pain and bleeding, Blair and Campbell told her they were going public immediately so that the delay in their family holiday because of the miscarriage did not trigger speculation of an early Iraq invasion. Mrs Blair wrote how astonished she was at the ruthless manner in which her husband handled the news of her losing a baby at age 47.

One of the techniques used by the Blair spin machine was to maintain a weekly diary of upcoming events to ensure positive news about the government was not overshadowed by 'bad'

news and, on occasion 'to 'slip out' any bad news on what is broadly a good news day for the government' (Franklin, 2004, p. 61). It also played the political version of the 'carrots and sticks' where journalists critical of the government would have their bids for interviews denied and would no longer receive tips about breaking stories. *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger described how this game was played out in the run-up to the 1997 election. Campbell 'used to ring up to cajole, plead, shout and horse-trade. Stories would be offered on condition that they went on the front page. I would be told if I didn't agree they would be offered to the *Independent*' (cited in Franklin, 2004, p. 63). Campbell had a document compiled assessing senior political journalists, their competences, their perceived influence, their political leanings and, most significantly, their support or hostility to the new Labour cause (Franklin, 2004, p. 63). Other news management strategies of British political parties cited by Franklin included trying to set the news agenda so the media was focused on issues favourable to them and parties negotiating with broadcasters over the format of programs and the style and content of political interviews (Franklin, 2004, pp. 132-137). Another was to establish key government entities to orchestrate relationships between the government and the media: the Media Monitoring Unit designed to prepare daily digest of news content and identify potential crises; and the Strategic Communications Unit, aimed at co-ordinating media relations efforts to keep all of the government branches 'on message' (Franklin, 2004, p. 60).

Franklin cited Campbell's campaign against the BBC in the wake of Andrew Gilligan's infamous allegation that Campbell had 'sexed up' the dodgy dossier used to justify the invasion of Iraq by the 'Coalition of the Willing' as a classic news management strategy to shift media attention off the Prime Minister and onto the BBC, a classic case of 'killing the messenger' (Franklin, 2004, p. 54). The BBC had a long history of being attacked by British governments (Margaret Thatcher at the time of the Falklands War, for instance), so much so that its response was often to be overly timid, giving rise to the suggestion that it was an acronym for 'Be Bloody Cautious' (Franklin, 2004, p. 30).

### **2.1.2 US government general strategies**

In the United States, it was the Clinton administration that perfected the art of bringing 'government spin' into that nation's living rooms. The rise of the 24-hour news cycle and the President's endless scandals meant television viewers were constantly bombarded with carefully worded sound bites from the White House. One of their more lasting legacies of spin occurred in 1997 when Congress voted \$US1 billion for a print and television anti-drug campaign. As Jodie Morse explained, the administration offered to buy advertising time from television networks and the print media at half price (Morse, 2006, p. 855). In a lukewarm economic climate, many outlets agreed. But when the economy revived, participation flagged, so the White House suggested that if the networks inserted government-approved anti-drug messages into their shows, they did not have to run the ads at all and could re-sell the time already underwritten by Congress. Many outlets jumped at the deal, and the White House could pre-approve scripts of shows like *ER* and *Beverly Hills 90210* containing the anti-drug material (Morse, 2006, p. 855).

The Bush Administration has been shown on a number of occasions to have used spin doctoring techniques to advance their causes. In 2005 the administration admitted it paid conservative commentators to praise its programs and policies. The Education Department paid Armstrong Williams \$241,000 (about \$260,000) to push Bush's controversial 'No Child Left Behind' program, and another commentator was paid less than a tenth of that amount to promote the Department of Health and Human Services (Ethics Newline, 2005b). The president decided to stop the practice after it surfaced. Later in the same year the *Los Angeles Times* reported that articles praising US military efforts were written by US military personnel, translated into Arabic by a defence contractor who then paid to place the stories in papers in Baghdad (Ethics Newline, 2005a).

The year 2005 was a bad one for the administration. The respected *New York Times* reported that in the (northern) summer the Administration faced a fresh wave of criticism of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre, branded by Amnesty International as 'the gulag of our times' and more calls for its

closure. The spin doctors responded by sending a group of retired military officers to Cuba for a carefully orchestrated tour of the camp. As David Barstow of the *NYT* reported, these men were familiar faces in the US, 'presented tens of thousands of times on television and radio as 'military experts' whose long service equipped them to give authoritative and unfettered judgments about the most pressing issues of the post-Sept 11 world' (2008). The Pentagon's PR machine was accused of using the analysts in a campaign to generate favourable coverage of the administration's war effort. Barstow characterised the analysts as a media 'Trojan Horse' – intended to shape terrorism coverage from inside the major American TV and radio networks (2008).

Government-initiated spin tactics were also adopted by the Bush Administration in the context of the Iraq war. With the outbreak of the second Iraq conflict in 2003, the US military were ready to present the battle to the world viewing audience from their \$2.5 million Hollywood-designed set at Central Command Headquarters in Doha, Qatar. For example, when asked about a missile strike on a Baghdad marketplace in which 16 civilians died, a Defence Public Affairs spokesperson characterised it as 'just a sign of the brutality of this regime and a sign of how little they care about civilians that they put military assets close to civilians, in and around, and near civilians, deliberately putting their lives at risk' (Starick, 2003). Such media officers were called the 'warriors of spin', fighting the propaganda war. One of the president's most loyal aides, former press secretary and chief spin doctor Scott McClellan, came clean in his memoir of his time in the White House in May, 2008, when he said President Bush used propaganda to sell the Iraq war (cited in Elliott, 2008). He said the President was not 'open and forthright on Iraq' adding that the decision to invade was a 'serious strategic blunder' and 'was not necessary' (quoted in Elliott, 2008).

Louw (2005, pp. 155-162) tracked the increasing sophistication of US presidents' media management methods from the Nixon through to the Clinton administrations, all designed to 'script' the particular leader's celebrity. He described Nixon and his media team as the most significant 'innovators' (p. 154) and detailed the following techniques among others:

- Engaging a full time television producer to advise on performances;
- Adopting the 'man in the arena' concept, where television forums would feature questions from ordinary folk with media questions barred; and
- Using Hollywood stars for endorsement, feeding a notion of celebrity to media.

Reagan's administration took media relations a step further, according to Louw (2005, pp. 156-157) including:

- The 'Rose Garden Strategy' where he would look 'presidential' and control questioning by jumping from a helicopter into the White House rose garden and shout a few quotes as he rushed off to undertake important business;
  - Use of the Internet for the first time;
  - Using satellites for live television feeds of statements;
  - Capitalising on the niche media sector, notably cable television and ethnic media;
- and
- Creating Republican Television Network so his party convention could be covered with quality images provided free to networks.

Clinton built upon these methods with:

- The 'Manhattan Project' to counter an image problem with positive and heart-wrenching details from his background (Louw, 2005, pp. 161-162);
- Twice daily 'War Room' meetings with media advisers on strategy.
- 'Rapid response strategy', including both research into opposition tactics and a dirty tricks campaign to pre-empt and counter them;
- Regular meetings between key media advisers and public information officers from the executive to present a uniform image;
- Predetermining topics before agreeing to interviews;
- 'Narrowcasting' his message to local communities;
- Producing video news releases in the White House studio;

- Ramping up the use of email as a media communication device; and
- Operating on a 'permanent campaign' footing for every policy initiative.

### **2.1.3 French government strategies**

The French government had another tactic for controlling parts of the media. All media have to contend with advertisers trying to influence content one way or the other. But in a showdown early in 1996 that many would find inconceivable, the then French prime minister Alain Juppe complained to the chairman of Agence France-Presse, the world's third-largest news agency, about coverage of two sensitive issues. Within weeks of the criticism AFP chairman Lionel Fleury was replaced with someone more to Juppe's liking (Baldwin, 1996). At the time, AFP employed 1100 journalists worldwide and had revenues of about \$US24 million, but about 46 per cent of its subscription sales (as well as other subsidies) came from the French government (Baldwin, 1996).

## **2.2 Techniques of actual media relations operatives**

The Australian Broadcasting Authority's *Sources of News and Current Affairs* report (ABA, 2001) noted that public relations practitioners had used a range of strategies and mechanisms for getting access to journalists. These included direct approaches in person and by telephone, the mailing of press releases to target publications and journalists, the purchasing of advertorial space, the offering of 'freebies' in return for editorial coverage, the staging of press conferences and the sending of press releases and other literature by facsimile message and over specially designated wire services.

The literature generally reveals numerous techniques in addition to these. We start with a general discussion of techniques before moving to specific spin strategies, those used by politicians, those used in the context of elections, and those targeted at specific media such as television and new media.

### **2.2.1 General discussion and theories of techniques**

One of the first articles to theorise about the role and function of the 'spin doctor' was that by Sumpter and Tankard (1994) where they introduced the 'spin control' or 'spin doctor' model as a new model of public relations, an alternative to the traditional approach. They identified nine key points of difference between the two, including goals, media, clients, tools, communication techniques, orientation to the public, breadth of appeal, approach to ethics and concern with self-image (p. 24). Many of these related to actual strategies used, which are discussed in the appropriate sections below.

Greve (2005), Craig (2004) and Brown (2003) offered general discussions of public relations tactics, many of which have been applied in the government media relations context. Craig (2004, p. 45) observed the aim was to maximise communication of the message and to minimise media scrutiny and interference. Brown (2003, p. 3) suggested the driving principle of supplying information to the media was to place the sponsor organisation in the most positive light and the opponent in the most negative possible light. This required systematic co-ordination of communications across departments using 'communications grids' identifying messages of the day or week. Supporting this was the systematic monitoring of media to identify negative coverage and to allow for quick rebuttal, even 'prebuttal' – a response issued before an anticipated attack. Brown (2003, p. 3) divided tactics into positive (privileged access to information) and negative (denial of access and bullying). Greve (2005, p. 12) discussed government agencies' efforts 'designed to get information directly to the public by going over the heads, around the backs, and between the legs of MSM' (mainstream media). The specific techniques are discussed at 2.2.2 below.

Gaber (2000, p. 508) offered a useful theoretical framework for the consideration of spin techniques, with a broad division between 'below the line' and 'above the line' strategies, with the former being 'overt' functions that 'would have caused an 'old-fashioned' press officer no great difficulty', and the latter being more 'covert' and more about strategies and tactics than about imparting information. Examples from recent British politics were offered. He listed 'above the line' activities as:



- Government or party announcements;
- Reacting to the above;
- Publicising speeches, interviews and articles;
- Reacting to interviews or speeches; and
- Reacting to breaking news events.

‘Below the line’ activities, more associated with ‘spin’ were:

- ‘Staying on message’ (keeping spokespersons’ comments consistent);
- ‘Spinning’ (the process of highlighting positives to journalists);
- Re- and pre-buttal (responding to an attack or anticipating one);
- Setting the news agenda;
- Driving the news agenda (sustained campaign focussed on particular issue);
- Planting a story (supplying an article purportedly written by a politician but really by a media adviser);
- ‘Firebreaking’ (deliberate diversion from an embarrassing scandal);
- ‘Stoking the fire’ (supplying media with material to fuel an embarrassing story about opponent);
- Building up a personality (structuring media events for emerging stars);
- Undermining a personality;
- Pre-empting;
- Kite-flying (floating proposals to test reaction);
- Raising or lowering expectations (particularly in lead-up to Budget);
- Milking a story (maximising positive coverage);
- Throwing out the bodies (issuing bad news announcements at most opportune moments in media production process);
- Laundering (releasing newsworthy ‘good’ news to overshadow ‘bad’ news on same day);
- The ‘white commonwealth’ (creating a favoured group of journalists); and
- Bullying and intimidation.

In another theoretical paradigm using a cultural studies approach, van Zoonen (2003, pp. 108-122) compared the portrayal of politicians with the development of plot and characters in television soap operas. She argued political communication was about converting politicians into celebrities, with spin doctors the equivalent of Hollywood publicity agents ‘managing the image of, and access to, their stars’ (p. 92). She contended that spin doctors wrote the ‘script’ for politicians’ soap opera appearances, with classic elements of the genre represented, including ‘scandal, conflicting, incompetence and spin control’ (p. 108).

### **2.2.2 Government information officer techniques**

The literature cites a gamut of techniques used by practitioners of government media relations. Methods used in media relations for government departments and more general PR strategies applied in the government context are listed here, while strategies used specifically by politicians are featured in the section immediately following.

VanSlyke Turk (1986, p. 13) considered the ‘information subsidies’ used by public information officers at six Louisiana state agencies and identified six such ‘subsidies’ in currency at the time: written news releases, telephone calls, agency documents, press conferences and in-person contact. It is noteworthy that her research was conducted in 1984 - the very year identified by Andrews (2006) when the term ‘spin’ was first used in a mainstream publication – the *New York Times*. Thus, VanSlyke Turk was concerned with the traditional traceable techniques of government media relations rather than the more sophisticated ‘spin’ techniques of the modern era.

Sumpter and Tankard (1994, p. 24) distinguished the techniques of the spin doctor from the traditional public relations practitioner, suggesting they were more likely to:

- Be reactive rather than active, attempting to deal with negative turns of events and ‘brushfire control’, often using pre-emptive strategies;
- Use new technologies;
- Work in the field of government or politics as distinct from corporations;
- Use indirect PR tools such as contact with editors and visiting reporters in the press room rather than broad-brush press releases and news conferences;
- Use specific strategies like the 30-second sound bite, talking points to get into the day’s news and ‘good news, then bad news’ delivery styles; and
- Flood media channels with the client’s message (p. 24).

Much can be gleaned about techniques by browsing any of the numerous trade journals for the public relations industry, such as PR Week in the United States. Examples included the use of exclusives to ‘get into a publication they are finding hard to break’ (Trickett, 2002) and the positioning of a client as an expert commentator, often via online services like ProfNet, SourceNet and ExpertClick (PR Week, 2003).

Simmons and Spence (2006, p. 167) examined the techniques behind what they coin ‘media release journalism’ – basically, the phenomenon where the resulting ‘news’ ‘is not the product of journalistic inquiry or attempts to report a balance of viewpoints, but the preferred representations of the entities that issue media releases’. They cited others referring to the media release as the most important public relations tool (p. 168). In a conference paper, Simmons (2006, p. 9) described the ability to craft press releases in ‘a style that is indistinguishable from news’ as a foundational skill in public relations.

Greve (2005, p. 12) quoted a retired Environmental Protection Agency public affairs official detailing techniques used in that government agency, including:

- Briefings to which only supportive reporters were invited;
- Teleconferences for reporters with a one-question rule and thus no follow-up questions;
- Leaks to outlets outside of Washington when the daily White House beat reporters grow hostile.

Louw (2005, pp. 164-166) noted that part of the work of a government PR officer was to supply journalists ‘with the sorts of stories and images they need to please their bosses’. He added the following strategies:

- Conducting background research for stories, letting journalists believe they still had control;
- Leaking stories to inexperienced journalists who did not realise they were being used;
- Leaking stories to experienced journalists as exclusives, creating a debt-favour relationship while allowing journalists to maintain a ‘professional ideology’ of not being used;
- Scripting speeches to make sound bites and intros easier for reporters;
- Arranging ideal photo opportunities, often staged as part of ‘pseudo-events’;
- Arranging news conferences to make the quotes as easy to obtain as possible;
- ‘Jumping over’ the heads of ‘problematic’ journalists by using local and niche media, cable television, direct mail and advertisements;
- Organising teams to write letters to newspapers, creating impression of a groundswell of opinion;
- Monitoring and telephoning talkback radio programs; and
- Lobbying key columnists and editorial writers.

Grundy (1993, p. 293) reported on Queensland’s Electoral and Administrative Review Commission’s inquiry into government public relations in 1992-1993. The body found the Queensland government had been using many of the techniques mentioned above, along with:

- Sometimes giving newspaper reporters a story late in the day so television and radio missed out;
- Giving stories to television reporters days in advance, while promising to withhold it from newspapers until after it had been screened;
- Public reprimands of journalists who dared to criticise the government; and
- Press secretaries planning ministerial trips around the facilities and links available for television crews;

The dissemination of the media relations message has also been known to take the form of payments to columnists to hype up government policy and the commissioning of freelancers to write favourable stories about government agency programs (Heavey, 2005).

While most examples in the literature came from state and national governments, there is also a large media relations component to local government. Hough (2005) reported on a South Australian campaign by the Local Government Association to help ease the message of rate increases. As well as holding a 'media briefing' to explain how rates were set, the association sent a mock press release to the state's 68 councils, complete with mock quotes and information about initiatives, ready for release to the media under particular councils' letterheads.

### **2.2.3 Politicians' techniques and examples**

Louw (2005, pp. 17-18) saw three distinct groups involved in the media-political process: political insiders, semi-insiders and outsiders. The political insiders were the major political players, the semi-insiders were aware of 'the game' political elites played, but were not privy to the highest level discussions of policy and strategy. The outsiders were the public or electorate, the passive consumers of the political news disseminated by the media. Of importance to this discussion is that Louw placed both spin doctors and 'some' journalists in the semi-insiders group. He likened the hype created by politicians and their media advisers to the smoke and mirrors that magicians used to distract their audiences and conjure up illusions (p. 143).

Dale (1985, p. 4), press secretary to former NSW premier Neville Wran, argued a new era of sophistication in media relations was introduced by that politician from 1973. He portrayed the former Liberal premier Sir Robert Askin as representing 'the gruff, blustering politician's style of the fifties and sixties' (p. 4). Askin's techniques were restricted to the press release, a rare off-the-record chat to a favoured reporter (p. 4), a quiet word to a media proprietor, or the release of bad news when the media least expected it – famously on one occasion during the press gallery's Christmas party (p. 6). Wran, Dale wrote, breathed new life into the relationship through a range of techniques, including:

- Aircraft trips to disaster sites with a media contingent (p. 12);
- Ensuring some close and friendly experiences with journalists they could share with their colleagues to shore up the perception of him being a likeable individual in journalistic circles and in the press gallery folklore (p. 13);
- Thinking visually to play to television coverage of announcements (p. 57);
- Developing the art of the late Sunday press release to capitalise on the slow news weekend (p. 18);
- Making himself available to the media each morning and having journalists to his office (p. 115); and
- Timing and pooling ministerial media announcements so the government's 'good' stories could be told on different days and 'bad' announcements could be interspersed between positive ones for minimal impact (p. 114).

A press gallery view of the techniques used by spin doctors of all political persuasions operating at state and federal levels was provided by Nick Richardson, who had spent half his working life writing about politics. In a chapter in Tanner's *Journalism Investigation & Research* (2002, pp. 173 - 183), he detailed the strategies he had observed:

- **The time limit** – The release of information late in the day so evening radio and TV news bulletins did not carry all the details, or carried no substantial criticism from the opposing political party or media.
- **The leak** – Either managed or unmanaged. The former could be an effective way to selectively disseminate information to sympathetic outlets or journalists. The latter was seen as the mark of the good journalist who was leaked potentially damaging information.
- **The freeze** – Essentially punishment, most likely imposed by government media officers, on individuals who did not ‘play by the rules’ or who were perceived to report in a partial manner.
- **The spray** – A basic government tactic designed to intimidate, bully, silence or at least engender second thoughts on the part of individuals about the reporting of a particular story.
- **The wedge** – Best described as the divide-and-conquer principle where the government drove a wedge between sections of the media. Part of the strategy was to let the media know its purpose – favouring the ‘chosen ones’.
- **The drip** – This was where rare access to information from the government by way of a senior figure was afforded to journalists and broadcasters who were believed to be sympathetic to the government.
- **The spin** – What Richardson called the most reviled or valuable tool in government-media relations, depending on your perspective, which as we have seen many times thus far, was the practice of putting the best light on events.
- **The agenda** – The attempt by the government to dictate what they saw as the most important issues of the day often driven by the political imperative of minimising problems by either defusing the political row or distracting the media from concentrating on it.
- **The briefing** – This originated as a method of ensuring the government communicated its message effectively, directly and anonymously to the media. But in more recent times it had become another opportunity, Richardson noted, for some generous spin doctoring.
- **The venue** – This relatively recent tactic came from overseas experience where the political leader was deliberately isolated from the media pack. It allowed the leader to appear before the media pack on his or her own terms.

Craig (2004, p. 142) contended that spin doctors aimed to generate publicity for their political masters while controlling their public presence. This created the paradox where a politician had a high public profile but was relatively inaccessible to the media. Craig listed several media strategies used by politicians, including:

- Minimising dissent on the floor at party conferences (p. 45);
- Timing release of information just before media deadlines (p. 45);
- Deflecting interview questions towards preferred topic (p. 45);
- Holding fewer press conferences (p. 142);
- Holding more ‘doorstop’ interviews to control discussion (p. 142);
- Selecting more favourable radio and television interviewers (p. 142);
- Appearing on talkback radio to be seen to interact directly with public via a sympathetic interviewer (p. 142); and
- Limiting the few individuals who could speak to the media on a specified topic (p. 142).

Media relations personnel were also willing to go on the offensive against journalists. Esser et al. (2000, p. 216) listed ‘complaining’ as a key component of a spin doctor’s job: about bias, time allocations vis a vis opponents, weightings of stories, dropped interviews and so on (p. 216). More important than the fact of complaining was the nature, frequency and scale of complaints, they contended. Negative tactics included implicit and explicit threats about cutting off journalists’ access to the politician or information. Kurtz (1998, pp. 30-32) recounted how US president Bill

Clinton's press secretary Mike McCurry used the technique to effect against the *New York Post*. He also used threats to withdraw presidential access to ABC network correspondents and affiliated programs and some administration officials even visited the ABC Washington bureau to make their message clear (p. 30). Adelaide *Advertiser* senior journalist Paul Starick said the tactics used by spin doctors included 'cajoling, intimidation, obfuscation, the implied fear of missing out on future stories – or even telling the truth' (2005). James (2003, p. 18) quoted Clerk of the Senate, Harry Evans, telling a parliamentary inquiry that ministerial advisers saw part of their role as 'going out and frightening and savaging people who they think ought to be frightened and savaged for the good of the cause'. Phelan referred to some of the less attractive roles of the ministerial press secretary, like threatening to cut off the supply of government news to reporters who did not 'toe the government line' and the selective leaking of stories to 'favoured' journalists (1993, p. 292). Politicians often simply attacked the media, as Howard government Foreign Minister Alexander Downer did in 2004 when he did not like the content of a promo for an upcoming program on terrorism which he saw as inferring that he and the government had prior knowledge of the Bali bombings and had failed to protect Australian lives (Marr, 2004).

Both of the major journalism education journals in the US, the *Columbia Journalism Review* and the *American Journalism Review*, have looked at the issue of political media relations. Alicia Mundy, writing in the former journal more than 15 years ago asked: Is the press any match for powerhouse PR? (1992) and went on to chronicle what she saw as the latest techniques used by Washington PR operatives to control the news agenda. One of the techniques suggested by a staffer of PR powerhouse Hill and Knowlton was to 'go after the little lies in a big way', meaning to attack any and all flaws in a reporter's story, then use them to discredit the whole piece (Mundy, 1992). The article mentioned other methods suggested by PR firms to counter and bad press.

Some used spin itself as a weapon against a political opponent, as noted by Paul Starick in the *Advertiser* in 2007, citing Liberal attacks on Premier Mike Rann as being concerned 'about style and spin ahead of substance' (2007). The same newspaper even covered the fact the parliamentary speaker even issued a press release complaining about the rise in the use of spin by his colleagues (Kelton, 2004).

Richards saw part of the spin doctors' job as being on the phone for much of the day complaining – 'about perceived bias, lack of time given to an item, too much time given to an opponent, lack of prominence given to a story, an interview being dropped, or incorrectly slanted facts' (cited in Esser et al., 2000, p. 216). Other activities are less controversial, like explaining and interpreting the party's strategy, issues and candidates' statements to the media; strategy, speech and debate consulting; polling, focus groups and grass-rooting; as well as advertisement consulting and producing commercials (2000, p. 216).

Louw (2005, p. 166) suggested some special strategies for what he called 'political PRs', including:

- Providing off the record backgrounders to journalists, sometimes involving key personnel such as the politician meeting directly with them to 'charm' them;
- Enhancing or damaging journalists' career paths by providing stories to them if they were deemed 'friendly' or freezing them out otherwise;
- Conducting smear campaigns against opponents based on intelligence from an effective research department;
- Staging planted questions when politicians met the public in shopping malls or during parliamentary question time;
- Helping identify media talent amongst politicians and 'grooming' them;
- Training politicians for television performances and in rehearsed responses;
- Teaching politicians to be dressed and groomed appropriately; and
- Accompanying politicians to help 'manage' their micro-relationships with media outlets.

Ingham (2003, p. 89) proposed that leaks could rob a government of its control over the agenda and damaged cohesion because of the suspicions raised about other ministers and civil servants. Yet

the practice of leaking had become 'a way of governance' for the Blair government, he contended. Australian political correspondent Michelle Grattan (1998, p. 41) described the phenomenon of the 'double leak' where material was first leaked to the Opposition who, in turn, leaked it to a journalist. She divided leaks into two categories: those that leaked despite attempts to keep the information secret and material that was deliberately leaked with a strategic purpose. She said the motivation of the deliberate leak was to get a certain spin on a story and to get added exposure for it, while making the journalist feel obligated. However, it could cause lazy and distorted journalism, she argued (p. 42).

Ester (2007, pp. 117-122) categorised the decline of 'all-in' press conferences and the ascendancy of talkback radio as the key means of blocking and distorting information by ministerial staff. Press conferences had become highly controlled and stage-managed, with former prime minister John Howard often delivering a few sentences and refusing to take questions. This reduced journalists' access to the executive, she contended. Talkback radio presented 'an effective means of talking directly to the public and avoiding difficult or "pesky" questions from journalists', Ester wrote (p. 118). One journalist described the practice as 'press conference by radio' and the scripts of such interviews became the source of the day for political quotes. Another senior correspondent said journalists had become 'captive to transcripts' (p. 121). Television and newspapers had to rely on their images of the radio studio interview to accompany their stories.

As Geoffrey Craig pointed out, since media relations officers had often worked previously as reporters, they had an intimate knowledge of the needs and strategies of journalists (2004, p. 44). He gave their functions as issuing media releases, organising news conferences, handling inquiries from journalists, following up on information released to the media and organising media access to their politicians. The media relations officer would advise their politician on media strategy and work on the politician's media presentation skills, including voice and style training. He or she may also oversee the work of other staff, such as researchers, and liaise with party staff.

Stanton (2007, p. 139) said a media adviser would build a profile of an individual journalist by researching everything the individual wrote 'so they have a feel for the direction the individual will take on an issue or event that related to the specific ministerial portfolio the adviser is responsible for'.

Releasing an item on a big news day was another basic strategy (Franklin, 2004). Franklin (p.3) explained how this was done on September 11, 2001 when British government spin doctor Jo Moore circulated an email to colleagues stating 'It's now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury'. Ingham (2003, pp. 134-135) described the tactic as the 'Jo Moore game' – burying bad news under the guise of a major diverting story or releasing it late on the last day of parliamentary sittings or on a Friday afternoon. One such big news day in Australia each year was Federal Budget day, the perfect timing for the South Australian government to issue a press release announcing pay rises for 10 of the state's top public servants (Eccles & Kelton, 1998, p. 19).

Ingham (2003, pp. 134-135) also saw the role as 'intelligence agent' as central to the press officer's role – gathering information for a minister or department via contact with journalists. Grattan (1998, p. 41) also underscored the importance of a good monitoring procedure to the spin process.

Former press secretary from the Bjelke-Petersen era in Queensland, John Phelan, noted that the term 'news management' had taken on more sinister connotations in the 1980s and 1990s, with the goal to have government news staggered through the week so as not to create a political news 'vacuum', which would prompt journalists and/or the Opposition to create issues (cited in Grundy, 1993, p. 292).

Another concept of journalist-media adviser relations canvassed by Phillipps was reciprocity, or fair dealing. He said that in their relationships with political journalists, media advisers 'stressed the need for fair dealing (at least with those reporters who dealt fairly with them)' (2002, p. 181).

Some of the politicians' techniques were 'controlling', designed to manage the information flow by interview pooling, microphone management and so on (Nicholas Jones, 2003, pp. 29-30). Phillipps (2002, pp. 105-109) analysed the role of the media adviser as 'fixer', stage-managing

leaders' appearances and orchestrating the events (pp. 105-109) and screening photo opportunities carefully, giving examples of situations where they had backfired on the politician (pp. 129-133). In early 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's minders were accused of trying to prevent journalists filming or asking questions of the prime minister while he was in public areas of Parliament House (ABC News, 2008).

The extent to which government minders played an active role in the finer aspects of media management was explained by Adelaide *Advertiser* reporter Craig Bildstien (2004, p. 40) who traced the trail of 32 emails between government staffers, communication advisers and an advertising agency over a five day period related to a state government advertisement for the opening of a gas pipeline between South Australia and Victoria.

In June 2008, a backbencher in the new Rudd Labor Government admitted he was part of a new spin technique adopted by that administration: a roster of MPs 'primed and ready to deliver the message of the day to waiting media as they walk through the doors of parliament House every morning' (Kerr, 2008a). The strategy allowed for these selected politicians to improve their own profile while keeping the government 'on message'. Those not rostered for that day might use another, less public, entrance to Parliament House.

### **2.2.3.1 Election techniques**

Techniques used during election campaigns have been considered deserving of attention in their own right. Politicians' media relations efforts take on a special intensity and focus during election campaigns, with special techniques being brought into play.

Grattan (1998, pp. 39-40) has described how the media relations of election campaigns changed over several decades in Australia, from speeches and twice daily press conferences through the introduction of the doorstep format for campaign press conferences, through the use of suitable backdrops for television, to the emergence of talkback radio interviews as a communicative device.

Esser et. al. (2001) identified three distinct phases of political communication in election campaigns in the United States (later to be adopted elsewhere round the world) over the past 50 years. In the 1960s they characterised election coverage in the media as issue-dominated, using mainly a descriptive style, where the candidates' policy statements were of inherent news value, the candidates were the main agenda-setters, and their words carried the story (p. 16). In the 70s issue-based stories gave way to stories emphasising who was ahead and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead and stay there. This is where the modern day spin doctors made a major appearance in the political process. This phase, called 'strategy coverage' was marked by features like winning and losing as the central concerns; the language of the campaigns were of war, games and competition; stories with plots, performers, critics and audiences (voters); centrality of performance, style manoeuvres, and manipulated appearances of the candidate; journalists' interpretation and questioning of candidates' motives; and a strong emphasis on opinion polls and the candidates' standing in them (p. 17). This could still be seen in Australian election campaigns, even in the most recent poll – the 'Ruddslide' of November, 2007. But the 1988 US presidential election was seen as a watershed in the third stage of political reporting, the so-called 'metacoverage', foreshadowed in 1.3 above. Here the media diverged from its customary role as a conduit of information to one of reporting on how it (the media) was one of the actors on the campaign stage. Reporters focussed on the media's role, acknowledged they were being manipulated by the spin doctors and attempted to deconstruct their purpose. Metacoverage was defined as the self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism (Esser et al., 2001, p. 17). Political journalists wrote themselves and their colleagues into the story of the campaign.

Examples of this in the 2007 Australian federal election campaign included the controversy over whether former Treasurer Peter Costello was 'on' or 'off' the record when he attacked John Howard's chances of winning ("Costello coy over 'destroy' dinner," 2007); the attempt to use a political reporter for *The Age* to smear deputy Opposition Leader Julia Gillard (Koutsoukis, 2007) and the so-called 'Overington Affair' involving a senior journalist on *The Australian*. The ABC's

weekly journalism critique *Media Watch* revealed less than three weeks before the November 24 poll that Caroline Overington sent a series of emails to an independent candidate for the seat of Wentworth saying if she gave her preferences to the sitting member, Malcolm Turnbull, she'd get front page treatment (Ricketson, 2007). She became involved in another email scandal involving the Labor candidate, George Newhouse. It all came to a head at her local polling booth on election day and readers of Overington's sister paper, the *Sunday Telegraph*, woke on November 25 to read about Kevin Rudd's election victory, the defeat of prime minister John Howard in his seat of Bennelong by former ABC journalist Maxine McKew, and Ms Overington slapping Mr Newhouse's face (Markson & Chesterton, 2007). *The Australian* took the unusual step of a brief page two apology for their reporter's behaviour ("Apology to George Newhouse," 2007). On election day, the *Weekend Australian* allowed conservative columnist Christopher Pearson to lament that the 'Fourth estate let us down' in the coverage of the campaign (C. Pearson, 2007). He took up the case of former Labor spin doctor Barrie Cassidy, host of the ABC's Sunday morning talk show, *Insiders*, who injected himself into the campaign by complaining that then opposition leader Kevin Rudd was deliberately avoiding scrutiny by any but the softest media interviewers and urged journalists to 'declare war' on Rudd.

Right on cue, in the run-up to the 2007 Federal Election, the *Walkley Magazine*, the official journal of the journalists' union, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), devoted an eight-page section to political spin, titled 'Out of control: Breaking the spin cycle' (2007a). Articles by Channel 10 political editor in Queensland, Cathy Border (2007), researcher Anne Tiernan (2007), media freedom advocate and lawyer Geoffrey Robertson (2007) and journalists Jack Marx (2007) and Hedley Thomas (2007), canvassed various aspects of political spin. Border chronicled the highlights of master media manipulator and self-confessed 'media tart' Peter Beattie's premiership in Queensland (he had recently retired as State leader only to return as a commentator for the *Seven* network on election night):

After years of observing the Beattie stunts it became brutally clear that there was little he wouldn't attempt. As his former deputy Terry Mackenroth once observed, the most dangerous thing you could do was stand between Peter Beattie and a television camera (Border, 2007)

But behind every stunt – like swimming with sharks at Underwater World on the Sunshine Coast and describing it as 'normal Queensland politics' (Border, 2007) is another spin doctor, and as will be noted elsewhere, he had plenty of them on the State payroll.

Spin could also involve massive generalisations. Politicians have been known to use phrases like 'the voters support X' or 'the voters are totally opposed to X' when they really mean 'I hope they are, as X is a key part of our campaign' (Jaensch, 2005).

Franklin (2004, pp. 120-140) divided party communication strategies during UK elections into two overarching categories, each with sub-categories:

- Party propaganda
  - Party election broadcasts
  - Political advertising
- News management
  - Setting the news agenda
  - Structuring contact to control media appearances
  - Coaching politicians in media skills
  - Complaining about poor coverage

Esser et. al. (2000, p. 228) examined the reportage of election spin-doctoring in newspapers in Germany and the UK. They divided spin doctor activities into those not directly related to the media and those directly related to the media:

*Activities not directly related to the media*

- Strategic consulting;
- Speech or public appearance consulting;
- Political advertising;



- Public opinion research: polling, focus groups;
- Disciplining one's own camp eg, keeping members 'on message';
- Other activities concerning the oppositional campaign; and
- General consulting.

*Activities directly related to the media*

- Explaining the party's election strategy to journalists;
- Criticising the political opponent publicly, 'negative campaigning';
- Informing or exclusive briefing of journalists;
- Explaining candidate's and party's statements and actions to journalists;
- Misinforming, intimidating, criticising journalists;
- Explaining candidate's and party's plans (as regards content) and political positions to journalists;
- Rapid response via the media;
- Preventing negative coverage by criticising and threatening journalists;
- Media monitoring; and
- Media-related activities without specification.

In a later study expanded to the United States, Esser et. al. (2001, p. 33) chose a three-way division of spin doctors' activities into those directly related to the media, those aimed at fighting the opposition's campaign and those aimed at improving their own party's campaign. The activities cited above were redistributed within those headings.

#### **2.2.4 Techniques for television**

As noted above, Dale (1985, p. 148), press secretary to NSW Premier Neville Wran, suggested his boss was the first Australian politician to focus his PR efforts upon television as a political news medium. He did this in several ways, including:

- Scheduling television interviews for the mornings to allow for networks' production times and scheduling (p. 57);
- Getting out of the office and away from the lectern into real-life locations with more visual appeal (p. 57);
- Bringing stories to life on camera. For example, destroying a bicycle helmet to demonstrate poor safety standards (p. 59);
- Providing beer and meals to television news stories to lure them back time and again (pp. 59-60);
- Giving television reporters special treatment with exclusives in the weeks before their contracts came up for renewal to get them on side (p. 121); and
- Marking the most suitable 30 to 45 second 'grabs' of speeches so reporters could top and tail them without even attending the function (p.120).

Michelle Grattan (1998, p. 38), as a political correspondent for the *Age*, bemoaned that fact that former prime minister John Howard's strategy was to hold more television and radio interviews and fewer press conferences, making him 'simultaneously over-exposed and under-available' (p. 38).

Greve (2005, p. 13) observed that the broadcast industry was too loosely organised, tightly budgeted and ethically compromised to prevent the 'unacknowledged airing of government PR' and that the trend would continue.

This might have accounted for the increasing use of the strategy of special television-oriented media packages, known as VNRs (video news releases), which has been the subject of several academic analyses. Morse (2006, p. 857) dated their use by US federal agencies to the early 1990s but noted an increase in their usage as they were used in the new millennium to promote President Bush's 'signature initiatives'. VNRs became a news topic in their own right from 2005 when the Bush administration was exposed as paying to produce them for its initiatives and then supplying them to television stations which proceeded to air them as authentic news broadcasts (Ahrens, 2006). The revelation prompted a Federal Communications Commission inquiry into the practice with the

potential for \$32,500 fines if stations did not use proper labelling. One health policy package even had a reporter's sign-off: 'In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting', and was broadcast into 40 of the US's key television markets (Morse, 2006, p. 857). The US General Accounting Office deemed the government-prepared material as 'covert propaganda' violating laws against using taxpayer dollars for propaganda purposes (Dickinson, 2004).

Simmons (2006, p. 9) debated the ethics of government distribution and media use of non-disclosed VNRs after the watering down of the S.967 Pre-packaged News Stories Bill in Congress. Simmons identified a tension between self-regulatory recommendations for disclosure of a VNR source and the PR aim to 'craft news releases in a style that is indistinguishable from news'. There was more pressure to use such material where news budgets were tight and there were demands on journalists to up their output, particularly on local stations with few staff (p. 12). Complicating the disclosure issue was the fact that journalists 'prefer not to be seen to be using PR sources' and 'TV stations don't like to appear to be using video material not produced by their own people' (p. 15).

Jackson (2008b, p. 33) explained the typical VNR in Australia consisted of 'what is called a B-roll, comprising overlay footage, graphics and interview grabs'. Audio grabs were also available for radio stations via a dedicated 1800 number (p. 38). Most examples of their use she cited were corporate or industry lobby groups rather than government, though she dated the use by all such bodies to 1995. Television news directors she contacted either denied they used VNRs, claimed they used them rarely but labelled them as such, or refused to comment.

Richards (2005, p. 104) quoted Canberra press gallery doyen Laurie Oakes describing ministerial issue of VNRs as 'straight-out propaganda' because the minister was able to avoid journalistic questioning via the mechanism.

The most sought after television coverage in the world was a spot on a US network morning show, industry journal *PR Week* contended (2003, p. 18). It suggested the following techniques for doing so:

- Be honest when pitching an exclusive;
- Be reliable and have everything in place before pitch;
- Prepare for the effects of the segment;
- Only pitch a single show at a time;
- Don't promise results because news priorities change;
- Don't expect instant results – some might take two months.

### **2.2.5 Using new media**

The advent of the Internet introduced a new mechanism by which publicists and 'spin-doctors' could access journalists and attempt to influence them and manage their work. This was noted by Kliethermes (1997). She conducted ethnographic interviews of eight prominent media and public relations practitioners in her study of the Internet and its impact upon media relations. She concluded that by 1997 the medium already provided public relations professionals with a 'dynamic' rather than 'static' medium; altering the time and space constraints present in other media (p. 59). She found public relations practitioners were using a range of devices to influence journalists, including the posting of information to corporate Web sites (p. 56); the organising of online interviews (p. 58); and the issuing of press releases (Appendix 2). Garrison (1998) also found journalists complained about the public relations orientation of many research sites.

Pearson (1999, pp. 278-280) cited several examples of attempts by public relations practitioners to influence journalists via the Internet. Some nations featured their own Web sites. One was billed as 'the main gate to Colombia', almost like an immigration checkpoint. Journalists 'entering' a country through such an official gate should expect to get the official line on important issues. Certainly, by 1999 the distribution of press releases to journalists was becoming more organised, confirming the findings of Quinn (1998, p. 246) in his study of Internet usage by Australian journalists. Web sites were being used to store and archive press releases for reference and journalists could register to have press releases sent automatically to their electronic mail addresses. While this was a voluntary request for such promotional data, some publicists chose to 'spam' lists

with their material, to the annoyance of discussants, according to Pearson (1999). Others listed journalists' electronic mail addresses in digest form, as with the US All Media E-Mail Directory. Journalists needed to be wary of their addresses being listed in such directories if they wished to avoid junk mail.

Pearson (1999, p. 280) wrote:

It is clear the public relations presence on the Internet evidenced by the above examples represents a significant influence of the Internet upon journalism practice. The Net has been adopted by public relations operators as a useful communication tool. Publicists and spin doctors were using this new technology to influence reporters, in the most blatant and in more subtle ways.

Pearson (1999, p. 280) noted some journalists were seeking out authentic material by using the discussion lists to ask their colleagues about it. Others were using the lists to warn their colleagues of dubious material or were voicing their concerns about the abuse of the medium for such purposes. Clearly, journalists needed to develop systematic authentication procedures when dealing with such information and investigate workable means of balancing views in their stories.

Edes (2000, pp. 463-465) foreshadowed the Internet would make life easier for government information officers because of the direct link with the public via well designed government websites, however the downside would be the increase in reporters' queries from ready access to so much free information and the increase in email inquiries from both the public and the media. Meanwhile, Edes suggested the mainstays of 'press releases, telephone calls, letters, posters etc' would continue as the methods of choice by GIOs.

Fleeson (2001) attributed the decline in the number of news personnel assigned to cover Washington to the fact that press releases were distributed electronically and even media conferences were being held remotely.

Most agency press offices have become so adept at utilizing telecommunications innovations that the practice of journalism has been changed dramatically. At the Federal Communications Commission, for instance, where rulings on high-tech companies translate into volatile trading jolts in the stock market, the press office links as many as 100 reporters into telephone press conferences. E-mails and faxes are distributed simultaneously to hundreds of reporters.

Barns (2005, p. 9) related the example of the Howard Government's special media unit, the Government Members Secretariat (GMS), marshalling MPs to vote in a ninemsn poll in 2004, asking online viewers to file their preference between prime minister John Howard and leadership aspirant Peter Costello. The intervention resulted in a healthy Howard victory in the poll.

By 2005, Greve (p. 12) was suggesting web sites and bloggers were excellent outlets for spin 'because they're understaffed and grateful' and operated as useful agenda-setters because of their speed of transmission. He cited examples of blogs being used to influence the political agenda and predicted 'surreptitiously financed bloggers', susceptible to spin, to be of growing influence with potential financial backing from government and/or interest groups (p. 13).

However, Cook (2008) found that by 2008 US politicians were making much more sophisticated use of the Internet in political communication than their Australian counterparts. He cited market research showing 27 per cent of 18-29 year old Americans had used social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook to get information about presidential candidates and that almost one in 10 had signed up as a friend of a candidate on such a site. This compared with just 24,000 signing up as 'friends' of prime ministerial aspirant Kevin Rudd in the 2007 campaign. He suggested new media and social networking were a 'largely untapped resource' in Australian politics, 'still locked into a centrally planned one-way industrial age media model'. He used as an example former prime minister John Howard's use of the expression 'good morning' on his first YouTube clip 'on a timeless, borderless medium'. Labor had been groundbreaking with the interactivity of its Kevin07 site but dismantled the site the day after the election, Cook noted. He suggested the traditional media were leading the way with more blogging and interactivity and that political parties would have to follow or risk looking 'hopelessly out of date with increasingly demanding and

sophisticated audiences'. Online publications like Crikey, New Matilda, Online Opinion and Australian Policy Online seemed to be thriving, he observed.

Ferguson (2006, p. 55) studied the impact of the Internet on the dissemination of media releases and found email had changed the mode and speed of delivery of media releases which had previously been faxed or posted by 'snail mail'. She noted releases had previously gone to a central point in a newsroom – usually a fax machine – whereas now they went directly to the email inbox of the individual journalist. Reporters could then cut and paste the material into their stories, creating further issues of potential plagiarism.

Kirat (2007, p. 173) surveyed 24 key United Arab Emirates organisations, most of which were government entities, on their patterns of online media usage. He found a lack of two-way communication on their websites and an absence of virtual tours, films, videos, newsrooms, contact numbers, news clippings and speech archives.

### **2.3 Techniques for journalists working with spin**

Basic journalism texts, such as Conley and Lamble (2006) and Tanner (2002), offer some elementary guidance in handling public relations strategies, particularly the dangers of accepting material in press releases at face value. However, few go very far into the deeper strategies of dealing with government media relations, and certainly not the sophisticated techniques already detailed in the literature above.

Esser et. al. (2001, p. 31) identify the journalistic practice of 'meta-analysis' as one way of dealing with spin. As explained earlier, this is where 'spin doctors or their activities are reported on from a higher viewpoint giving background and reflection about their role and influence on the candidate or the media'.

Simmons (2006, p. 4) noted the dangers of what he called 'media release journalism' where reporters failed their audiences by not disclosing that press releases were the sources of stories. Ward (1991, p. 57) had noted this 15 years earlier and had suggested journalists used the expression 'the office of X issued a news statement' instead of 'X said yesterday'. Simmons and Spence (2006, p. 215) recorded a fairly primitive technique journalists claimed they used when dealing with media releases – throwing them in the garbage bin – but claimed this was at odds with public relations practitioners' claims of high success rates. The ethical technique, they contended, was to attribute the release as a source, but this was often not done (p. 217). Another was to seek opposing views to those promoted in the release itself (p. 219).

One journalistic approach to press releases mentioned by Dale (1985, p. 6), with questionable motives and consequences, was the caucusing of press gallery journalists from competing organisations on whether or not to use a particular release:

... press statements were distributed and discussed with the final rejoinder: 'If you don't cover this I won't.' Thus many a press secretary's hours of work went on a spike or in the rubbish bin (p. 6)

Some journalists put their spin doctors to good use, particularly in situations where others were reluctant to go on the record with comments. Phillipps (2002, p. 199) recorded a 'rent-a-quote' technique where reporters phoned friendly contacts to get them to lend weight to an unsourced story.

Brown (2003, p. 10) suggested spin would lose its power 'if media organisations moved towards a less mediated form of reporting' and if they offered platforms for a range of political perspectives there would be less need to use 'aggressively packaged communication'.

Much more work is needed in the area of journalistic techniques for combating spin.

### **2.4 Alternative means of controlling information: stemming leaks and FOI refusals**

Schultz (1998, pp. 211-212) demonstrated the willingness of federal governments of both political persuasions to stem public service leaks to the media from the early 1980s. She explained that in 1980 the conservative Fraser government had sought an injunction to stop extracts from a book of documents on defence and foreign policy being published in the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning*

*Herald*. Just three years later the Labor government of Bob Hawke won an injunction from the High Court to prevent the *National Times* publishing a second instalment of extracts from confidential intelligence documents, known as the 'AUSTEO Papers'. Fairfax negotiated an agreement with the government, allowing it to 'vet' subsequent articles about the documents, a concession criticised by academics at the time.

Moss said the Australia's Right to Know report demonstrated that 'free speech and media freedom were being whittled away by gradual and sometimes almost imperceptible degrees' (covering letter accompanying Moss, 2007). The report found there were 365 Acts of Parliament at federal and state levels involving 500 different pieces of legislation, with specific secrecy provisions blocking public access to information (Bennett, 2007). Among the examples of the Howard government hiding behind FoI provisions was the Melbourne *Herald Sun* having to abandon a two-year inquiry about federal politicians' travel after being quoted a fee of \$1.25 million for the information on the pretext that it would amount to 32 years of full-time work for a public servant (Moss, 2007, p. v).

Ester (2007, pp. 103-109) conducted interviews with 24 senior journalists and found the crackdown on whistleblowing had affected the way public servants dealt with the media. Tight public service regulations were designed to clamp down on whistleblowers from within the government sector. The main provisions were as follows:

**Public Service Regulations 1999**  
**Statutory Rules 1999 No. 300 as amended**  
made under the Public Service Act 1999

**2.1 Duty not to disclose information (Act s 13)**

- (1) This regulation is made for subsection 13 (13) of the Act.
- (2) This regulation does not affect other restrictions on the disclosure of information.
- (3) An APS employee must not disclose information which the APS employee obtains or generates in connection with the APS employee's employment if it is reasonably foreseeable that the disclosure could be prejudicial to the effective working of government, including the formulation or implementation of policies or programs.
- (4) An APS employee must not disclose information which the APS employee obtains or generates in connection with the APS employee's employment if the information:
  - (a) was, or is to be, communicated in confidence within the government;or
  - (b) was received in confidence by the government from a person or persons outside the government;whether or not the disclosure would found an action for breach of confidence.
- (5) Subregulations (3) and (4) do not prevent a disclosure of information by an APS employee if:
  - (a) the information is disclosed in the course of the APS employee's duties; or
  - (b) the information is disclosed in accordance with an authorisation given by an Agency Head; or
  - (c) the disclosure is otherwise authorised by law; or
  - (d) the information that is disclosed:
    - (i) is already in the public domain as the result of a disclosure of information that is lawful under these Regulations or another law; and
    - (ii) can be disclosed without disclosing, expressly or by implication, other information to which subregulation (3) or (4) applies.
- (6) Subregulations (3) and (4) do not limit the authority of an Agency Head to give lawful and reasonable directions in relation to the disclosure of information.

*Note* Under section 70 of the *Crimes Act 1914*, it is an offence for an APS employee to publish or communicate any fact or document which comes to the employee's knowledge, or into the employee's possession, by virtue of being a Commonwealth officer, and which it is the employee's duty not to disclose.

Not surprisingly, the Howard government's clampdown, Canberra correspondents reported bureaucrats were frightened to give background briefings to even senior journalists sympathetic to the government. The Howard government was willing to put federal police resources into its crackdown on leaks, Ester noted (p. 105). She quoted Opposition Senate leader Kim Carr revealing 32,000 police staff hours had been expended tracking down whistleblowers, amounting to almost \$200,000 in costs but single figure prosecutions. Ester wrote that her interviews 'highlighted issues such as control and surveillance, and paint a picture of cumulative deterioration in sources of political news and information, describing new layers of disempowerment, frustration and disinformation.' (p. 112).

State governments were also using strategies to stem leaks. Award-winning investigative journalist Hedley Thomas, formerly of the *Courier Mail*, and more recently *The Australian*, was a strong supporter of government 'leaks'. In a special article for the *Walkley Magazine* on spin, Thomas demanded an end to Queensland government witch-hunts to uncover the sources of leaks in that state (2007). In an article aptly named 'Plug leaks, sink democracy' Thomas called upon new Queensland Premier Anna Bligh, who earlier in her premiership announced a review of that State's Freedom of Information regulations, to 'abolish taxpayer-funded witch-hunts for sources' (2007). In mid-2008 it seemed she had done just that when she promised to adopt in its entirety a radical overhaul of the state's FOI laws chaired by former journalist and lawyer David Solomon (Wardill, 2008). Experts praised the recommended reforms and encouraged their adoption nationally and in each state (Snell, 2008).

### **3. Impact and influences**

Having considered the literature related to the scale of government media relations, as well as books and articles exploring the techniques used by governments and media relations practitioners, we now turn to the literature offering insights into the impact and influences of government media relations on journalists, news products and society more generally.

#### **3.1 Legal implications**

When it takes its most extreme form – censorship – government media relations has stark consequences of fines and jail for those who break the hundreds of laws restricting the flow of information in modern democratic societies (Moss, 2007). As outlined in media law texts (Armstrong, Lindsay, & Watterson, 1995; D. A. Butler & Rodrick, 2007; M. Pearson, 2007; Walker, 2000), journalists, publishers and whistleblowers face legal consequences including jail terms, substantial fines and large damages payouts if governments or their representatives choose to prosecute or sue them under a range of laws. These include contempt of court, defamation, confidentiality, anti-terrorism and sedition, among numerous others. Thus, the impact of this extreme form of government information control can have enormous consequence on an individual's life and career. Given that it is not the purpose of this literature review to dwell on such consequences, readers are referred to the above texts and annual publications from organisations like Freedom House, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and Reporters Sans Frontieres for details on actual prosecutions and law suits.

#### **3.2 Physical dangers**

Another extreme form of censorship is the threat of physical violence against journalists, or even the actual use of physical violence as a mechanism of control. While such methods are not commonly used by governments or politicians in western democratic nations like Australia, very occasionally there are incidents. For example, in mid-2008 when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd attended a Sydney function and refused to answer questions about freedom of information

legislation, his security staff man-handled a journalist and photographer (Lyons, 2008c). Other incidents included the smashing of a news camera by former opposition leader Mark Latham in 2006 (MEAA, 2007b, p. 19), former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett shovelling sand at television cameramen, Aboriginal activist Noel Pearson pouring water over a reporter's head in response to a question, and a Northern Territory MP winding a microphone cord around a journalist's neck (Taylor, 1999). Of course, all of these episodes pale when compared with the murder of five Australian journalists in Balibo, East Timor, in 1975, by Indonesian government special forces (King & Fitzpatrick, 2007). Scores of similar examples of government physical intimidation including murder, imprisonment and torture from throughout the world appear on the websites of Freedom House ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)), Reporters Sans Frontieres ([www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)) and the Committee to Protect Journalists ([www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)).

At its extreme, poorly managed spin can endanger lives and security operations. Such was the allegation by Scotland Yard spokesman Peter Clarke against someone in Tony Blair's spin machine who seemed to have leaked sensitive operational intelligence about a terrorism investigation. '(W)hatever you think of this culture of spin as a general phenomenon, if it encroaches in the area of police operations and the handling of sensitive intelligence matters then it can be very, very damaging,' he told the ABC (Kennedy, 2007).

### **3.3 Ethical implications**

Ethics texts for journalism students have canvassed the ethical consequences for journalists, including the issues of acceptance of gifts and lunches from spin doctors, the need to attribute and verify material in media releases, the compatibility of truth and 'spin', and the different ethical obligations of journalists and PR operatives to their audiences and clients respectively (Hirst & Patching, 2007; Richards, 2005; S. Tanner, Phillips, Smyth, & Tapsall., 2005).

Some scholars have grappled with the different approaches to 'truth' taken by journalists and government media relations practitioners. Brown (2003, p. 5) argued that press officers were bound not to lie, but this did not necessarily mean they had to tell the truth. Rather, it 'implies a lawyerly precision': 'The spin doctor operates through precision and the vagueness and misdirection,' Brown wrote. Sumpter and Tankard said that one way spin doctors approached the concept of truth was that 'every issue has two sides' - a position adopted when representing unpopular clients, or that truth was relative, depending on who or what you were representing (1994). Thus, they were often accused of 'bending the truth' on their clients' behalf.

The nature of the relationship between the journalist and the government PR operative has also been the subject of academic attention; both with regards to the nature of the relationship which, Brown (2003, p. 4) argues, is subject to broader social and historical forces; and notions of power, with political journalists often young and immature and ignorant of political institutions compared with the wiser and older media advisers.

A further topic of ethics debate has been the level of attribution that should be applied to media releases in the interests of transparency for audiences. Simmons and Spence found that although media releases played a substantial role in shaping what was published as news, local codes of ethics and conduct generally failed to mention or guide the use of media release material (2006, p. 167). Rather idealistically, they called on journalists to scrutinise and attribute their sources when using material provided by public relations operatives, and called on those PR operatives to stop practices they claimed were 'designed to deceitfully obtain third-party endorsement from publications' (p. 167). They cited cases of 'media release journalism' which they describe as 'not the result of journalistic inquiry and attempts to report a balance of viewpoints, but the preferred representations of the individuals or entities that generated the media release' (p. 172).

Simmons (2006, pp. 16-17) suggested the ethical responsibility for disclosure of the source of government-commissioned video news releases (VNRs) rested with journalists and news organisations but they were torn by the sense of a 'professional inadequacy' and a loss of credibility with the public if they admitted using material produced by others. He suggested both PR and journalism codes of ethics be adapted to consider the proper use of news release material. But

Greve (2005, p. 13) concluded the broadcast industry was 'too loosely organised, ethically challenged – and strapped for money' to adopt VNR disclosure practices.

### **3.4 Policy and legislative implications**

Research into government media relations will not feed into policy and statute unless parliamentarians embrace the important role of the media as truth-seekers in society, yet few studies have explored politicians' attitudes to media freedom. Pitts (2000) surveyed 58 members of the Zambian Parliament on their attitudes to bias and accuracy in news reporting, citizen involvement in democracy, politicians' relationship with the media, and their sources of information. Just more than half of the Zambian politicians (57.1 per cent) felt press freedom should be increased and Pitts explained this attitude in the context of 'a society which has sought to control information and ideas'. Pearson and Galvin (2007) used grounded theory methodology to track the contexts in which Australian parliamentarians used the expressions 'press freedom' and 'freedom of the press' from 1994 to 2004. They used speeches in which discussions of press freedom arose. The terms were used by members of the House of Representatives or Senate in just 78 speeches out of more than 180,000 over that decade. They found Australian parliamentarians contrasted the value of press freedom in Australia with press freedom in other countries as if that country was an exemplar of the principle when, in fact, its own record was questionable.

Human Rights and media freedom crusader, Geoffrey Robertson QC, used his address to the Australia's Right to Know dinner in Sydney August, 2007, to renew his call for a legislative guarantee of freedom of expression in Australia (2007). He acknowledged there should be some limits on that freedom:

A media that wants, needs and deserves freedom to publish newsworthy facts must accept some limits on its right to rifle the intimacies of a citizen's life so long as the exclusion zone is limited to the bedroom and the bathroom and the changing room, the school, the hospital and the grave (Robertson, 2007).

Yet even such a guarantee would seemingly do little to prevent anything other than the most direct attempts at censorship and would leave government spin strategies in place.

That said, some measures have been taken to limit spin. For example some US laws prohibited government agencies using taxpayer funds for 'covert propaganda' (Dickinson, 2004) and Morse (2006, p. 864) developed legal arguments to conclude 'certain covert government news management practices disrupt the function of the press, and, accordingly, violate the First Amendment'. Thus, even with Robertson's proposal of a legislative guarantee of free expression, or with a constitutional protection of media freedom, there would need to be judicial interpretations that government deception via covert strategies was illegal.

That said, there have been specific legislative and policy recommendations on the disclosure of government information and the management of news by governments, such as those of the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission in Queensland in 1992-1993, as reviewed by Grundy (1993). These included a bias towards disclosure of official information, equitable distribution of media releases and press conference invitations, honesty in media briefings, and the disclosure of expenditure on media and information units (pp. 301-3).

Ferguson (2006, p. 71) questioned whether the proven mileage gained through the issue of media releases provided a mechanism by which organisations could bypass the legislation designed to protect consumers from misleading advertising.

### **3.5 Impact on the news agenda**

Several scholars have explored the impact of spin on the news agenda, though most is commentary and little empirical research has been conducted. That of Barbara-Ann Butler was an exception. Butler's interviews with journalists revealed that they had become 'too dependent upon politicians and their press secretaries for their daily bread between elections and too dependent upon the major political parties for news during election campaigns,' (B. Butler, 1998, p. 41). Her research confirmed that PR operatives inside and outside government were primary newsgatherers of



political news for TV news organisations. These ‘information subsidies’ offset the high cost of news production (p. 42). Over-reliance upon PR people was a problem for media organisations, she wrote.

Tony Fitzgerald QC, during his inquiry into corruption in Queensland quoted at length earlier in this review, expressed the view that corruption was able to develop and flourish in the state due to the failure of the media to adequately report on the nature of the exercise. This failure, he contended, was the result of government media units being used as propaganda agencies to control and manipulate the information obtained by the media and disseminated to the public (Fitzgerald, 1989, p. 142).

Armstrong (1988) argued that the political agenda was pre-set by a mixture of media releases and set-piece interviews, and that journalists rarely sought out sources located outside the theatre of parliament and the two political parties. Fishman (1988) contended that news bias was primarily the result of the methods of news gathering. The fact that most news was obtained by reporters from public relations people, both government and non-government, who prepackaged news in the form of press releases, police reports, council meeting minutes, and so on, had reduced complex events into simple cases, he wrote. Similarly, the work of Golding, Murdock and Schlesinger (1986) looked at how the professional beliefs and practices of broadcasters and their relations to political actors and organisations shaped the flow of political communication. The writers explained that the interaction between journalists and political institutions was complex and multi-layered (Golding et al., 1986). Nevertheless, Davis (2000, p. 48) concluded the difference between well resourced and poorly resourced organisations meant the former set the agenda while the efforts of the latter became ‘quickly marginalised’.

Eric Beecher too, in his Andrew Olle Media Lecture, spoke of ‘the remarkable rise and rise of public relations as not only an influence, but almost as a kind of partner, in the whole journalistic enterprise of this country’ (Beecher, 2000, lines 101-103). He explained also that journalistic talent was being attracted to public relations by higher salaries and that the enterprise of journalism had come to rely on public relations handouts to keep up production:

A senior figure in PR recently told me how easy the game of ‘spinning’ has become over the past few years — that is the business of nudging journalists in a particular direction, stage-managing news, creating newsworthy events, even drafting news releases in story form that appear in the media virtually intact. But as a former journalist himself, he wasn’t boasting about this trend: he was more like a fisherman talking about his catches in a well-stocked trout farm (Beecher, 2000, lines 232-238).

Veteran press gallery journalist Michelle Grattan recognised the dangers to journalism when ‘lines’ on issues were accepted uncritically by the media, or even ‘become orthodoxies, or when the fashionable spin is strong enough to discredit what might be an alternative, well-based position’ (Grattan, 1998, p. 42). Again, however, few have set about observing or measuring this in an academic study. Most have simply reflected on the observations of working journalists, such as Ester’s extended interviews with press gallery reporters (Ester, 2007).

### **3.6 Impact on reportage, news content and production**

Simmons (2006, p. 11) alluded to the difficulty of calculating the exact influence of PR on the news agenda because ‘it tends to rely on self report by journalists and PR practitioners, or analysis and tracing of the origins of news, or tracking media use of a sample of news releases’. Few have done so in large-scale studies.

Sometimes experienced journalists have explained their own impressions on the effects. Grattan (1998, p. 42) was concerned at the proliferation of ‘lazy journalism and distorted journalism’ as a result of the sheer volume of media relations material produced by political operatives. She said it results when the ‘spin factories of Opposition or government do the work for the journalists – the carefully assembled research on a scandal, or the bundle of budget PR material – and the journalists come to rely overmuch on these factories.’ Grattan contended that there could be incremental erosion of standards with journalists ‘having accepted a genuine product from the factory’ later

accepting a 'product of inferior grade'. She also observed the spin doctors restricted journalists' access to individuals with so-called 'primary data', such as their ministerial employer, ministerial staff experts and the public service (p. 43). Franklin (2004, p. 30) concluded that 'the net effect of this running battle between journalists and politicians has been to undermine journalists' self-confidence, encourage self-censorship and create a climate which is typically hostile to investigative journalism'.

Some have gone beyond the anecdotal. Simmons and Spence (2006, p. 218) have reviewed the empirical research on the use of media releases in Australia, the US and the UK, and summarise the research in a single paragraph. Their summary was that large amounts of print media news emanated from media releases and PR sources.

Davis (2000, pp. 43-45) linked the increase in dependence on information subsidies and public relations in the UK with the decline of editorial resources over the 1980s and 1990s. There had been rising pressures 'to increase output without a corresponding increase in resources', Davis wrote (p. 43). Jackson (2008a, p. 33) cited research commissioned by British journalist Nick Davies which found 80 per cent of stories in British quality dailies over a two week period were rewritten press releases and wire agency copy – a phenomenon he coined 'churnalism'. Only 12 per cent of the material could be identified as actually generated by the newspapers' reporters. Louw (2005, p. 164) described the increasing use of PR materials as 'a form of journalistic outsourcing, which makes good economic sense for media corporations'. However, the price paid by such savings was that one of the most expensive enterprises – investigative journalism – was cut back in the process. As Mark Crispin Miller noted, 'the investigative journalist is the propagandist's natural enemy, as the former serves the public interest, while the latter tends to work against it' (Bernays & Miller, 2005, p. 26).

In Australia, the main studies of media use of public relations material were published in the early 1990s. The first was Ian Ward's small content analysis of 338 news stories from the *Courier-Mail* and the *Brisbane Sun* over a three week period from July 1, 1988 (Ian Ward, 1991). He found one quarter of them originated with a press release issued by a politician (p. 54). Some published articles were almost direct copies of the press release material. All 83 that made use of press releases 'maintained the fiction of the journalist as an observer of events', Ward noted (p. 57).

Grundy reported upon a larger analysis conducted by Queensland's Electoral and Administrative Review Commission which monitored 271 national, metropolitan and regional media outlets to track the success rate of media releases issued by six Queensland government departments over a month in mid-1992 (1993, pp. 297-299). The 279 releases resulted in 402 print media stories, Grundy reported (p. 297). Almost half had simply reproduced the release and 220 of the 279 releases were used substantially by at least one media outlet (p. 298). The large circulation dailies took up 140 of the 279 releases. Regional and country newspapers were most likely to reproduce the releases unedited, responsible for 85 per cent of the instances where the original form of the release was published. Seven stories appeared with journalists' bylines despite the material being direct reproductions of the release (pp. 298-9). Radio outlets used about three times as many stories based on releases (111) as television (36), still a large quantity considering the smaller story count and need for actuality in those media (p. 299). There was a large channel of stories to the regional press via the wire agency Australian Associated Press, resulting in 134 of the stories (p. 299). Grundy noted the EARC report had attracted minimal media coverage in the media (p. 299) and that one television reporter had complained there was no media release accompanying the report's launch (p. 298).

Public relations academic Jim Macnamara undertook a press release tracking study for his MA research in 1992 (Macnamara, 1993). He obtained 150 media releases from 27 different organisations and monitored their usage throughout 1992 (p. 69). He complemented this with the tracking of all press releases issued in that year by three organisations. The organisations were a mix of corporate, non-profit and government (p. 70). Macnamara reported the 150 press releases led to at least 768 stories in the media, an average use rate of 5.12 times per release (p. 71). There were 2500 stories monitored overall, meaning 30.72 per cent had emanated from press releases, although

other coverage could have been influenced by other PR techniques such as phone calls, press conferences or interviews. National, State or metropolitan media published 245 (32 per cent) of the 768 stories, while 47 per cent (360) were published in the trade press, 13.5 per cent in regional and country media and 7.5 per cent in suburban newspapers. Only nine of the 150 media releases (1.2 per cent) were not picked up at all (p. 72). Fewer than 10 per cent of releases used only once or not at all, while one release led to stories in 69 outlets, including 30 national, state or metropolitan media and 22 suburban newspapers (p. 72). About 20 per cent of press releases were used verbatim, or with only minor changes, Macnamara reported (p. 74).

Former PR academic Clara Zawawi has been cited widely on the use of media releases by Australian journalists. Some citations refer to an article emanating from a small pilot study published in 1994 (Zawawi, 1994) while others refer to a much larger 2001 study which remains unpublished and unexamined as part of an incomplete PhD project (cited in Simmons & Spence, 2006, p. 218). In the former work, Zawawi collected 192 news stories from three newspapers on a single day in 1993 and traced between half and two thirds of them to public relations sources. More than 80 per cent of the business stories in that sample had a PR origin. In the larger incomplete study she followed 1163 articles published in three east coast metropolitan dailies and found 47 per cent of articles had resulted from public relations activity (Macnamara, 2006; Simmons & Spence, 2006).

Simmons (2006, pp. 11-12) cited a VNR tracking study by the Centre for Media and Democracy which found 77 television stations used 36 VNRs from three PR companies. The stations 'actively disguised' the source of the material so it looked like their own reporting.

Esser et. al. (2000, p. 213) suggested the success of a spin doctor could become apparent in two ways: either he or she was treated as a conventional news source, complete with quotes and attribution; or the reporter adopted a favourable bias or angle for the story without revealing its origin.

### **3.7 Impact on truth and accuracy**

Mark Crispin Miller, in his introduction to the reprint of Edward Bernays' *Propaganda*, asked the crucial question, encapsulating one of the key ethical questions of the spin enterprise: 'In a world under the influence of propaganda experts, how does a costly truth get out in to the world *as* truth?' (Bernays & Miller, 2005, p. 25)

Some of the most interesting and important research and commentary on the impact of government media relations has been in the area of its effect on truth and accuracy in public communication. Sumpter and Tankard (1994, p. 24), for example, theorising about two models of public relations, found a point of distinction between the traditional public relations model and the 'spin control' or 'spin doctor' model was that the former stressed being ethical and 'truthful' while the latter viewed the concept of truth as 'liquid'. This, they argued, was premised on the spin doctors' approach to truth as maintaining that every issue had two sides (p. 22). Miller portrayed the world of Edward Bernays as being one where 'it is the preeminent consensus that determines what is "true"' (Bernays & Miller, 2005, p. 25). There was a tendency to let the client's needs dictate 'the truth' (p. 23). With truth being negotiable, it even meant media release journalism had the potential to be deceptive, even if the actual release was true, according to Simmons and Spence (2006, pp. 166-167). They argued the lack of corroborating evidence that the information in a release was accurate was enough to undermine its credibility. It also breached a duty of trust owed by journalists to their audiences. They argued that both journalists and PR practitioners were complicit in such deception (p. 167).

Greve (2005, p. 11) coined the term 'pseudoreporting' and 'pseudonews' to describe the phenomenon of government-generated content for mainstream news outlets. In Australia, press gallery veteran Michelle Grattan (1998, p. 35) used a different form of expression to describe the phenomenon: 'The modern media seems much closer to the action but actually is more at arm's length. Gatekeepers are everywhere.' Helen Ester (2007, p. 116) used the Howard Government's 'children overboard' episode in late 2002 to illustrate the negotiable quality of 'truth' in government

media relations. She pointed out that the prime minister and his ministers later claimed they had not lied during the affair 'because they were not advised of the truth'. This had changed the protocols of reporters working through ministerial advisers for routine confirmation of facts because they could no longer presume any information was coming under a minister's imprimatur.

One of the consequences of too much spin could be a saturation of the journalism targets. Such was the case with the Clinton administration, according to Kurtz (1998, p. 297), who said the administration had become victims of their own success with spin in the past. 'In fact, it would be ludicrous to start spinning in this overheated climate until they could bring some facts to the table,' he wrote.

Kurtz (1998, p. 302) argued that even though all the techniques had been used by the Clinton spin machine, 'even the best spin cannot work if it is totally untethered from substance'. 'The spinmeisters could no longer save him from himself,' Kurtz concluded (p. 303).

### **3.8 Impact on popular culture**

Leighton Andrews (2006) argued that part of the result of the activities of the spin doctors was to turn politicians (and later themselves) into celebrities. 'Celebrity structures the relationship between the media and politicians. It reduces politics to personality clashes, and policy to process. 'The discourse about media presentation of politics is increasingly a discourse about celebrity, about the individual actions of one or another 'spin doctor'' (Andrews, 2006, p. 38). He saw politics as a soap opera, structured and developed for tabloid consumption. He called the TV series *The West Wing* the political world's own 'soap opera' and claims it was avidly watched by British spin doctors, and that former Prime Minister Blair was said to be a fan. Andrews argues that *The West Wing* was a way of introducing voters to stories that were not fully explained in traditional media coverage, including the process of government, and the realities of the relationship between the media, politicians and their staff (2006, p. 38). He also noted that spin doctors in the Nineties became celebrities themselves and that Michael J. Fox's character in another political TV series, *Spin City*, was supposedly based on George Stephanopoulos, Clinton's spin doctor in the 1992 campaign. Sam Seaborn, Rob Lowe's character in early series' of *The West Wing*, was also supposedly based on Stephanopoulos, but the actor denies it (Andrews, 2006, p. 39). The former Clinton media adviser now works for the American ABC network from Washington. The 'celebrity politician' argument was also proposed by Street (2003, p. 92) in which he cited British examples.

A view of how popular culture viewed spin doctors over the decades can be gleaned from their portrayal in the movies. Mordecai Lee (2001) found 20 movies released between 1944 and 2000 which featured public relations people as part of the plot. Researching the movies he found six characteristics about the portrayal of PR people in films: they were almost all male; media relations was almost exclusively the only public relations activity the screen PR's engaged in; the roles depicted were predominantly from the American government; the missions of the agencies involved were predominantly those of uniformed professions (13 of the spokespersons were with the military); half the movies were produced in the 1990's (re-enforcing the perception of the surge of interest in spin doctoring in that period); and in 18 of the movies, government public relations staffers had only minor roles, appearing in only one or two scenes (Lee, 2001, pp. 308 - 309). Trends to emerge from the depictions of PR people in the movies were that the movies themselves were neither predominantly light entertainment nor serious theatre (12 dramas and 8 comedies); the government officials had a wide range of titles; and the government 'flacks' were neither consistently good guys or bad guys [in five they are depicted in a sympathetic or positive light, while in another seven they are the movie 'heavy'] (2001, p. 310).

### **3.9 Increase in media relations/ PR sector**

One impact of the spin era has been the sheer increase in the number of people employed in the sector and the government money being spent on the enterprise. Thus, Section 1.6 Quantifying Government Expenditure in the 'Scale' section also acts as one manifestation of the so-called 'impact' of government media relations. In the UK, for example, Davis (2000, pp. 44-48) identified

the rapid growth of the employment sector for professional communicators as a consequence of the general increase in spin. He tracked the increase in the number of information officers in various branches of the UK government, and cited a 125 per cent through to 917 per cent increase in PIO staffers between 1979 and 1995 in four government agencies (p. 48). Much more work needs to be done in Australia in this area.

### **3.10 Impact on democracy**

The effect of spin on the democratic process should come as no surprise. In his 1928 work, *Propaganda*, the father of PR, Edward Bernays, devoted his first chapter to explaining how propaganda was the tool by which elites could govern the masses under a democratic system: 'Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government,' he wrote (Bernays & Miller, 2005, p. 48).

Julianne Schultz in her seminal work *Reviving the fourth estate* (1998) saw one of the most compelling reasons for the traditional watchdog role of journalism as the increasing sophistication of information management and a 'desire to get below the surface of this expensively massaged information business' (p. 56). She saw the growth of the public relations industry in Australia and the increasing sophistication of methods of media management (many of which are explored in the next section on 'techniques') as not only distorting the information available but also undermining claims to journalistic freedom and autonomy (p. 57). Respected Canberra journalist Michelle Grattan also saw the job from the media's perspective. While she said the modern media 'seems much closer to the (political) action, but actually is more at arm's length' (1998, p. 35). She called the media advisers the modern-day 'gate keepers'. 'Even if he/she wanted to, the modern minister could not satisfy individually all the demands made for comments, interviews, 'grabs'. To do so would be to forego doing much else'. And later: 'The media adviser becomes the security blanket. Or to change the metaphor, the politician ends up like a caged animal, fearful of the jungle out there' (p. 35). She contended the effect of so much 'spin' was '... to have everyone – the politicians, the staff, and the media – concentrate heavily on the straight politics, the tactics, rather than the substance of policies, especially in the public presentation' (Grattan, 1998, pp. 38-39). It also created what she called a 'circle of cynics', where spin doctors, politicians and journalists had all become cynical about the whole process, and claimed this partly explained the rise of Pauline Hanson as a political force when the public had become frustrated with being treated with disdain (p. 37).

Others have been less accepting of journalism's Fourth Estate claims and its role as a key institution in democracy. For example, Esser et al (2001) argued journalists had 'demonised' spin as a counter-strategy to the high level of professionalism developed by political PR and marketing so journalism could prove its own independence and legitimacy (p. 26). They went further to suggest 'one elite group of long-established and respected professional communicators becomes defensive and paranoid about the activities of a new force in news making' (p. 27). They suggested political PR operatives provided essential information which was vital to journalists serving their public task and that 'in its role as a supporting infrastructure of mass-mediated politics, is a valuable element of the modern democratic process' (p. 26).

Louw (2005, pp. 150-152) identified eight changes to the political process prompted by the move to spin, namely:

- Power shift from party hacks and bosses to spin doctors;
- Characteristics required of political leaders have changed to more media-friendly skills;
- Whole process has become more expensive;
- Popular culture interface has prompted a new range of popular and populist faces;
- Politics has become more television-focussed because of its value as a spin tool;
- Local political meetings have been undermined by television and spin;
- Power of newspapers has declined in the process; and
- PR-isation has prompted the 'politics of avoidance', involving permanent entertainment and distraction.

He also noted the political process had evolved into a ‘pseudo-competition’, where political rivals seem to be competing but each is saying as little as possible that might be taken as offensive; simultaneously ‘bland’ and ‘hyped’ (Louw, 2005, p. 81).

Craig (2004, p. 45) suggested political spin had helped shift the power balance in favour of politicians over the media, leading to growing public cynicism about politics. However, he said that balancing this was a greater media literacy developing in the public although there was the risk the focus was shifting towards political media strategy rather than issues and matters of substance. The transition had been so marked, that it even prompted political scientist Ian Ward to question whether Australia had become a ‘PR state’ (Ian Ward, 2003).

Ingham (2003, p. 247) surveyed the toll of the Blair spin era and concluded it had resulted in a blurring of the demarcation between an impartial public service and special media advisers. Political reputations had also suffered badly as a result of spin-doctoring, Ingham argued. ‘The wages of spin are disrepute and decay,’ he wrote.

Kurtz (1998, p. 302) said the limits of spin became apparent near the end of the Clinton administration in the US:

When it worked, the coordinated strategy of peddling a single line to the press, of browbeating some reporters and courting others, was stunningly effective. Damage could be contained, scandal minimized, bad news relegated to the fringes of the media world. But each time an administration did that, each time it beat back the negative publicity with shifting explanations and document dumps and manufactured announcements designed to change the subject, it paid a price. The journalists were more skeptical the next time around, less willing to give the Clinton spin team the benefit of the doubt.

#### **4. Research opportunities**

This meta-analysis has canvassed the literature of government media relations, or ‘spin’, across the three domains of scale, techniques and impact, both internationally and in Australia. Despite the fact that the overall document amounts to around 40,000 words, much more could be written about the story of spin research to date. Undoubtedly, that story will unfold as new political players develop innovative new techniques and digital technologies proffer opportunities for managing media coverage of government and politics. Even though so many have *written* in the field, there is a dire lack of empirical research to underpin many of the claims scholars have made. Within the categories developed for this review several avenues for such research present themselves, including:

- Media historians might look more closely at the evolution of government media relations, both in Australia and internationally. Fascinating and still unresolved is the development of the word ‘spin’ in this country and also the changing meanings of the word ‘propaganda’ over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Empirical assessment of the scale of the government media relations industry in particular markets. This is sadly lacking in Australia, with virtually nothing done on the topic since the early 1990s. This requires a multi-method approach to a count of media relations personnel under their various titles and job descriptions with an accompanying quantification of their salaries and expenses to give an actual dollar figure for the cost to taxpayers of spin.
- Given the international research on the new area of ‘meta-coverage’, there is a call for a comparative study of this phenomenon in Australia, which would most likely involve a content analysis of media coverage of the spin industry and techniques, in both election and non-election periods.
- Empirical data on the actual impact of government media relations upon news products – such as its actual demands upon the time of journalists at media conferences, telephone conversations with spin doctors and chasing press releases, and actual impact upon the space and time of news coverage. Some content analysis work was done in the

early to mid 1990s on the 'hit-rate' of press releases, but this needs to be revisited, allowing for a range of new media and a variety of spin techniques now in operation.

- More systematic evaluation of new media techniques in government media relations, given the importance of new communication technologies to mass media. There is scope for a formal 'audit' or 'taxonomy' of such techniques, grouped into identifiable categories, with documented instances of their use by modern practitioners.
- Related to both of the above, there would be merit in a major ethnographic study of newsroom interaction with the spin sector, both in the Canberra press gallery and in the general news room, to determine points and nature of contact.
- The literature here has been divided into techniques used by government departments, politicians, and in the election climate. This distinction needs to be tested with empirical studies tracking the use of techniques in each of those contexts to establish whether the differentiation is justified.
- The review shows a clear development of sophistication of techniques as new media have gained popular appeal. This calls for a formal study of spin techniques using different media.
- Little has been done in the area of journalistic techniques for combating spin. There are clear training and education needs of both journalists and journalism students in dealing with political spin. Most journalism courses offer basic instruction in the reporting of media releases and press conferences, but there is a dire need to explore techniques for identifying the more surreptitious methods and finding the real truth on behalf of audiences.
- Hard evidence is needed on the extent to which the media relations functions of government departments now overlap with the media relations functions of the incumbent political operatives. This would require a systematic organisational analysis featuring flow charts of media relations chains of command.
- Applied ethicists could do much more in the area of case study research into the journalist-spin doctor relationship and its ethical implications. This might also include document analysis of the journalistic and PR codes of ethics with consideration of where media relations practitioners fit in the mix.
- There is scope for spin research in the field of policy analysis. Exactly what government policies relate to media relations? In what legislation, regulations or conventions do they reside? How are they enforced or applied?
- Research is needed which assesses the power, status and efficacy of spin as an information technique of western democracies vis a vis the more blatant censorship methods of other press systems.
- Further research would be justified into the level of community knowledge of government media relations techniques. There are arguments for better education about such matters in the high school curriculum to improve the 'spin literacy' of the general citizenry.

Given the pivotal location of the media at the communication interface between politicians and their constituents, formal research into the field of government media relations deserves the highest priority. While truth might be a negotiable commodity in the new era of spin, there are measurable truths about the scale, techniques and impact of this black art that need to be discovered and told.

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