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Boekbespreking van: Spin City: Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine

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Book Reviews

Howard Kurtz, *Spin Cycle. Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine*. The Free Press, New York etc. 1998, ISBN 0-684-85231-4

It's just not right! It seems easy enough to make such a simple judgement when it comes to the modern practice of spin, the hiring of advisers specifically to present information in the most positive light possible. There is no question of a more or less neutral, objective and truthful presentation of information or public relations. The aim is to emphasize the good news above all else and to bury the bad news, or, if that cannot be done, to make it appear as innocent and meaningless as possible. And, since in the case of political officials in a representative democracy, for example, the president of the United States, a balanced presentation of information can be considered of essential importance for the smooth functioning of the democratic process, spin doctors can be seen as a danger for democracy. That it is all somewhat more complicated than it may at first seem is made clear by Washington Post journalist Howard Kurtz in *Spin Cycle, Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine*. His quite readable report on the relation between president and press during President Bill Clinton's second term, in particular in 1997, reveals that it is not so easy to think only in terms of the good guys – journalists who are only interested in objective reporting – and the bad guys – the spin doctors and other press officers for whom appearance is more important than truth and reality.

Spin Cycle is the story of the permanent struggle in the most important American media (as defined by the journalistic and political elite) for image and opinion formation surrounding the Clinton presidency. This struggle, that reached its height when it concerned the scandal charges levelled at Clinton and his associates, pitted White House officials against journalists, in particular those of leading newspapers such as the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, and of television networks such as ABC, CBS, CNN, C-SPAN and NBC. At the White House, the primary role was assigned to press secretary Mike McCurry, a 'spinmeister extraordinaire', who worked from different, often conflicting, conceptions of his assignment. "The three principles of his job, he believed, were telling the truth, giving people a window on the White House, and protecting the president, but the last imperative often made the first two difficult" (p.15).

"No day went by without the president and his coterie labouring mightily to

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generate favourable headlines and deflecting damaging ones, to project their preferred image on the vast screen of the media establishment," is the description provided in the introduction to the book (p.xvii). In his description of this process Kurtz gives considerable attention to damage control. This is understandable, given the long line of affairs and investigations of affairs in which Bill and Hillary Clinton have been involved during his presidency: the Whitewater investigation, Travelgate, Filegate, the Paula Jones affair, the campaign finance scandal. The most talked-about and spectacular affair, with leading lady Monica Lewinsky, did not explode in all its intensity until Kurtz had almost finished his book, and is only mentioned in the introduction and the epilogue. However, there was also a permanent need to control information and thus a need for well-considered and systematic spin in the campaign finance scandal, which forms the continuing core of Kurtz's story. Had Clinton and Gore themselves asked for money or only for support? Which shady figures had been approached and how often? Was the money intended for their own re-election or for the Democratic National Committee? Was some favour requested or given? How and where had funds been solicited? (This is 'where' in the most literal sense of the word, as it is forbidden to carry out fundraising activities in certain areas of the presidential abode.) The answers to such questions did not only have political implications, they could also have legal consequences, so the desire for careful information dissemination was great. And, there was a complicating factor: the answers to such questions were not only being sought by journalists, but by a special committee of the Senate as well.

In their attempts to steer and control the flow of information, McCurry and his colleagues had a broad arsenal of possibilities at their disposal. First, it is logical that good news was spread in the most prominent manner possible, especially if it might be presumed that journalists were preparing less favourable pieces. However, making positive messages available does not guarantee that they will fill the front pages of the newspapers or open television news broadcasts. A technique often employed to assure prominent coverage is to provide exclusivity. One journalist received information that Clinton was planning A and another that he had accomplished B. The chosen journalist became the first, and sometimes the only one to receive this information and could therefore open with it; there are few journalists who can resist the temptation of a scoop. Such a scoop generally receives considerable attention, and the spinners thus achieve a secondary goal: other media cannot remain behind and must also devote space to the story. With a bit of luck coverage of one good piece of news could continue for several days.

More generally the most important task for spinners is to keep journalists content, to create a climate in which the president will be given the benefit of the doubt now and then. Clinton's spinners had a formidable task in this respect. The Clintons have a thorough dislike of journalists, who, in their eyes, were only out to criticize and present matters in a negative light. To this is added the fact that, because Clinton has so often been forced to retract or alter comments about what he has or has not done during his political career, journalists standardly take his remarks with the proverbial

pinch of salt. In an attempt to improve the cool, almost hostile relations between influential journalists and the president and his wife, Clinton reluctantly agreed to the idea of meeting various journalists off the record. The spinners hoped that this would help convince the journalists that Clinton was not so negatively inclined towards them, that he worked hard, and that he had a wide range of plans, also for his second term. Condition for participation in these meetings was that the journalists present would not make use of any of the information gained from these open discussions, except the remarks or suggestions that had been approved by the spinners.

However, the spin cycle can also proceed in a different, sometimes less friendly fashion. When bad news threatens, the spinners have other means at their disposal. First of all, McCurry ensured that he himself was not always fully informed. By not asking Clinton certain questions, during meetings with the press – the gaggle – McCurry was able to reply with a straight face that he did not know the answer and that he had not heard the President comment on the matter. This conscious non-response was also a protection against possible subpoenas to testify in the many legal proceedings against Clinton and his associates. In other instances exactly the opposite tactic was chosen. If a journalist, after long and difficult investigations, had discovered something and was about to publish it, the spokespersons would simply release the news, sometimes as part of a sudden wide-ranging rush of new facts. Not only was the scoop ruined, but the appearance could be maintained that the Clinton administration strove for openness and had nothing to hide. If this did not work, it was always possible to attempt to discredit the journalist's sources: Are you really planning to lower your respected newspaper/programme to such levels? And if matters became really threatening the political spokespersons could always fall back on the legal staff, to whom certain matters had been delegated about which no information could be released until a later, unspecified date.

The fact that the White House spokespersons do their best to ensure that any reports about their boss are as favourable as possible does not mean that the much-feared impression of a manipulated media is correct. For one thing the spokespeople do not always agree on the most sensible strategy: should something be made public or not, everything at once or incrementally, and who will receive precisely what information and when? This inevitably leads to misunderstandings and accidents. It should be noted that in general the spinners, McCurry in particular, are of the opinion that bad news should be made public as quickly and completely as possible, if only to keep it from becoming a long, drawn-out affair. It is preferable to accept one's losses early and in a controlled fashion than to become dependent upon what journalists manage to discover at a later moment, often assisted by leaks from the bureaucracy itself. Further to the differences in strategic insight, there is issue of tension between the political and the legal sections of the information sector: the legal staff – 'the Hezbollah wing of the White House' – was never willing to release a document or snippet of information without a struggle, so giving less important information extra weight. Finally there were, of course, the Clintons and vice-president Gore, whose own considerations and

actions more than once resulted in an inability to follow a particular strategy or even killed a strategy. In particular the somewhat clumsy Gore repeatedly got himself into difficulties, and in doing so may have endangered his chances as a future president.

The possibilities for spinners to manipulate news and image formation in the media are, in fact, limited because in the final analysis the journalists always have the greatest influence on determining what will be news. In his book, Kurtz presents numerous examples of carefully planned positive messages that never made it to the newspapers and of bad news that despite the efforts of the spin masters dominated the front pages and the talk shows. The relations between spokespeople and journalists may be tense, but at the same time they need each other. They are dependent upon each other, and the power of the spin is determined in part by the spinners but also by the journalists, whose relationship may alternate between cooperation and conflict. The spin cycle can only be understood in a broad political and journalistic context.

The story that Kurtz unveils is thus not one of evil geniuses who as one man manipulate the media and deceive the general public. Even if they wanted to, they are not able to do so. That they attempt to paint their own, positive version of reality is true; after all, it is their job. A difficult job actually: it is noteworthy for what short periods most people manage to last as a spin doctor, and how vulnerable they themselves are to journalistic and legal action. As long as political and journalistic multifariousness are maintained, the power of the spin doctors, while present, will remain modest. Harsh judgments and point-blank condemnations are less appropriate than a thorough and accurate study of the processes of image and opinion formation in which each has a specific role. Kurtz demonstrates that although the spin doctors are sometimes the bad guys, the same can also be said, to no less a degree, of journalists and politicians themselves, such as Clinton.

Joop van Holsteyn

Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper, *The Challenge of Pluralism. Church and State in Five Democracies*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham/New York/Boulder/Oxford 1997, ISBN 0-8476-8568-3 (hardback), 0-8476-8569-1 (paperback)

Although numerous, and sometimes very elaborate, typologies of church-state relations exist, the seemingly simple typology developed by American political scientists Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper in their book *The Challenge of Pluralism. Church and State in Five Democracies* is an eye-opener. The five countries involved are the United States, England, the Netherlands, Australia and Germany. As the fact that all five are Western liberal democracies already suggests, the various models which Monsma and Soper distinguish are all in keeping with the liberal tradition within Western society. What nevertheless makes them differ, however, is