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Book review: Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism

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BEDER, Sharon (2000)

Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism
(revised edition), Sage Publications, Melbourne, 320 pp. ISBN 0-908011-44-X

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If you're the kind who worries about right-wing conspiracies to take over your mind, you've probably already read the first edition of Sharon Beder's *Global Spin*. And you probably read it with some glum satisfaction: satisfaction because someone – an Australian, yet – had taken on the PR monster in a measured, reasoned, researched, scholar's way; glum because it would probably make no difference.

You've probably also read Lee and Solomon's *Unreliable Sources*, Nelson's *Sultans of Sleaze* and Stauber and Rampton's *Toxic Sludge is Good For You! Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry* with similar emotion.

And you wouldn't be alone. Increasingly, if a little belatedly, people who observe the media, as well as those who work in it, know you don't have to be paranoid to believe that something big and creepy is happening, and has been happening for some years, and that there's little anyone can do about it.

As academic and engineer, as well as unabashed partisan, Beder made clear in that first edition, the power of almost unlimited global corporate money linked with a booming, global PR industry is not something that can be reined in by anyone — not gadfly authors, not governments, not citizen organisations, certainly not a supine media. The movement that began, legitimately, as a counter to the strong environmentalism of the 60s and early 70s is now wheeling and dealing in everything. And it does want to take over your mind: that's its undisguised, proudly stated purpose!

Having rolled back almost all the gains of the environmentalists, the consumerists, the welfarists and anyone else perceived to be in the way of untrammelled business growth in the US, the now hugely skilled, confident and cashed-up PR-corporations axis isn't stopping there. It wants to create a culture of consent so that such aberrations never occur again — anywhere. It wants to be the guiding force of politics, it wants to be the media, it wants to direct the education process in schools and universities, and it wants everyone to think all of this is a good idea, indeed, the only idea

Beder outlined, point by point, how this has been done and

is being done: through simple fronting for industry, through creation and financing of counter groups in communities and “think-tanks” at strategic levels, gathering and using intelligence on opponents, stealing the opponents’ clothes, threatening vast punitive damages, staring-down opponents in the courts, muddying the scientific waters, creating public opinion by assuring the already compliant media that this is public opinion. Those interested in the real agenda behind the assault on the ABC and the corporatisation of education and health in Australia won’t find precise references in this book. They will get the drift, though.

But we’ve already read that book.

In her second edition, Beder takes the glum case a little further. Three new chapters detail new and exciting developments in the campaign, all of them close to home for Australians. The three new chapters deal with the business-conservative government campaign against notions about global warming, a “greenwashing” of the Sydney Olympic Games, and interesting moves in the Greenpeace organisation in Australia and globally.

Briefly, Beder shows the campaign against moves to restrict greenhouse and ozone-depleting gases has been ratcheted up a few notches. In scenes reminiscent of the worst days of the tobacco industry’s smoke-screening, a panel of scientists now is installed as “credible” alternatives to the prevailing – near universal – scientific view that, yes, global warming is occurring. It’s a measure of the zeal of this campaign and its need to keep a tight grip on public opinion that it isn’t very interested in the fact that scientific opinion is indeed divided on the extent and pace of warming. The campaign wants to deny that any real scientific consensus exists at all. And it has been successful in sowing doubt and disbelief.

The Sydney Olympics had their share of public scandal and unsavoury whiffs, but the strange story of the “green” Games only occasionally peeked out of the bag. Beder shows that, thanks to almost watertight state government information security and “commercial-in-confidence” manoeuvring, the decidedly ungreen site and its far-less-green-than-advertised structures were used to lever the Games in Sydney’s direction, then passed off as the real thing in September. The front-line units for all this were those best equipped for the task – the multinational PR organisations.

And in Greenpeace, that erstwhile bastion of resolute, unbending principle, Beder points to some other strange happenings. Greenpeace, it seems, has seen the corporate light. A new pragmatism has apparently replaced the old pugnacity. Instead of opposing what it sees as environmental despoilers, Greenpeace more often chums up with the former enemy’s PR people in an effort to “persuade” corporations to be good: a

“solutions-oriented approach”. Less abseiling and obstructing, more deals and “approval” decals is the contemporary way. And what of those lean, mean people who run or have run Greenpeace? In a “revolving-door” system, some in high places are former executives of the former enemy and are not converts. Others are environmental “consultants”, some with Greenpeace’s sworn enemies on their list of clients whom they are helping overcome image problems. Beder identifies at least one of these who is with Greenpeace for part of the week and with such clients in the rest. Patrick Moore, the co-founder of Greenpeace, now tours the world as a speaker sponsored by the logging, paper-making, mining and waste-management industries.

All is not lost, however. In a final chapter on the inevitable decline in democracy through citizen alienation and “entertainment” distraction from the workings of politics that corporate new-speak demands, Beder finds some joy in what communications scholars have known for a long while: people will insist on creating their own subtext, putting their own spin on anything they’re told. A little like the unsuspected micro-organisms in *The War of the Worlds*, people in general are capable of at least being annoyingly frustrating to the giants by simply being human. She cites Stauber and Rampton:

The fact that corporations and governments feel compelled to spend billions of dollars every year manipulating the public is a perverse tribute to human nature and our own moral values

But don’t be too sure of that. Anyone teaching journalism who tries to interest students in politics or foster discussion about current events in the news will know that a job has been done on them.

Journalism educators should read this second edition of *Global Spin*, if only for the new chapters. Partisan or not, they add to what educators, at least, ought to see as a pointer to where journalism is being shunted, along with much else. Journalism educators still have the view that they don’t set out to train people as mouthpieces for anyone – the Left or the Right. They do train people to be disinterested where possible and always healthily sceptical. But, given the power and the omnipresence of the new force on the block, they may need to reinforce these values while they can. ■