

# The Ethics of Spin

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*Spin* is now a firmly established part of political communication.<sup>1</sup> It may seem to be an unwelcome part: the term “spin” has pejorative connotations and to accuse a politician, press agent, or communications director of “spin” is to ascribe behaviour that is less than honourable.<sup>2</sup> Whilst there have been a number of—often partisan and polemical—catalogues of spin and spin-doctoring there has been little philosophical discussion of what spin is and why spin might be wrong.<sup>3</sup> The fact that “spin” is used pejoratively may make it seem that spin is readily identifiable as a species of communicative wrongdoing. But such accusations may not reveal *why* there is anything wrong with spin. Nor do such accusations help explain the fact that *if* spin is wrong, it seems to be less wrong, less dishonourable, less unworthy, than explicit lying.

The aim here is to begin the process of providing a framework for ethically evaluating spin. As we shall see, the ethical evaluation of spin is not as simple or straightforward a matter as might be thought. We begin by trying to frame the ethics of spin in terms of norms of deception. For various reasons this approach is inadequate and limited. The notion of *sincerity*—spin, even if not deceptive, is insincere—seems to get us further, but this too has its limitations. In the end it is concluded that a proper ethical evaluation of spin must take

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<sup>1</sup> The current use of the term dates from the early 1980s (e.g., see *The New York Times* Oct 21 1984 ‘The Debate and the Spin Doctors’ p. 22). The phenomenon, of course, is much older: classical rhetoric and oratory stresses the importance of influencing audiences’ emotions and opinions. Bentham’s (1824) *Book of Fallacies*, though it long predates the introduction of the term “spin” is a more modern survey. Bentham’s use of “fallacy” is not the modern one found in logic, where a fallacy is an oft-repeated form of error in inference. By “fallacy” Bentham means an act of deception: the book might better be called *The Art of Political Deception*.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., see the right wing journalist Peter Osborne’s *The Rise of Political Lying* (Free Press 2005) which focuses on the UK New Labour spin doctors of the 1990s

<sup>3</sup> Many of these polemical catalogues focus primarily on “corporate” spin via PR firms: Stuart Ewen *Spin! A Social History of PR*. (Basic Books, 1998). David Miller and William Dinan *A Century of Spin: How Public Relations Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power* (Pluto Press, 2008). John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1995). Some are primarily concerned with spin *within* and *by* the media (we shall return to this below) e.g., Norman Solomon *The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media: Decoding Spin and Lies in Mainstream News* (Common Courage Press, 1999)

into account the complex and dynamic social, economic and political context which motivates and, in part, justifies spin, not just by political press agents, but spin within the media more generally. More specifically, whether or not spin is wrong will depend, not just upon the form that the communication takes, but upon its broader indirect effects on trust, democratic decision-making, and our epistemic environment.

## 1. Introducing spin

The spin that will concern us here is a distinctive kind of communication where *the intention is to influence an audience's attention and attitudes by giving a selective interpretation of events, actions, policies, data, and so on.*<sup>4</sup> Our focus will be restricted to political spin, rather than the spin produced by corporate PR agencies, charities, and other institutions. Although we will focus on the actions of press agents, communications directors or "spin doctors" it should be stressed from the outset that such individuals do not act alone. Typically the press agent engages in communication of a certain kind because he or she is employed to do so.

Political parties engage in spin because *audiences matter.*<sup>5</sup> More specifically, what matters is how audiences think and feel, and how their attention is focused. This is because such beliefs, emotional responses, evaluative attitudes, and how their attention is directed or maintained, can make a difference to audience's decisions and actions. Audiences' attitudes are not a fixed, once and for all, affair: they are formed, maintained, lost, refreshed, and so on. Furthermore, audience's attitudes are subject to many different influences and constraints. The press agent may thus seek to bring about different kinds of attention-related or attitude-related outcomes: the press agent may seek to (i) *Create* an attitude towards the target object: (ii) *Maintain* a attitude towards the target object. (iii) *Pre-empt* the formation of an attitude. (iv) *Remove* an attitude. (v) *Gain and direct* attention. In (i)-(iv) the attitude may be positive or negative, depending upon the *target* of the spin, and the aims of the press agent (e.g., the aim may be to create a negative attitude

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<sup>4</sup> Press agents engage in a wide range of activities with the aim of influencing audiences: timing press releases (e.g., the "burying bad news" strategy); forming relationships with journalists (perhaps including flattery; bribery; blackmail; coercion; bullying); producing unattributable "leaks"; producing pre-emptive "predicate stories" to control future discussion of scandals or unfavourable events.

<sup>5</sup> Political spin may be directed at various, or multiple, audiences. The aim may be to influence voters, to appease financial backers, to rally support from the party faithful, and so on.

towards an opponent's proposal, whilst maintaining a positive attitude towards one's own party's proposal).

There are different ways of achieving (i)-(v) via communication but the kind of communication that concerns us takes place via *news* media. These days traditional news media—both print and broadcast— have been supplemented by new forms of communication and including blogs and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter which provide alternative avenues for communicating with informing large audiences, and thus for the activity of spinning. Like news media these are mechanisms for mass communication of (putative) facts. In order to keep things simple our focus here will be primarily upon the ethics of spin that involves news media.

It is important for our discussion of the ethics of spin to be clear about why press agents engage in spin at all. The press agent has a range of aims, as noted above. But how might the press agent go about achieving them? One option, which can immediately be ruled out, is to do nothing at all. This is a bad option. First, it denies the press agent the opportunity to publicise positive facts. Second, spin takes place in a context where there are many other influences upon audiences, and other agencies who seek to influence a target audience's attitudes. For example, political party A knows that opposing political party B will be seeking to influence audience's attitudes in B's favour. Inaction risks giving advantages to one's competitors—a point that we will return to below.

A second option is what we might call *free and unguarded* communication where the press agent simply seeks to communicate to audiences without paying much attention to what exactly is being said, or how what is said might influence audience's attitudes. In everyday speech we often engage in this kind of free and unguarded communication with friends. But in the context of political communication free and unguarded communication is dangerous. Facts may be disclosed that may harm the press agent's party, undermine its reputation, and so on. Communication in the news media has a "life of its own" once an utterance or statement is made. The wrong choice of words, or the wrong way of expressing a fact, may be repeated in media outlets across the globe within hours.

A third option is to lie. Explicit lying involves putting forward claims believed to be false with the aim that audiences take them to be true. Now, lying might seem to be a very

useful tool in a press agent's arsenal: if the press agent lies, he or she can say whatever she wants! But lying is a problematic route to follow.<sup>6</sup> First and foremost, there are deeply entrenched *prima facie* prohibitions against self-serving lying. Press agents—no matter how they may be represented by their opponents—are not moral nihilists and, if there are ways of achieving desired goals that do not require the agent to engage in immoral acts, these will be preferable. Second, lying may not be a very good option for prudential and strategic reasons. If the lie is discovered the press agent (and her organization) may lose credibility. If the press agent is identified as the liar he may be sacked by way of protecting the reputation of the employer. The maintenance of the lie may require further lies and thus simply compound the original situation which required “spin” in the first place.

The three options viewed so far all have disadvantages. But there is a fourth option: *spin*.<sup>7</sup> Spin, is truthful but *managed* communication. This communication management may involve a wide range of actions and strategies. For example, attention must be paid to the time and manner of communication. The press agent may also want to pay attention to *lexical* options: e.g., consider the emotional charge attached to the term “terrorist” as opposed to “freedom fighter”, or “fat cats” as opposed to “captains of industry”.<sup>8</sup> The aspect of spin that will concern us most here, however, is being selective in one's interpretation of events, policies, proposals, situations. A non-partisan, and familiar kind of, example will help.

Suppose a government statistics bureau produces a complex set of data about changes in crime levels: some kinds of crime have risen by 2% (e.g., assault), rape and murder have fallen by 2%, most crimes have fallen by at least 5% and the overall rate is down 1%. Let us leave aside issues about the methodology of categorizing classes of crime, measuring their decline or rise, and generating overall averages (these are ‘pre-spin’ elements). Let us suppose that the government press agent produces a press release highlighting the fall in crime overall. The press agent includes in it the following sentence, with the aim that it will

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<sup>6</sup> As one of Clinton's press agents put it ‘Bad spinning is essentially a strategy of deception. [ . . . ] bad spinning is not only dishonest, it is ineffective’ Lanny Davis, *Truth To Tell: Tell It Early, Tell It All, Tell It Yourself: Notes from My White House Education* New York: Free Press 1999 (p. 41)

<sup>7</sup> There is a *New Yorker* cartoon by Mort Goldberg where a person is being turned away from heaven, making the protestation ‘Wait, those weren't lies! That was spin!’ 20<sup>th</sup> April 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books 1988); George Lakoff *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Chicago UP: 2002 )

be repeated in the press, and used by party campaigners up and down the land in their speeches, interviews and own press releases:

(A) “We are winning the war against crime: official statistics show that crime has fallen yet again”.

This is selective, and does not present the full data. The sentence may not be particularly emotionally powerful—certainly not a classic soundbite—but it does get across the positive idea of “winning,” it uses the inclusive “we” (which may be taken by audiences to include themselves), and uses the emotive metaphor of a “war” with the government presented as successful combatants (and, who could object to a war *on crime?*).

Suppose there is another political party opposed to the government. It is in its interests to get a critical interpretation into the public consciousness. The opposition press agent offers an alternative selective and emotive interpretation:

(B) “Our streets are not safe: government does nothing to stop rise in violent crime”.

This interpretation of the same data taps into public anxieties about safety, manages to use the emotionally salient terms “not safe” and “violent crime”. The phrase “does nothing”, although it has the complement “to stop rise in assaults” may also be emotionally salient: the government *does nothing*. The question that will exercise us in the rest of this discussion is: what, if anything, is wrong with selective interpretations like (A) and (B)?

## 2. Truthful but deceptive spin

We are focusing on *truthful* spin. We cannot, then, judge that spin is wrong because spin essentially involves lying. But a speaker can intentionally *deceive* an audience whilst being truthful. For example, suppose an evil hitman is searching for your friend Lucas. “Where is Lucas hiding?” he asks. You know that Lucas is hiding upstairs waiting to make his getaway, but you truthfully say “OK, OK . . . he’s normally in Frank’s Bar this time of day”. This is truthful but deceptive: it aims to induce a false belief in the audience that Lucas will be at Frank’s bar. This kind of deception trades upon what Grice called *implicature*.<sup>9</sup> A speaker or

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<sup>9</sup> Grice, Paul (1975). “Logic and conversation”. In *Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts*, ed. P. Cole & J. Morgan. New York: Academic Press. Reprinted in *Studies in the Way of Words*, ed. H. P. Grice, pp. 22–40. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1989). Grice’s theory has been defended and developed by some, criticized by

audience can *implicate* something from an utterance that is not explicitly said. Grice noted that a great deal of ordinary conversation involves implicature.<sup>10</sup> Grice argued that this process of understanding what speakers mean by their utterances is made possible by participants in conversation observing what he called *the cooperative principle*. In conversation, speakers ought to aim to make their speech further the purpose of the conversation, where that purpose of the conversation is derived from the intentions, interests, and current state of knowledge of the participants. Audiences, in turn, ought to assume that speakers are cooperative, and speakers will assume that audience's will take them to be being cooperative too. Grice's cooperative principle involves four more specific *maxims*: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The maxim of quantity concerns the amount of information that speakers ought to give. Speakers ought to make their contribution as informative as required, but not more informative. Quality concerns truthfulness and epistemic responsibility: speakers ought to be truthful, and not to put forward claims as true without evidence or warrant. The maxim of relation concerns relevance: a speaker should make her contribution as relevant as possible. Finally the maxim of manner concerns things like clarity, avoiding ambiguity and so on.

It should be stressed that Grice's maxims are not moral maxims, they are maxims which speakers need to follow (and which audiences need to believe that speakers will follow) in order to secure successful communication. The notion of implicature comes into play by way of explaining the fact that what a *speaker* means by her words, in a specific conversational context, may not align with what the sentences used in her utterance mean, considered in the abstract. Implicatures can be intended by speakers, but not drawn by audiences, or they may be drawn by audiences even if not intended by speakers. A speaker is not *wronging* her audience if they, contrary to her intentions, draw some unintended implicature. But Grice's maxims *do* help us to understand how a truthful utterance can be deceptive. The audience in our example assumes that the speaker is being cooperative and,

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others in linguistics and philosophy of language. For our purposes we can use the plausible core of Grice's principle to illustrate how implicature works, and how implicature deceives. It is arguable that alternative pragmatic theories (like Sperber and Wilson's "relevance theory") will differ in the detail but not in the result: i.e., that speakers can deceive by intending implicatures from truthful speech.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the idea of *the* meaning of a sentence is a philosophical abstraction.

against this assumption, draws an implicature from the utterance “he’s normally in Frank’s bar this time of day” to the effect that Lucas will be in Frank’s bar *today* at this time of day.<sup>11</sup>

But this then raises the key question: is truthful spin of the kind that concerns us essentially deceptive? Consider our example (A): “We are winning the war against crime: official statistics show that crime has fallen yet again.” In *some* contexts this truthful claim might be used deceptively. For example, the press agent may want to induce the (false) belief that *all* crime has fallen, rather than some. Or, consider (B) “Our streets are not safe: government does nothing to stop rise in violent crime.” A speaker may intend that the audience draw a false implicature from this that many kinds of violent crime (including rape and murder, say) have risen. Suppose, for now, that the press agent intends that the audience come to form these false beliefs: in such cases truthful spin would be intentionally deceptive.

As such, this kind of spin falls foul of norms against deception. Now, there are different normative accounts as to why deception is wrong. Consequentialists—and let us ignore act consequentialism and fix upon rule consequentialism—argue that the prohibition of deception—i.e., the rule or norm which prohibits it—can be justified by its beneficial consequences. First, audiences are harmed by deception, especially if and when they discover that they have been duped. Second, deception may undermine trust, and trust is the basis for many important and valuable social goods.<sup>12</sup>

Kant’s categorical imperative offers another justification for the claim that deception is wrong. The first two formulations of the categorical imperative are (i) ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’<sup>13</sup>; (ii) “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”<sup>14</sup> Let us leave aside the sophisticated reasoning that Kant deploys in justifying the categorical

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<sup>11</sup> Our example involves the kind of deception which is philosophically complex when we come to the ethical evaluation of deception. The deception in this example is benevolent and altruistic (given the risks that being caught pose to the deceiver). For our purposes the point that matters is that truthful claims can be deceptive and, in many situations, deception is wrong.

<sup>12</sup> We return to the way that spin undermines trust in section \* below. For a discussion of the consequentialist prohibition of deception see Sissela Bok *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), Chapter IV.

<sup>13</sup> Kant’s *Groundwork* trans as *The Moral Law* H.J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1948) p. 84

<sup>14</sup> Kant *Groundwork* trans Paton (p. 91).

imperative and take them to provide an articulation of deeply entrenched ethical intuitions which underpin liberal thought.<sup>15</sup> Deception is prohibited on both formulations of the categorical imperative. First, deceptive intentions cannot be universalized. Communication, including deceptive communication, relies upon trust. If everyone acted upon deceptive intentions communication would be undermined by the lack of trust and, in such a context, deception would be impossible. Second, rather than communicating with the dupe as another autonomous rational being, the deceiver treats the dupe as a means to an end. The dupe's actions are shaped by the deceiver without consent. Insofar as rational agents are owed a distinctive kind of respect (as creatures capable of acting on the basis of rational will): deception involves a failure of respect of this kind.

Although the consequentialist and Kantian accounts of the wrong of deception differ—especially with regard to whether deception is ever permissible—they both imply that truthful but deceptive spin is wrong. On the consequentialist account deceptive spin is *prima facie* prohibited because its prohibition is socially beneficial. On the Kantian account the deceptive spin doctor makes a truthful assertion with the intention that a false implicature be drawn from it. This intention cannot be coherently universalized. This is because the deceptive impicator wills, at the same time, that *others* adhere to the Gricean cooperative principle, whilst exempting herself from its demands. The deception's success depends upon others being cooperative, and upon others assuming that others are cooperative. If *all* were to act on intentions to breach or flout the cooperative principle, communication would not be reliably successful. In such a context the deceiver could not trade upon others' adherence to the cooperative principle to achieve her goals. Deceptive implicature involves the same kind of rational incoherence that lying does. Second, the deceptive spin involves a lack of respect. The audience is not being treated as an end in itself. The audience's reasoning and deliberation are directed, and thus undermined as autonomous, by the false belief engendered by the deceptive communication.

But now there is a puzzle. If deceptive, but truthful, spin is wrong, how can it provide a good strategic option for the press agent? Spin is supposed to be—prudentially at least—a better option than explicit lying. This puzzle is resolved once we acknowledge (a) that spin

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<sup>15</sup> For a clear elaboration and defence of Kant's moral thought, see Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990)



involves a greater degree of deniability; (b) that there are reasons why deceptively implicating is viewed as less wrong than explicit lying.

Deceptive spin of the kind that concerns us deploys sentences which are truthful. This gives the deceiver a distinctive kind of “deniability” that may be absent in cases of explicit lying.<sup>16</sup> The speaker who utters (A) deceptively can respond “but I didn’t *say* that *all* crime had fallen”. This kind of deniability stems from the fact that the *audience* can be viewed as partly responsible for the formation of the false belief. Indeed, the responsibility for the false implicature may seem to rest, in part at least, with the dupe, rather than the deceiver: “If you *chose* to infer that *all* crime had fallen from what I said, that is your fault.”

The fact that truthful spin is more deniable than explicit lying does not imply that it will be judged by others as being less wrong: and others’ judgements are important to the press agent. Adler offers a broad argument as to why we, in general, take deceptive implicatures to be less wrong than explicit lies. Central to this argument is the fact that implicatures typically involve a weaker commitment to the truth of what is said than explicit assertions do.<sup>17</sup> When a person makes an unqualified assertion, she commits herself to the truth of what is said. But implicatures allow a speaker to convey information, without expressing a strong commitment to its truth. For example, one standard kind of implicature in speech is where a speaker gives a possible *reason* for taking a proposition to be true. Suppose Tom asks Mary “Do you know if Bob likes jazz?” Mary responds “Well, he has been to Jerry’s Jazz Joint a couple of times with Sue.” Here Mary is *tentatively* offering a positive response to the question. Suppose Tom draws the implicature that Bob likes jazz. If it turns out that Bob does not like Jazz, Mary has a line of defence: she never *said* that he did, she only, as it were, gave a reason for thinking that he might. Adler’s argument is that *in general* deceptive implicatures, will be taken to be less unworthy than explicit lying because the speaker is not exerting such direct and specific influence upon the audience’s beliefs.

Our discussion so far tells us that spin would be wrong *when* and *insofar as* it involves an intention that audiences draw an implicature believed to be false. Deceptively implicating spin will also seem to be *less* wrong than explicit lying and, given that it offers more by way

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<sup>16</sup> Darrell Huff puts it nicely in his classic *How to Lie with Statistics* ‘A well-wrapped statistic is better than Hitler’s “big lie”; it misleads, yet it cannot be pinned on you’ (New York: Norton, 1954) p.9

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Adler, ‘Lying, deceiving, or falsely implicating’, *Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997) 435-452.

of deniability as compared to explicit lying, we can see why press agents engage in spin of this kind.

### 3. Spin, interpretation and insincerity

But our analysis so far has been partial and incomplete in two ways. First, truthful spin does not have to be deceptive in order to succeed in its goal of influencing audience's attention and attitudes. Second, the philosophical framework used for discussing the ethics of lying and deception is not sufficiently sensitive to the distinctive nature of spin as a form of communication. Our discussion so far has been framed in terms of a speaker bringing about a false belief in audiences. This kind of framework starts with the speaker's beliefs—her belief that  $p$ —and then focuses on different ways in which a speaker who believes that  $p$  can seek to bring it about that an audience come to believe that *it is not the case* that  $p$ . But this is not the right framework for thinking about the rights and wrongs of spin.

A more appropriate framework is one that focuses on the way that spin involves forming and communicating an *interpretation* of an event, action, policy, situation, proposal and so on. Forming an interpretation is not the same thing as forming a belief. First, not all interpretations need involve a commitment to the truth: an interpretation of a poem or work of art need not do so. There are different kinds of interpretation appropriate to different subject matters and different contexts. Second, although interpretations may involve beliefs as constituents, they may also involve evaluative or expressive constituents too. These first two points can be read in terms of interpretations allowing a greater degree of subjectivity than belief. The subjectivity of interpretation leads to a third point: interpretations seem to have a greater license or flexibility than belief. Beliefs are primarily evaluable by two standards: their truth (or falsity), and their rational support (or lack of it). An agent can properly be criticized for maintaining a false belief, or a belief without rational support. But interpretations can be evaluated in a wide variety of ways: as more or less cogent; inspired; partial; interesting; relevant; useful. A fourth, and important, distinction between belief and interpretation is that interpretations are *selective*. Giving an interpretation involves highlighting some aspects or elements of a situation, event, action, text, policy or programme. A fifth, and important, contrast between interpretation and belief is that we allow that interpretations reflect and are informed by the interpreter's

knowledge and *interests*. The formation of belief should reflect the evidence or warrant in favour of taking something to be true, and, as such, one's interests should not play a role (other than providing a focus for *what* one seeks to find out about). In contrast, we fully accept that interpretations of actions, events and the like reflect interests and background knowledge.

For example, suppose three people watch the same football match and are asked the question "How was the match?" Person A, a long term supporter of Team1 gives an account of how the match shows that Team1 are back on form after a bad season. Person B, a new supporter of Team2, relates how Team2 should have won, but for some bad luck. Person C, is a game-theorist who has no interest in football, talks about the decision making incentives within the game. Now, these three interpretations are very different. They may all be truthful, but each person has selected some aspects of a complex situation and highlighted those in giving an interpretation. We can make sense of the interpretative differences, in part, by making appeal to variations in the speakers' background knowledge, their interests and limitations. The fact that the three parties have come up with very different interpretations of the same event does not mean that any of the three interpretations is wrong, nor does it imply that any of the parties are being deceptive or insincere.

But there are different ways that an agent's interests can inform and shape, influence and inform her interpretations. In our example above, the speakers' interests shape and inform their attention, what things they see, hear and pick up on. The interests inform their evaluation and assessments, which they can then communicate to others.

But rather than simply forming a sincere interpretation and then communicating it, a speaker may form one interpretation but communicate another, different, interpretation. To illustrate this, consider how the interpretation of crime figures in example (A) might have been formed then communicated.

**Example 1:** Tom studies the crime figures for a while. "How are they?" asks Mia. "Not bad, looks like we're winning the war on crime: crime has fallen yet again" Tom responds. Mia and Tom are relieved and prepare a press release to pass on this interpretation.

Here the interpretation is formed sincerely and honestly (it is akin to our football match examples above). With the sincere interpretation formed, the press agent wants to influence audiences by informing them: that is, by honestly disclosing something which she takes to be a correct interpretation of the data. This is not really *spin* at all. Now consider a second version of how the interpretation was reached and communicated:

**Example 2:** Tom and Mia receive the crime statistics. “OK, you know what we are looking for: let’s try and find some good news in here, the party really needs it with the election coming up” says Mia. Tom studies the crime figures for a while then says “We’re lucky, though assault has gone up, we can claim that crime overall has fallen” Mia responds “Sounds good, but why don’t we just say ‘crime has fallen’ – drop the ‘overall’ and we can leave it nice and vague”

Here there are, as it were, *two* interpretations in play. There is the interpretation that is formed, sincerely. Then there is an interpretation that is *constructed* with the goal of influencing audiences in mind. Now, such a communication may be an instance of the deceptive kind of spin above. But it *need not* be. That is, the press agent may simply want the audience to accept, and be influenced by, the specific interpretation constructed for that purpose *without* necessarily intending that the audience form any false belief on that basis. Whilst such communication may not be deceptive it is *insincere*.

Now, insincerity (and, relatedly, sincerity) can be analysed in different ways. Hampshire casts sincerity in terms of single-mindedness: ‘The ideal of sincerity [. . .] amounts to the ideal of undividedness or singleness of mind.’<sup>18</sup> Communication is insincere where the speaker expresses an attitude which she does not possess, or indicates that she is committed to something without being so committed. Drawing upon Hampshire’s analysis we might conclude that spin is insincere because it exhibits this distinctive kind of “double-mindedness” (or—though Hampshire does not use this term—*duplicit*y). Indeed, on this analysis *all* spin can be viewed as insincere. Deceptive spin is insincere insofar as the deceiver keeps apart what *she* believes from what she wants her audience to come to believe. The nondeceptive form of spin that we have been discussing is also insincere, but here the “double-mindedness” applies to the speaker’s *interpretations* not to her beliefs.

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hampshire ‘Sincerity and single-mindedness’ in *Freedom of Mind* (Oxford: OUP, 1972) 232-

She wants the audience to accept an interpretation which is true, but *only* insofar as she wants the audience to be influenced in certain ways (there is another *more sincere* interpretation in the background, as it were).

But there is a problem with this way of viewing sincerity and insincerity.<sup>19</sup> A.D.M Walker argues that single-mindedness is neither necessary nor sufficient for sincerity. It is not necessary: when deceptive speech is part of a game we do not accuse speakers of insincerity, even though they meet the condition of “double mindedness”. Nor is it sufficient: we tend not to say that a person who makes a violent threat is being sincere even if she means what she says. Walker explains this intuition by arguing that sincerity is a kind of purity of motive, and here we draw upon Augustine’s notion of *sinceritas*.<sup>20</sup> On Walker’s Augustinian account of sincerity ‘a man speaks sincerely only if he speaks from good motives, while lack of sincerity is involved when he is motivated by some reprehensible desire.’<sup>21</sup> Communication that is “double-minded” may, *or may not* be insincere on Walker’s account: it depends upon what the speaker’s motives are.

Is insincere spin wrong? One argument that we might use is to link insincerity to a certain kind of deceptiveness. Insincere spin relies upon a *concealment* of motives. If the press agent explicitly communicates to the audience that she seeks to influence their attitudes by providing a selective interpretation constructed for that purpose, the spin is less likely to be effective. But not all concealment of motives as part of an insincere speech act is wrong: consider speech acts like praising a child’s actions in order to boost their self-confidence. This may not be sincere, and the speech act may fail if the intention in making the utterance is shared, but it does not seem that such an act need be wrong. That is, it seems to be plausible that one can be insincere for morally worthy motives. But can one engage in insincere but truthful *spin* for morally worthy motives?

#### 4. Justifying spin?

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<sup>19</sup> A.D.M Walker, ‘The Ideal of Sincerity’ *Mind*, Vol. 87, No. 348 (Oct., 1978), pp. 481-497

<sup>20</sup> See Suzanne Stern-Gillett ‘Augustine and the Philosophical Foundations of Sincerity’ *Brills Studies in Intellectual History* vol 162 (2008) 225-250 for a fuller discussion of the origins of the Augustinian notion of sincerity.

<sup>21</sup> Walker *op cit.* p. 495

So far we have been treating the media as if they were a transparent “conduit” of information where press agents construct their “spin” and the media pass on the spun communication to audiences. But this is not just an oversimplification, it is misleading. The first point to highlight is that media organizations are, like political parties, dependent upon audiences and their attitudes. This point is especially relevant for commercial media, but is relevant too, albeit less directly, for publicly funded media. Media organizations thus share an interest with political press agents, but, unlike press agents, they are in a more direct position to influence audiences. The journalist Roy Greenslade puts this point well, pointing out that media players can be viewed as engaging in spin in their own right:

[T]he spin doctors who really count in Britain are the owners, editors and journalists on national newspapers. They are the people who control what appears and doesn't appear, who decide what is important, how much space it should receive, whether it deserves big pictures, why it should become a permanent hobbyhorse or a one-off story. Underlying their daily spin-doctoring are commercial realities (ensuring they maximise sales) and political values (reflecting the owner's overall ethos) which are of far greater significance than any public relations hype.<sup>22</sup>

Greenslade picks out two elements here: the economics of information, and the ideological assumptions and interests of media organizations. Media organizations face a wide range of economic pressures and they compete with one another for audience attention. In a competitive news environment investigative journalism may be viewed as an expensive luxury, with deskbound journalists forced to rely on “newswire” services like Reuters or the Press Association. Such economic changes may make spin easier for political press agents, but may also make it much easier for proprietors (or their carefully selected editors) to ensure that what is reported fits with the aims of the newspaper (rather than corresponds to the facts).

News media may be explicitly or implicitly ideological. They may have a more or less explicit political allegiance and/or political agenda. This may stem from the political agenda of the media organizations proprietor, or from a broader group of interested parties who support

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<sup>22</sup> Roy Greenslade ‘More spinned against than spinning’ *The Guardian*, April 9, 1998, p.16. Greenslade’s remarks are about the UK, but are applicable more broadly.

and control the media outlet. Or, the ideological direction may be provided less directly. Advertisers may indirectly shape the kinds of stories that are deemed to be fit to print.

Now, print and broadcast media are constrained by regulatory norms. In the UK, for example, there is the 'Editor's Code of Practice' which is, in turn, enforced by the Press Complaints Commission. The first principle is that of *accuracy*:

- i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.
- ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and - where appropriate - an apology published.
- iii) The Press, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.<sup>23</sup>

In the US the American Society of News Editors, Article IV concerns 'Truth and Accuracy':

Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly. Editorials, analytical articles and commentary should be held to the same standards of accuracy with respect to facts as news reports. Significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly.<sup>24</sup>

What counts as *misleading* or an *error of omission* is something that will typically be open to dispute. Recall our example of the press agent trying to "spin" the crime data. By coincidence, after choosing this example, the UK crime figures were released, during an election campaign. The headlines in the UK media (April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010) reflect the political alignment of newspapers in a striking way. The centre right paper *The Independent* has 'Boost for labour as home office reveals falling crime rate'; the centre left paper *The Guardian* has 'Crime falls by 7% despite recession', the moderate right *The Times* has a relatively neutral 'Police record lower number of crimes than when labour came to power in 1997'. In contrast, right-wing tabloids offer a very different slant: 'Danger on the streets as violent attack rate soars' in *The Daily Express* and 'Violent crimes are up by 750 a week' *Daily Mail*. These differences may not be traceable solely to the action of the political press agents, but are likely to be an outcome of journalistic and editorial decisions within the newspapers themselves. Are any of such claims false? Are any misleading? A fuller

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html> (accessed 22.02/2010)

<sup>24</sup> [http://asne.org/article\\_view/articleid/325/asnes-statement-of-principles-325.aspx](http://asne.org/article_view/articleid/325/asnes-statement-of-principles-325.aspx) (accessed 22.02/2010)

discussion of these issues must await another occasion. For our purposes what matters is the fact that news media themselves engage in selective interpretation, with the aim of influencing audiences, even though they are nominally constrained by codes of conduct.

In the example above there are explicit and obvious differences in headline that correlate with the political leanings of the newspaper in question. But often ideological influences may not be so explicit or readily apparent. For example, the terms used to frame a debate may shape, direct and limit the debate in various ways. As Entman notes in his analysis of these linguistic and communicative “frames”:

Frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions. Politicians seeking support are thus compelled to compete with each other and with journalists over news frames<sup>25</sup>

For example, if a group is referred to by most media as “a terrorist organisation” it may be hard for any other view of the group to be presented.

Given the way that media control and influence the flow of information, political spin doctors can argue that spin is, in the real world, a practical necessity. Knowing that the national press, which sets the media agenda, is not a disinterested open “channel” to audiences, they have to overcome media bias and prejudices to get their case across.<sup>26</sup> Ideologically driven media may offer their own “spin” and “counter-spin”.<sup>27</sup> Spin emerges by way of a process of *mutual* influence between political parties and media organizations.<sup>28</sup>

Our discussion so far has tacitly assumed a ‘transparent’ media, and, as such, our focus has been upon the way that press agents seek to influence audiences in their favour. As such, it may look like spin is inevitably self-serving. But spin need not be self-serving. Spin—and

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<sup>25</sup> Robert M Entman, ‘Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’ *Journal of Communication* 43(4); 1993, 51-58 (p.55). For a broader

<sup>26</sup> Newspapers are described by the newspaper journalist Charlie Brooker as ‘mindwarping shitsheets filled with selective reporting and audacious bias’ Charlie Brooker, ‘Election 2010, which leader’s public persona do you prefer?’ *Guardian* May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010.

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of this interrelation in the UK context see Nicholas Jones *Soundbites and Spin Doctors: How Politicians Manipulate the Media – And Vice Versa* (London: Cassell, 1996)



bear in mind we are focusing on political spin—may be motivated by strong *moral* commitments. Consider the following two examples:

Example (a): a political party is strongly egalitarian and wants to rid society of a range of unjust prejudices; it seeks to redress—what it perceives to be—unjust distribution of power in society. The proprietors of powerful media organisations are equally strong in their convictions and commitments: they are strongly anti-egalitarian, content to maintain prejudices which serve in their favour, and vehemently committed to maintaining the status quo, so far as the distribution of power is concerned.

Example (b): a political party is strongly committed to promoting individual liberty and individual responsibility, together with building a social framework that rests upon traditional and certain kinds of religious values. The news media are run by atheist progressives with a strong commitment to expanding the role of the welfare state, and have even introduced an ideological distortion into language itself, with requirements of “political correctness.”

Let us leave aside the grand and vexed question as to which of these examples might be more plausible (or *where* the examples might apply). What matters for our purposes is that it would be absurdly limiting to frame the ethics of spin solely in terms of deception and insincerity. Whether or not the spin is defensible depends upon whose commitments are, ultimately, defensible, upon whose cause is just.

A useful point of comparison is with the ethics of propaganda. Spin shares a great deal with propaganda.<sup>29</sup> But propaganda tends to be a production of states, whilst a wide range of agencies engage in spin: corporations, charities, press agents for celebrities and so on. In general it would be misleading to frame the ethics of propaganda solely in terms of deception and manipulation, or to charge the propagandist with insincerity. A proper

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<sup>29</sup> For example, the definition of “propaganda” in Marlin’s *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* is close to the kind of spin we are focusing on here: ‘The organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual’s adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement’ (Broadview Press, 1999) p.22. Or, “Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Sage: 2006). Jowett and O’Donnell cast “spin” as being a form of “propaganda as journalism” ‘To consider propaganda as journalism is to understand how news management or “spin” shapes information, emphasizing positive features and downplaying negative ones, casting institutions in a favourable light.’ (Garth S Jowett & Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* 4<sup>th</sup> edn. Sage, 2006).

ethical evaluation of propaganda must take account of, and make appeal to, the purposes for which propaganda is being used and the context within which it is used. If we accept that propaganda can, in certain contexts, be morally justified as a means of achieving important and valuable moral goals, then, it would seem, so too can spin. The ethical evaluation of spin requires us to move away from a narrow focus on whether or not the *form* of communication used in spin is itself intrinsically wrong, to a broader focus on the *context* within which spin takes place.

## 5. Spin and trust

But once we expand the scope of our evaluation in this way, we also encounter further reasons why spin may be wrong. One kind of detrimental effect of spin is that when it is *known* that spin is widely practiced, audiences may be less inclined to trust. In 2004 the UK government funded an independent review into government communications.<sup>30</sup> The report notes that ‘Trust in government and politicians is at its lowest, at least in modern times’ adding that ‘the government is no longer believed and media coverage throughout the period of this Review has referred constantly to this being an era of spin.’<sup>31</sup> A number of respondents to the consultation stressed how spin had undermined trust in politicians. For example, in their consultation response the left-leaning think tank *Demos* suggested:

The approach to publicity known as ‘spin’ is associated with a partisan form of communication, which is highly tactical in its use of media communication channels. The result has been an increasingly adversarial relationship between government communications, and potentially reduced trust in government messages received via the media.<sup>32</sup>

But *how* does spin undermine trust? Trust has two elements. First there is an element of reliance: those whom we trust to act in certain ways, must be capable of reliably doing so. Second there is an assessment of the trustee’s intentions and perhaps character: the trustee ought to act with the trusting party’s aims and interests in mind, and not be swayed by self-

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<sup>30</sup> ‘An independent review of government communications’ chaired by Bob Phillis. January 2004. <http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/gcreview/News/FinalReport.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p.6.

<sup>32</sup> *Demos* ‘Publicity: From persuasion to participation. A submission to the Government Communication Review Group’ 28<sup>th</sup> April 2003 <http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/gcreview/evidence/demos.pdf>

interest. *Deceptive* spin, when it is discovered (or assumed to be the case) undermines both elements. We cannot rely on the deceiver and the act of deception shows that deceiver to be willing to breach prohibitions for selfish gain. So, where spin is deceptive there is a fairly obvious connection: if it becomes known—or even believed—that a certain class of speakers are routinely deceptive in their communication this gives an inductive rationale for withdrawing trust. But *nondeceptive* spin may undermine trust too and may even engender a culture of suspicion. In particular, audiences may rightly feel that they are not being given a “straight” account of matters of concern. When it is widely assumed that politicians engage in spin audiences may rightly assume that the interpretations that are offered of events, policies and the like are (a) not the *only* interpretation available, and (b) are only being offered insofar as the interpretations serve self-interested purposes. So, when a politician says “Crime has fallen” we may be suspicious and raise a variety of questions “Has all crime fallen?” “How much has it fallen by?” “What do they mean by this?” and “What other things are they *not* saying?” Worse still, in broadcast media audiences may repeatedly encounter *opposing* spin: with competing interpretations offered, with no simple way of In the midst of all this audiences may have a sensitivity to the fact that the media too engage in their own “spin”. In the face of all this spin and counter spin, audiences may simply withdraw their trust: “How can we rely on what *anyone* is saying in this context?”

## **6 Spin and democracy**

Democracy rests upon and requires an informed populace where members are in a position to make their own autonomous informed decisions, even if the decisions in question are limited to voting (or to protest). Spin can have pernicious implications for democracy in two connected ways. First it may unduly *influence and direct* democratic decision making. Bribery or threat may perform this role, but spin can do it too insofar as voters decisions are based upon the “spin” that they receive in—or produced by—the media. Second, even where spin does not directly influence decision making—in the sense of determining the outcome of decisions—it may still *undermine or degrade* the democratic process. By analogy, indifferently destroying ballot papers (without favouring one particular party) undermines the democratic process even if it does not specifically direct it.

We have already noted that spin has an epistemic element—that of implicating false beliefs, or of keeping audiences ignorant of relevant facts. It also has an emotional element: with the aim of producing the right kind of emotional responses in audiences. Both of these elements—the epistemic and emotional—can unduly influence, or undermine, democratic process. For example, spin may simply produce false beliefs and thus undermine decisions based upon them, as well as directing the audience’s decision making. Second, spin may block audiences from getting the *relevant* information that they need to make properly informed decisions. We have noted that spin may undermine trust, and this does not help democratic participation.

Spin may involve emotionally manipulative uses of language. Once an appeal to emotion, rather than communication of relevant information, becomes widespread there is the risk of a transformation of politics away from the ideal of the informed electorate. As Marcus puts it in his analysis of the role of emotions in politics:

As we get closer to realizing the goal of an extensive rather than a restricted electorate, we seem to find politics more rather than less deeply entwined with emotional manipulation. Politics appears to be increasingly dominated by ever more sensationalized media, sensationalized policy debates, candidates’ efforts to defeat their opponent by emphasis on scandal and hyperbole, special interests’ resort to scare tactics to raise money, gain support and defeat policies they oppose.<sup>33</sup>

Properly informed democratic participation may be further undermined by the fact that if spin is effective and becomes the norm, strong incentives are created for *all* to engage in spin. A political party that believes that audiences should be well informed and make decisions based upon a clear specification of manifesto pledges may find that it is constantly being undermined.<sup>34</sup> Listing the facts may not be as effective as producing selective interpretations that lock onto people’s emotions. So, here the pernicious effect of spin is not just upon the audiences, but upon the political process itself.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> George E. Marcus *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) p.3

<sup>34</sup> This is the central argument of Westen’s *The Political Brain*

<sup>35</sup> Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch refer to this as a “crisis of civic communication” *The Crisis of Public Communication* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995) p. 1

## 7. Epistemic Pollution

The undermining of trust and democracy may not be the only pernicious effects of spin. Spin may have pernicious and more general *epistemic* effects. Knowledge is valuable to us. A great deal of our knowledge comes from others. There are many different social epistemic pathways—books, television, news media and so on. The proper operation of these resources is valuable, and not just for reasons for sustaining democratic participation. It is arguable that human beings have a deep-rooted intrinsic motivation to find out about their world. But even nondeceptive spin can have a disruptive effect upon the epistemic landscape. Spin involves the communication of a selective interpretation, where the process of selection—deciding *which* interpretation to give, and how to formulate it—is shaped and directed by the goal of influencing audience attitudes. So, rather than providing an interpretation of the world that aims to be accurate, or most relevant to audience’s interests, spin feeds a distorted insincere form of communication into our epistemic environment. Worse still, in order to be effective spin must be disguised as something else: as informing, or the expression of sincere opinion. The criticism here is distinct from the charge that spin undermines trust. The charge here is that spin, when widespread, may bring it about that audiences may come to be not only suspicious of sources of information, but fail to be able to effectively track *which* sources of information ought to be relied upon.<sup>36</sup> Spin involves a distinctive kind of distortion and undermining of epistemic responsibility. We rely on others to be epistemically responsible. Where evidence is limited we do not expect a confident declaration of truth. Where evidence is strong, we do not expect a self-interested and insincere expression of doubt.<sup>37</sup> The UN weapons inspector Hans Blix, reflecting on how the limited evidence for the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass

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<sup>36</sup> This pollution metaphor is at work in the right-wing homophobic journalist Richard Littlejohn’s criticism of the UK Labour party’s (gay) director of communication Peter Mandelson: ‘No one, with the possible exception of Alastair Campbell [another labour spin doctor], has done more to poison the well of public life’ though Littlejohn selects a different, but equally venal, metaphor for his headline ‘Malignant, malevolent, this creep is a cancer on British life’ *The Daily Mail* October 4<sup>th</sup> 2008.

<sup>37</sup> This is, of course, the strategy made famous by the PR firm Hill and Knowlton in their work for the tobacco companies. In full knowledge of the scientific evidence linking tobacco to cancer and the implications that this would have for their corporate clients, John Hill hit upon the simple idea of aiming to sow doubt, rather than combating the evidence directly. In an infamous memo, fortunately retained by the tobacco company Brown and Williamson, doubt is described as a *product* (sold by the PR company to the tobacco firms). See David Michaels *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (New York: OUP, 2008) p. \*\*

destruction was “spun” by the UK and US governments of Blair and Bush captures the pernicious social epistemic effects of spin:

When critical thinking is replaced by its opposite - by what is called "spin" - society loses. Facts can be lost sight of. Credibility risks being squandered. Spin, in politics, is used to sell positions that are based on very uncertain input. Of course, governments sometimes, perhaps often, have to act before all the facts are known. True, but all the more reason in such cases to examine carefully the facts you have. In the case of Iraq, one cannot avoid the impression that exclamation marks were too often used in places where there should have been question marks.<sup>38</sup>

With spin entrenched in the polity, the epistemic environment is, to an extent *polluted*.<sup>39</sup> As with real pollution, the damaging effects typically derive from the aggregate or compounded effects of the actions of many.

## 8. Conclusion: an ethical balancing act

We began by noting two facts: first, that “spin” is a pejorative term; second, that if spin is wrong it seems to be less wrong than explicit lying. These facts prompted our discussion, by, initially, trying to uncover whether the pejorative use of “spin” was simply a reflection of the fact that spin is wrong.<sup>40</sup> Having excluded explicit lying from our discussion we then saw that truthful spin can be deceptive, and, in such cases will breach well-entrenched and well-justified general norms against deception. At that point we did not address the question whether deceptive spin might be a *justifiable* breach of such norms. Instead, we turned to the fact that spin need not be deceptive in order to succeed. Spin involves giving a particular kind of

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<sup>38</sup> Hans Blix in his speech for the Inaugural Ceremony of the World Nuclear University 4 September 2003; <http://www.world-nuclear-university.org/about.aspx?id=15904>

<sup>39</sup> The idea of “epistemic pollution” has been noted by others. Kim Sterelny talks of “epistemic pollution” in the context of decision making, where “other decision makers degrade our epistemic environment by active and passive deception” Kim Sterelny ‘Cognitive Load and Human Decision, or, Three Ways of Rolling the Rock Uphill’ in Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence and Stephen Stich (eds) *The Innate Mind, Volume 2: Culture and Cognition* pp. 218-236 (p. 219). John Ziman uses the term in a discussion of the social epistemology of science, where he suggests that secrecy in science is a form of “epistemic pollution” *Real Science: What it is and what it means* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) (p. 116)

<sup>40</sup> [For further discussion: Those who use “spin” in a pejorative way, however, tend not to be using it pejoratively because of its pernicious effects on trust, democracy or upon the social epistemic environment. “Spin” is typically used pejoratively *within* the media: by one press agent directed at another; by journalists directed at press agents, or vice versa]

interpretation—perhaps using emotionally salient terms—to achieve certain effects. This kind of spin, however, is still insincere. The discussion, to this point, allows us to see why spin is viewed as less wrong than explicit lying. We saw that deceptive implicature involves less of a commitment to the truth of what is said than explicit assertion does. Many kinds of spin are not deceptive at all, and insincere speech is not as morally unworthy as explicit lying.<sup>41</sup>

But as our discussion progressed we saw that it is misleading to view spin as the sole provenance of press agents. The media too can be viewed as exercising a “spin” upon information. The media are not a transparent conduit of information, but are interested—often powerful—agents in our social epistemic environment. We then encountered the thought that spin might be motivated by decent or morally virtuous motives: the spin doctor *might* be viewed as a noble propagandist in the fight against powerful and vested interests, in the war for people’s minds. But even virtuous spin may have bad effects. Spin—expanded now to include the media—has detrimental effects on trust (both trust in the media and trust in government and political parties); spin may unduly influence and direct democratic decision making and may even undermine democratic process. More generally spin—or, better, the aggregated effects of widespread spin—can be viewed as a form of epistemic pollution.

Is spin wrong, then? It depends. . . .

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<sup>41</sup> [NOTE – haven’t expanded on this here – i.e., as to *why* insincerity is not as wrong as lying]