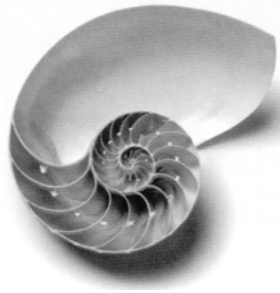


# echo

THE COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH GROUP



FROM DATA  
TO DIALOGUE

## PR AND THE MEDIA – WHO IS SPINNING WHOM?

MARCH 2002



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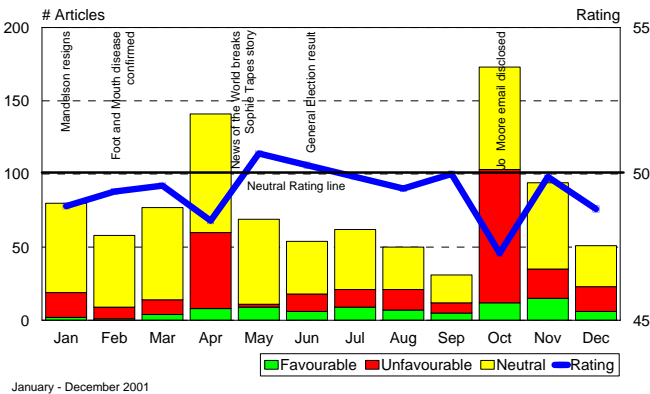
INTRODUCTION

“Scumbags”. “Insensitive, manipulative charlatans.” “Sleazy ... disingenuous”. All these terms have been used to describe public relations and its practitioners during a year when PR, or the more derogatory term ‘spin’, frequently became the story itself, mostly in the context of politics and the monarchy. For the trade publication PR Week, Echo analysed how the British press portrays PR, whether it has changed over time, and what conclusions can be drawn from the interdependence between the media and PR. Echo’s research was based on 3,101 articles referencing PR or spin which appeared in the UK national press in 1999 and again in 2001. Echo’s study in 1999 was conducted for the Public Relations Consultants’ Association.

2001 – A DISASTROUS YEAR FOR PR?

MONTHLY TREND

By Volume, Favourability & Rating



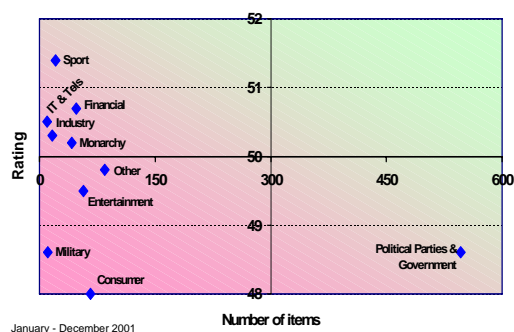
Since Echo’s study in 1999, the situation has worsened - support for PR in the press has more than halved with only 9% of articles analysed showing positive mentions, down from 22% two years ago, while media criticisms have climbed from 19% to 28%. PR reporting in 2001 was dominated by two events, which inflicted deep wounds on the image of PR. Special adviser Jo Moore’s infamous e-mail on the opportunity to ‘bury’ bad news on September 11 sparked an outpouring of media disgust and outrage at the use of spin in politics in **October** and **November**. Commanding only slightly less media attention were the ‘Sophie tapes’ in **April**, which prompted accusations of sleaze, that Sophie Wessex was using her Royal status to win business for her public relations company, RJH, and which culminated in her resignation.

Hers was not the only high-profile PR resignation of the year – in **January** New Labour’s original spin doctor Peter Mandelson was forced to leave the Cabinet for a second time over his alleged ‘passports for favours’ gaffe, while Alastair Campbell, generally considered the übermeister of spin, stepped down as the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson in order to counter accusations of a government obsessed by spin. The Conservative Party leadership campaign in **July**, the War against Terrorism in **September** and the ongoing rehabilitation of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles ensured that spin, its practitioners and the debate on its dubious ethics retained a high, and negative profile, throughout 2001.

*“In a year when spin turned on itself, the biggest casualty has been PR” – Julia Hobsbawm, HMC, writing in the Evening Standard, 12/12*

SPIN BECOMES THE STORY

Sectors  
By Volume & Favourability



**Politics** proved to be by far the main driver for media comment on PR and spin (64% of the coverage) and also generated the bulk of the most vehement criticism. Central to media disgust was the perception that the Government was obsessed with spin over substance, as the media uncovered evidence of rehashed statistics, announcements released twice, and news management techniques which far exceeded the boundaries of public acceptability. “To describe a day of hijacking aircraft, assassinating the crew, mass murdering thousands and creating hundreds of orphans as ‘very good’ in any sense is to speak the language of Osama bin Laden” was a typical view of Jo Moore’s e-mail sent on September 11, which revolted the media, public and politicians, but not Tony Blair, whose support enabled to

keep her job, albeit temporarily. Despite Moore’s apology, the e-mail was deeply damaging to the image of PR: “There could be no starker wake-up call to spin doctors the world over than Labour adviser Jo Moore. Her tactics (have) fuelled the image of PR advisers as insensitive, manipulative charlatans” noted The Guardian (15/10).

Other sectors provided a lower profile but no more favourable context for PR activities. Companies caught in the full media glare in 2001 variously included Swissair, whose sudden financial collapse stranded thousands of travellers around the world, M&S, Marconi, Claims Direct, Railtrack and Andersen. Still, the media's short-hand analysis of "PR disaster", "damaging PR consequences", "PR meltdown" and "PR nightmare" are more indicative of failures of management decision making in meeting expectations than of poor PR itself. Richard Branson's Virgin Trains showed that savvy management is the foundation of good corporate PR, even when there is a bad story to tell.

With a media driven by controversy and 'bad news', and indeed wary of the role of PR on disseminating information, bad PR stories provided good news for the media.

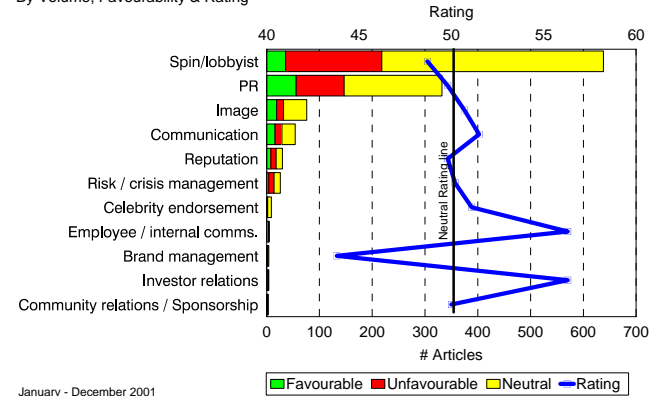
### SPIN CROWDS OUT PR

The inexorable rise in the term 'spin' reflected a wide use beyond its original, political, context, and suggests that spin has become an accepted term, as well as a form of abuse, to describe public relations. Thus, **investor relations** was replaced with "contradictory spin-doctoring" in Pubmaster's takeover bid for Wolverhampton & Dudley Breweries (Evening Standard, 10/8), and financial PRs were renamed "glam spin doctors" in a critical piece on "glitzy City public relations bashes" (Sunday Express, 12/8).

Despite its wide use, there was some evidence of a backlash against the term spin. Conscious of the media's obsession with finding evidence of spin, whether present or not in the announcements and management of Government news, Alastair Campbell tried a new tack. The anti-spin strategy was launched, but met with deep media scepticism. "Spin is the cocaine of politics and New Labour is full of sad addicts" wrote the Independent on Sunday (14/10), while The Observer noted "That Dr Campbell's prescription swiftly chased its way into the headlines is the warning that spin is not quite as deceased as Number 10 wants us to believe" (21/10). Spin is here to stay whether the politicians and media like it or not.

### TERMINOLOGY

By Volume, Favourability & Rating



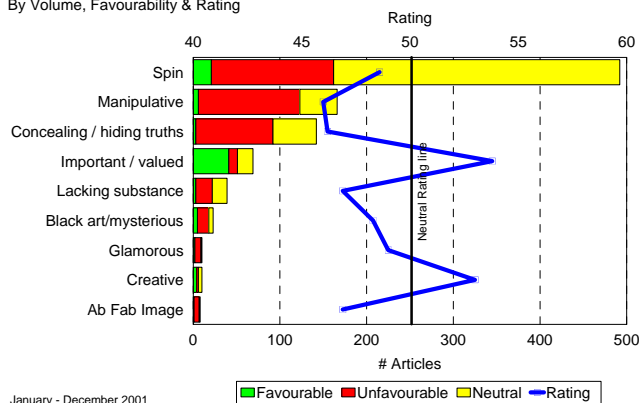
January - December 2001

"What the new spin is really about ... is making spin believable once more. Spin will only start working effectively again for New Labour if they can convince the audience that they have stopped spinning" – Andrew Johnson, The Express, 27/10

### PR AND THE MEDIA – A LOVE / HATE RELATIONSHIP

#### IMAGE OF PR

By Volume, Favourability & Rating



January - December 2001

On the interdependence between PR and the media, the relationship appeared distinctly one-sided, with negative images of PR pervading the coverage. Media hostility towards PR and its practitioners reached its zenith with the Jo Moore e-mail, resulting in comments that "Spin doctors are scumbags, but they're only doing their job" (Daily Star, 13/10), and "(news management) is sleazy, it's disingenuous and it's precisely what spin doctoring is all about" (Sunday Mirror, 14/10).

"The relationship between journalists and spin doctors is part and parcel of politics ... We speak to them all the time and we rely on them far more than on any civil servant" – George Pascoe-Watson, Deputy Political Editor of The Sun as quoted in The Guardian, 25/06

The War against Terrorism provided some respite for PR, with commentators agreeing that a degree of spin and news management was **important**, indeed essential in the propaganda war against Bin Laden. Shrugging off his usual 'master of spin' mantle, Alastair Campbell suddenly became a "communications supremo" for his role in "coordinating and magnifying the vital propaganda campaign which the US and Britain are leading against the global terrorist coalition" (Guardian, 29/10). The Sunday Times also offered qualified support for spin: "Blair and Campbell naturally employ their skills in the campaign against terrorism. Mostly it is for the good and so we are prepared to swallow some news management. In return they might get rid of Moore and others who abuse the system. They might spare us attacks on journalists who report uncomfortable facts" (14/10).

Honest recognition of the interdependence between PR and the media was in short supply. The Times struck a lonely pose when it commented: *“It is never edifying to watch the press explode with moral indignation against hands which have fed it so well”* (19/10) during the Jo Moore debacle.

**DOES PR NEED PR?**

With such a strong political focus, it is unsurprisingly that negative messages about PR and spin prevailed strongly in the press, with its **credibility** and **accountability** most heavily in question. The feverish debate about PR, spin and its ethics prompted individual responses from PR professionals, who did their best to distance themselves from spin doctor excess, but PR trade bodies faced criticism for their silence and lack of authority on weighty matters. Even before the Jo Moore debacle, The Sunday Times noted: *“PR has been sold short by its own industry bodies ... who have failed to promote it as a forward-looking profession. It remains tainted with sleaze and an image of wine bars, short skirts and shiny tights”* (19/8). *“Neither the IPR nor the PRCA have done much to enhance PR’s standing and for years the industry has amused anyone not connected with it”* provided similar comment in the Financial Times (30/10).

However, as found in 1999, PR did well when coverage centred on the commercial impact of good PR, which specifically appeared 71 times in 1999 and 21 times in 2001 in Echo’s coverage sample. The battle is less about name-calling and more about credibility, truthfulness and trust. As such, the industry should focus its energy on forging a relationship of trust and professionalism with the media and on communicating the business benefits of PR, rather than agonising about its poor image. It should also let the main beneficiaries – CEOs and management - do as much of the talking as possible.

**ABOUT ECHO**

*Echo Research is a global specialist in reputation audit and analysis, working to help companies measure how they are seen among different stakeholder groups. Echo has signed up to the United Nations Global Compact, and in the last 18 months, has increasingly focused on the challenges of corporate social responsibility, with a particular emphasis on helping its international client base to understand the views of new stakeholder groups.*

*With 165 employees and analysts spread across seven countries, Echo provides communication research to help clients understand the structure of their reputation, adding practical intelligence to facilitate their strategic decisions. We work across a number of industry sectors, with particular expertise in Environment, Government, Consumer, Financial Services, Health, IT, Media, Professional Services, Public Sector and Telecommunications.*

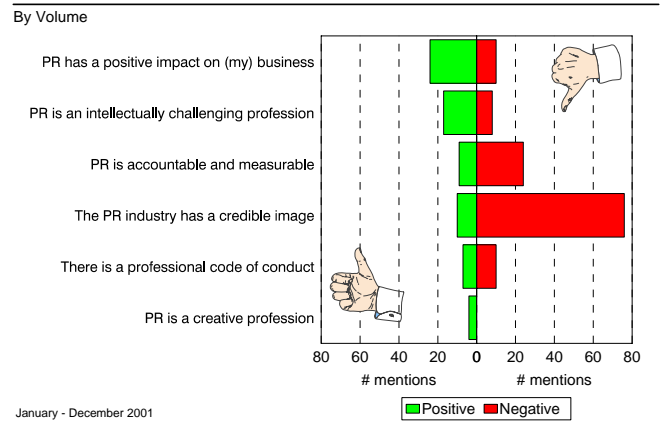
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**MESSAGES**



**COMMENTATORS**

