

EVA GROEN-REIJMAN

THE TROUBLE WITH SPIN

Krisis, 2013, Issue 1

www.krisis.eu

Is there anything wrong with modern political campaigns? Watching democracy unfold in the media these days can be like watching a boxing match. We cheer when the candidate of our choice throws in a good punch-line or skillfully dodges a question, and boo disapprovingly when the opposition does the same. In the large broadcasted arena that shapes political campaigns these days many modern forms of communication are at the politician's disposal, for us to admire or frown upon: targeting, priming, spinning, framing... Quite often they are talked about as if together they form one comprehensive strategy, but they are all distinct forms of communication which must be judged on their own character and merit. Among these spin is an important one. In many modern democracies spin has gained a much discussed presence, already well-established in the United States but also prominent during the Blair government in the UK and since the early noughties even reported on in the Netherlands. In short, spin is a communicative practice which aims at achieving beneficial reporting on facts. This can either be done by appearing as a speaker in the media or by influencing journalists' reporting. This practice is considered by many to be both a permanent and a harmful feature of modern-day Western democratic campaigns. Until recently philosophy had paid almost no attention to it, but in a recent article Neil Manson gives a thorough analysis of the phenomenon, without however

taking up the normative question: is spin wrong? This is the question I want to start answering here. I will argue that spin poses both an ethical and a democratic problem. However, the fierceness of our judgment may depend on whether we believe it was done for a good cause – which itself may be subject to political discussion.

What is spin?

Before we analyze spin as a practice, let us briefly look at what the function of spin is in political campaigns. An important insight in recent political communication literature is that campaigns are often not decided by which politician has the most convincing arguments, but by which topics are actually paid attention to and what elements are considered decisive in judging these issues. The media play an important role in this, but campaigns can attempt to influence which topics are most talked about – this is referred to as agenda-setting (Scheufele 2000). Through the way they communicate they can also attempt to influence how these topics are perceived, that is, what is considered the central problem and what values are at stake. By employing such techniques campaigns have been shown to affect voters in indirect ways, through successfully conveying information, setting the agenda by influencing the media, and by setting the 'yardstick' for how voters measure candidates (Iyengar and Simon 2000). There are at least two ways of exerting such influence; one is by strategically shaping your own communication – often referred to as 'staying on message' (Norris et al. 1999) – and the other is by trying to influence journalists (Esser et al. 2000).

These two tactics indicate what spin is intended to achieve: as both the agenda and the criteria for evaluating the topics matter greatly for campaign success and both are largely determined by the media, campaigns use spin to attempt to influence the selection of topics and the phrasing to match their own priorities. What then differentiates spin from other forms of communication? The fact that it is selective does not seem specific enough. After all, we always select what to speak of when we communicate. However, the reason that motivates the selection defines spin:

we may either report the truth selectively, based on our sincere belief about what is relevant to report, or we may select strategically, based on the effect we want to achieve with our listeners. Only in the latter case are we dealing with spin (Manson 2012). Spin is thus different from promotion; it is not simply the communication of some positive fact, it is the strategic choice to communicate only certain topics (topic selection) or aspects of those topics (aspect selection), in a selection of words which support the strategic purpose (lexical selection). It is different from lying in that it is not necessarily untruthful: it may select parts or aspects of the truth. However, it does always involve a ‘gap’ between ‘the speaker’s first-order interpretation (which, inevitably, will be selective in some way or other) and her constructed interpretation (one which is constructed in the service of promotional ends)’ (Manson 2012: 204).

Manson gives us solid ground on which to start answering the normative questions concerning spin: can we justify ethical or political objections against it? However, even though Manson claims only to provide an analysis of spin, he does make some normative headway by arguing that spin is in itself not a form of deception. Spin, he argues, is not deceptive in its intention, so even though spin doctors may be culpable of deceptive effects, and they may deceive regarding their own standpoint, in spinning they do not deceive as such. In the remainder of this article I will argue that in fact spin is deceptive, and examine whether this is enough to condemn the practice of spin or whether we may need other arguments.

Spin as deception

The reasons Manson gives for not considering spin deceptive differ with regards to aspect selection and lexical selection. In the latter case, he claims, spin is deceptive, but only because it deceives regarding the real beliefs of the speaker. To use Manson’s own example, when someone says ‘crime has skyrocketed’ when she would not as a first-order judgment have made the claim in those terms, the speaker deceives the audience regarding the sincerity of her evaluation; after all, her statement only has the intended effect when we assume that she *is* sincere (Manson 2012: 210-

211). This ground for calling spin deceptive however seems to miss the mark. It is true that we assume a speaker is sincere and that we therefore feel misled, but that is not what we are primarily deceived about; it is only a functional form of deception, just as when we are lied to we are also deceived about the speaker’s sincerity. Primarily we are deceived about the facts: we have been given a wrong impression of them, of what they mean at least. Manson argues against this idea by saying that many impressions *could* be true and so we cannot say that an untruthful evaluation gives us a wrong impression – it is simply an insincere one. But this is mistaken when it comes to examples such as his own, because the phrase ‘crime has skyrocketed’ certainly does convey a factual impression of the world. After hearing it we believe that crime has risen greatly, quickly and suddenly, that the rise is of an exceptional nature (to warrant such strong terminology) and that the result is that crime is now at a very high level. Of course it is true that there may be differences in how people evaluate facts and so this particular evaluation can be disputed, but we can still decide whether it is a right interpretation of the facts or not, and so it is not wholly personal. This becomes clear once we consider an example in which only the personal convictions of a politician are at stake, such as when she comments on the crime statistics by saying that she is disgusted, when she in fact did believe them to be very bad but had no feelings about that whatsoever. We may still consider this deception, but an important element is missing which was present in the ‘crime has skyrocketed’ case: it conveys no beliefs other than one about the politician’s state of mind.

The case of aspect selection is interesting too. Manson claims that we cannot regard aspect-selective spin as unequivocally deceptive. It can be deceptive in its effects but it is an empirical matter whether it is or not, as spinned communication goes out to a very wide range of people and may affect all differently. A more promising line of argument would be to claim that spin is deceptive because it necessarily aims at deception, but according to Manson this is not the case. Spin may have the intention to deceive, i.e. to instill a false belief in its audience, but it may also aim at maintaining ignorance or at simply *not* inducing a certain belief (Manson 2012: 209). In these latter cases, Manson argues, deception is not intended (even though it may very well result from it) and so these instances of spin are not deceptive as such.

Of course we might think, as Manson does, that there is a difference between causing someone to have a false belief and simply diverting her attention away from certain topics (by talking about other issues) or by not making her think about certain essential questions (by ignoring them in your own speech). We may judge the first as deception while the second or third we may not. But this is a mistake, for ‘getting rid of’ topics or aspects by selecting strategically what you do talk about abuses the speaker’s expectations just as much as does dishonesty, for one of the basic cooperative principles that we rely on in communication is relevance. If we ask ‘why did the plane crash?’ and the answer is ‘the so-and-so bolt was loose’, we do not only assume that this statement itself is true but also that it is the reason the plane crashed; otherwise this true statement would be irrelevant. So in talking about certain topics and not others or in emphasizing certain arguments and not others we not only make truth claims concerning their content, we also make a claim *about* these topics or arguments: that they are (the most) relevant. So even spin which aims not at instilling false beliefs in people per se but only at having them ignore certain issues instills a false (meta)belief, and relies for its effect on the assumptions which must be made to enable the communication, and abuses these to achieve its own purposes. So even when it does not intend to instill falsehoods but only to distract from (parts of) the truth, spin cannot but be deceptive in its intention.

The problem of spin

So spin is a form of deception, but is it bad? We might think that deceiving is not as bad as lying. Politicians who use spin seem to think that we think this, which would partly explain their choice for employing elaborate techniques in order to avoid not only truth-telling but also lying.¹ However, making a distinction between lying and deceiving disregards the fact that the intended effect, as was just shown, is the same in both cases: to instill a false belief in the recipient. When asked: ‘Do the tougher crime laws work?’ the answer might be untrue – ‘yes’ – or deceptive: ‘Both burglar rates and street violence have gone down’ (ignoring that these are not the targets of the new crime laws). Both will leave the audience with a

similar belief about the tougher crime laws, so why should we consider the deceptive answer to be less bad? We should not, as Jennifer Saul has convincingly argued (2012). She shows that none of the justifications which could support the difference actually hold. In the second case the audience acquires the belief through inference rather than by being given it directly, but ethically this makes no difference; conversational implicatures make certain inferences a necessary consequence of the beliefs we hold, and have to hold, about people we communicate with. Therefore such inferences too fall within the speaker’s responsibility.

Lying and deceiving may be as bad, yet in both cases we may judge more mildly depending on the intended effect. A lie told for a good cause is a lesser crime than one told for some self-interested purpose. Here judging becomes complicated, for in politics the people who are the victims of the deceit could also be considered its beneficiaries; after all, the deception is done to achieve certain political goals on the citizen’s behalf. However, this is only a mitigating circumstance when we agree that the goal that is aimed at is in fact good. Whether we believe this depends on evaluations which are themselves subject to political debate.

There is however another problem with spin, one which is missing from Manson’s analysis. There are after all two types of spin techniques: directly through appearances in the media, but also indirectly by trying to influence journalists’ reports on issues. Is this deception too? That seems implausible. We may not always know what happens between ‘spin doctors’ and journalists, but we may reasonably assume that journalists do not expect politicians’ press officers to be always cooperative in their communication. Their relationship is strategic; both press officers and journalists have a clear purpose and the appropriate attitude for both is one of distrust and control rather than of trust. Deception, which trades on a basis of trust, seems difficult to establish within such a relationship. However, the strategic communication between press officers and journalists can itself be a problem. For press officers there are many ways to influence media reports, such as establishing ‘quid pro quo’ type relationships with certain journalists using scoops or exclusive information as trade, by simply maintaining friendly relationships with them, by obstructing their possibilities to ask questions or to do research, or by exer-

cising other forms of social pressure (Van Vree and Prenger 2004). Such tactics may not be deceptive, but they surely are forms of manipulation.

This second form poses a specific problem for democracy, as not only does it become impossible for the audience to evaluate the trustworthiness of the messages they hear in the media, the manipulation which precedes it jeopardizes the independence of the media. This is a problem for democratic legitimacy, as independent media are an important if not indispensable source of information about political matters. Even deliberative democracy, which tends to prefer smaller-scale and more personal forms of communication, must for mass societies acknowledge the vital importance of independent mass media, as Habermas recently has done (2006). He argues that even modern mass democracies can be deliberative as long as there is an independent, self-regulating media system which provides a 'feedback loop' between the public and the political elite. Thus the importance of independent media for democracy lies in ensuring both participation in and publicity of public debate. A large branch of press officers, who are trained to use spin techniques ever more professionally, may pose a significant threat to the independence of the selection and interpretation the media make. This problem for the legitimacy of public decisions is a democratic problem, and one that people of all political convictions must so consider as being.

Eva Groen-Reijman is teacher and PhD-student at the capacity group *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam. She is working on a dissertation on deliberative democracy and political campaigns.

References

Dearing, J.W. and E. Rogers (1996) *Agenda-Setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Esser, F., C. Reinemann, and D. Fan (2000) 'Spin Doctoring in British and German Election Campaigns. How the Press is Being Confronted with a New Quality of Political PR'. *European Journal of Communication* 15, 209-239.

Habermas, J. (2006) 'Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension?'. *Communication Theory* 16, 411-426.

Iyengar, S. and A. F. Simon (2000) 'New Perspectives and Evidence on Political Communication and Campaign Effects'. *Annual Review of Psychology* 51, 149-169.

Manson, N.C. (2012) 'Making Sense of Spin'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 29, 200-213.

Norris, P., J. Curtice, D. Sanders, et.al. (1999) *On Message. Communication the campaign*. London: Sage.

Saul, J. (2012) 'Just go ahead and lie.' *Analysis* 72, 3-9.

Scheufele, D.A. (2000) 'Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing Revisited: Another Look at Cognitive Effects of Political Communication.' *Mass Communication and Society*, 3, 297-316.

Van Vree, F.P.I.M. and M.A.E. Prenger (2004). *Schuivende grenzen. De vrijheid van de journalistiek in een veranderend medialandschap*. Amsterdam: NVJ/Prometheus.

© This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License (Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0). See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.

¹ Manson of course notes that spin is preferred to lying in order to avoid the risk of being found out, which is easier in the case of a lie than in the case of selection.