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# Book review: The Invisible Persuaders - How Britain's Spin Doctors Manipulate the Media

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**MICHIE, David (1998)**  
**The Invisible Persuaders - How Britain's Spin Doctors Manipulate the Media**  
Transworld Publishers, Sydney  
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**I**t is self evident truth that metropolitan newspapers are no longer primarily journals of record.

It is impossible to travel to most western countries, notably the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and, in the context of this review, South Africa, and pick up on the day's main political, social or economic events simply by reading the three front pages of a morning or evening broadsheet.

Once upon a time this was the most useful stick with which to gain a measure of direction, a sense of what that country might be moving towards, or away from.

No longer sadly, is this neat trick possible to execute in the western world.

The 'record' of social, political and economic events which we could once turn to on arrival have been marginalised by thousands of column centimetres of dross across which a thin gossamer veil has been drawn to disguise the content as news.

Newspapers have become, effectively, the tool of the public relations professional, otherwise known as the doctors of spin.

This second unfortunate axiom has until now been known to few outside the media. There may be one or two within the public who are cynical enough to be able to attempt to quantify the degree to which the media is manipulated by these spin practitioners but very few would get close to the mark and fewer still would believe the real level to which spin has aspired in the western print media.

I emphasise 'until now' because the proverbial lid has been blown off the can that held all the invisible worms, mulching away at the newsprint, turning it into nothing more than compost.

David Michie is the lid blower and his book is mandatory reading for every journalism undergraduate in all countries mentioned above.

Michie has strung together 325 pages of eloquent prose - encased in its own 'spin' package - which on first reading takes us on a radio wave of ups and downs: to the heights of euphoria

in the belief that a fortune can be made in legitimate public relations, to the depths of a depression that only a gin-challenged warm martini can induce as we suspend belief to travel through the underworld of dirty tricks and celebrity PR.

No wonder public relations has such a crook name.

What is intriguing about this work, however, is the degree of research Michie has undertaken to present his evidence and it takes a second reading to appreciate the true worth of this book as a record of a sector of the western market economy which has encountered enormous change during the past three decades.

Michie is in fact a public relations practitioner of South African extraction, specialising in providing corporate communications to blue-chip UK and multi-nationals. He is based in London.

On this basis alone one would naturally assume Michie may spend some time bagging out his contemporaries at the bottom of the food chain - PR-ettes who rush around seeking front page coverage for their newest 'handbag' client. He does, but he does it with equanimity: his own corporate world is visited with aggression as he reveals the depth of corporate spin, news management and the ease with which headlines are created in the business and general news sections of all our daily newspapers.

Ironically, as Michie takes the cane to Thames Water, British Airways, Barclays Bank, and British Gas, one can't help but speculate who the equivalent players may be in the smaller Australian marketplace.

The beauty of Michie's work, while presenting UK media as easy targets for canny 'doctors', is that it can quite easily be relocated to any western country simply because of the slavish nature of 'culture following' which pervades lesser economically and militarily powerful countries than the UK and the US.

Every one of Michie's chapters has resonance in Australia. Even his denouement, *New Labour: Made in America*, can be recast as *New Labor, Made in the UK* with the central players, rather than Bill Clinton and Tony Blair being Tony Blair and Kim Beazley.

Subheads in this chapter include the obvious: new Labour, no lefties. As Michie writes: "One of the Tories' greatest achievements is to have reshaped new Labour in its own image." Huh-ho!! What a beauty. Retold - one of the Liberal National Coalition's greatest achievements is to have reshaped new Labor in its own image.

But wait (as Tim Shaw would say) there's more. When the UK Labour party committed, or more correctly Blair committed it, to the abolition of Clause IV of the party constitution in which Labour pledged itself to common ownership of the means of

production and a redistribution of wealth, it effectively and critically cut the party free from its socialist roots. Thus creating a party of the centre which emerged as New Labour. A further part of the process of re-invention was to shed, or hide, as many of the old guard as could possibly be shed or hidden without its constituency noticing.

It is not hard to see that the same tactics were presented - packaged by a similar 'doctor' - to the Australian electorate during the recent federal election campaign. Where were all those blunderers from the Hawke/Keating years? Wither the excitement of Laurie Brereton, the flush of Janice Crosio, the enormity of elucidation of Martin Ferguson? And oh, what we would have given for a second glimpse of Simon Crean, sent to gaol without passing go after his marvellous remark about 'Toorak Tractors'.

While the tabloids and quality press were wasting their time analysing the ferret out of One Nation and its own hugely incompetent 'doctors', Bomber Beazley's boys and girls were hiding quietly in the brush, waiting to charge forth with hands raised, crying 'me, me, pick me to enter the sanctum sanctorum, I didn't do real well last time, but I've been really, really quiet for the past five minutes. Pick me, pick me!'

It is not without some feeling of despair that one realises, while immersed in Michie's work, that the same packaging doctors have in fact been hard at work on Bomber and the Australian Labor Party, no less the Coalition, although the pay for that job would never equal the work required.

If, in the very words of the doctors of spin, you take away with you only one thing from this review, whether you are flack, hack, corporate manager or student, it is this: Read the book. Thank you David Michie. ■