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Review: Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy: Corporate PR and the Assault on Democracy. Edited by William Dinan and David Miller.

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Reviews

Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy: Corporate PR and the Assault on Democracy. Edited by William Dinan and David Miller. London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007, 324p. (cloth) ISBN-10: 0-7453-2445-2 ; ISBN-13: 978-0-7453-2445-6.

According to the political theorist Alex Carey, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of three developments that have shaped our political discourse. The first is the rise of democracy and universal suffrage; the second is the rise of corporate power over the political economy; and the third is the emergence of public relations (PR) to protect corporate dominance from universal suffrage. PR, according to Carey, was necessary to “take the risk out of democracy” for powerful corporate interests (Carey 1997). The many chapters in *Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy* both validate and expand on Carey’s theories by documenting the many contemporary uses of PR as a means to create public acceptance of neo-liberal policies across the globe.

As such the book provides a fascinating, albeit disturbing, overview of the many undemocratic communication strategies employed by powerful interests and presented to the unsuspecting public through the media. Warning against viewing PR as a harmless surface phenomenon, Dinan and Miller point to PR’s deceptive and manipulative practices and its avoidance of transparency and openness. Rather than encourage public debates around issues, corporate PR seeks to subvert such exchanges in the interest of its clients and it therefore represents a threat to democracy. They argue that “the misunderstanding of spin, the management of perceptions, beliefs, and ultimate behaviors, is a deeply problematic addiction of the powerful” (3) and that only by exposing their strategies can we end the suffering that often results.

The book’s eighteen chapters are divided into four separate parts, each dealing with a specific aspect of the expanding PR industry. The first section provides a general overview of the public relations industry and its methods. It discusses some of the political ramifications of living in a world where perception management, as opposed to structural changes, has become the *modus operandi*.

In one of the first chapters, Leslie Sklar shows how clever uses of spin have helped multinational corporations to monopolize symbols of free enterprise, international competitiveness, and the good life and how this achievement, or what Sklar labels a “deliberate strategy to mystify and obscure the realities of capitalist globalization” (31), has erected an additional obstacle for those seeking democratic alternatives to capitalist globalization.

Helping shed light on the public relations industry in the United Kingdom and the strategies that make corporate spin possible is a chapter by Chris Grimshaw. Estimating that as much as 80 percent of news media content can be traced directly or indirectly to public relations sources, he paints a disturbing picture of the many methods used by corporations to plant (and withhold) stories and explores the prac-

tice of manipulated news for public consumption. As Bob Burton points out in a later chapter, “most PR campaigns remain invisible, because they exploit the faulty lines in the media industry, with editors under pressure to cut costs and journalists expected to produce more stories with fewer resources” (252).

The second section of *Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy* uses a series of chilling case studies to explore “How Corporations Use Spin to Undermine Democracy.” Laura Miller provides an intriguing account of corporate funded front groups and their strategies for influencing politics and legislative issues in Washington D.C., while a particularly well researched chapter by David Miller explores the PR strategy of neutralizing scientific research that is unflattering or potentially threatening to a corporate client’s bottom line. By paying scientists to argue the industry’s cause, it is possible to create controversy around scientific findings and use the uncertainty to spin the issue, confuse the public, and maintain a political climate that is friendly towards corporate conduct in the health and environmental fields.

In one of the most striking chapters, Andy Rowell explores the exploitation of poor third world people as “poster children” for neo-liberal policies. Rowell shows how people who have been forced into poverty by policies that have devastated their environments and livelihoods are being enlisted in PR schemes to lend credibility to the multinational corporations. As NGOs in numerous countries are protesting corporate exploitation, indigenous people are being hired to pose as supporters of neo-liberal policies and are paid to show their “support” at public demonstrations. “Facts don’t really matter,” admits the pro-corporate Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise. “In politics, perception is reality” (132).

Eveline Lubbers and Ulrich Muller explore how various forms of PR strategies are used to forge connections between corporate and political elites. Lubbers explores the government sanctioned use of private intelligence to spy on The Campaign Against the Arm Trade - a well respected U.K. pacifist group - and describes the use of obtained information to sabotage and nullify the organization. Mueller delineates the intricate workings of Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft (INSM), a business initiative to erode the welfare state and facilitate greater acceptance for neo-liberal policies in Germany. Part of the INSM’s strategy involved the use of industry front groups (modeled on grassroots counterparts) to do their bidding. Exploring a whole range of PR strategies, including some very sophisticated forms of media manipulation, Mueller shows how the various groups are pushing their ideological agendas while attempting to keep their political and financial loyalties a secret.

“The Subterranean World of the Power Brokers” constitutes the third section of the book. The four chapters provide fascinating, but quite disturbing, insights into the length to which multinational corporations will go to secure favorable political environments for themselves. Gerald Sussman’s investigation of the Eastern European “Democracy Assistance” programs helps illuminate the anti-democratic methods that multinational corporations employ to secure favorable business conditions for themselves in the region. Equally unsettling is Granville Williams’ account of the organized neo-liberal assault on public service broadcasting and the media conglomerates’ claim that its public subsidies represents “market distortion”(202).

Aeron Davis's chapter on the London Stock Exchange and the potential effect of corporate spin on trading decisions raises important issues of political magnitude.

The last chapter in this section provides a fascinating account of the American right-wing think-tanks and how they, in cooperation with British counterparts, developed sophisticated PR strategies aimed at influencing and undermining the British left while facilitating greater acceptance of the United States among future Labour leaders. William Clark describes an intricate network of conservative politicians and corporate interests intent on privatizing the public sector but doing so covertly in order not to galvanize public opposition. Clark demonstrates how various forms of PR, including the creation of corporately-funded front groups, came to the rescue.

If the first thirteen chapters have not convinced us, Bob Burton's contribution makes an excellent case for keeping the PR industry and its anti-democratic workings under constant vigilance. Burton shows the ongoing industry efforts to co-opt, marginalize, and eventually nullify every challenge to corporate dominance. The mutating strategy he points out is reflected in Olivier Hoedeman's account of how US practices of establishing industry front groups and pseudo NGOs have spread to EU corridors in Brussels. As deceptive lobbying and PR practices increase so does corporate resistance to public disclosure and regulation of these practices. The last chapter by Andy Higginbottom describes not only the Coca Cola Corporation's violent and corrupt behavior but also its arrogance and outrageous spin when challenged by social activists.

Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy is an excellent addition to the small but growing body of literature that explores public relations from a critical perspective. Each chapter is well researched and makes its own distinct arguments while, at the same time, contributing to the book as a whole. Considering the contemporary nature of many topics it is unfortunate that most of the research, possibly due to printing delays, has not been updated since 2005. I also found the organization of chapters into four sections a bit random and slightly difficult to follow at times. These, however, are minor concerns that do not detract from a great book that I expect will be welcomed by critical scholars in the mass communication and sociology fields, and read by activists engaged in the challenging work of dismantling the corporate stranglehold on society.

Reference

- Carey, Alex. 1997. *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*. Ed. by Andrew Lohrey. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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